

ABSTRACT

Dial, Aaron Joseph. *Deadstock, A Philosophy of Sneakers and Materiality in the Afterlife of Black Bodies*. (Under the direction of Dr. Nicholas Thiel Taylor).

This work articulates the intimate and undiscussed connections between sneakers as material objects and Black bodies. I excavate sneakers from the strict confines of culture and fashion, asserting their existence as an object wherein bodies act and that acts upon bodies and spaces. Furthermore, this project hones the theoretical position that sneakers exist first and foremost as literal extensions of Black bodies, both sporting and cultural. That is, in sneakers, racialized imaginations of productive bodies are enlivened both as representative cultural fantasies and a collective reverie constellating the athletic possibilities of human potential. At the heart of this effort is a provocative question of immense consequence: how do sneakers make Black bodies matter and, conversely, matter Black bodies? Moreover, what happens if we consider sneakers with a material specificity emphasizing their honest existence as blackened proxies of vulcanized rubber, leather, and laces – the literal molding of Black men’s feet – where racialized fantasies of corporeal productivity materialize? Inherent to these queries is a definitive assumption of Blackness as bodies made matter through brutal and mineralogical frameworks of extraction and objectification (**dead.**) and capitalist regimes of accumulation, fungibility, and dispossession (**stock.**). To which, any answers gleaned articulate the intimate and undiscussed connections between sneakers as material objects and Black bodies. Put another way, I investigate how the social death marking Blackness enlivens inanimate cultural objects through a frenzied re-presentation of sneakers that rouse and inventory racial imaginaries about the productive nature of the Black body. That is, how do sneakers as cultural talismans charm death as matter and matter as death where culture exists in concert with a smogbound occult of Blackness. *Deadstock* claims the sneaker as an object and industry projects a fantasy of Black abjection where the body as absented vessel – only allowed agency through capitalism’s totalizing conquest of matter and interminable quest for profit – is an elemental component of sneakers as a cultural technology. Instead of a putting forth an argument with a relatively linear trajectory, *Deadstock* opts for targeted jaunts into the nuanced and layered world of sneakers. These chapters function as discreet and extended meditations on the possibilities and provocations of *Deadstock* as a philosophical construct. Each chapter, instead of presenting a mere criticism of sneaker history, seeks material reconstitution for an object that has lived and been primed, for too long, by the mostly white ideations of the fantastic power of Black bodies.

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Deadstock, A Philosophy of Sneakers and Materiality in the Afterlife of Black Bodies

by
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BIOGRAPHY

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DEDICATION

To all the homies here and gone
To Mom and Dad
To Amber and Autumn,
And finally, to you,
I am nothing without your love and support.

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It is with an overflowing heart I write these acknowledgments. Anything done, especially undertakings of great significance, require the unsung and often invisible efforts of others. My accomplishments, if I'm allowed a moment of frank honesty, quake in the towering shadows of my great many inadequacies and insecurities. If here is some sort of destination worthy of note – something my village implores me to believe – those hands reaching down and shoulders propelling me higher made my arrival possible. What follows is a list of names. It is incomplete; for how could I name all those many people who took time and made space? If you aren't named, please know while your name escapes me, the force of your help sustained me in those quiet moments when defeat haunted my spirit. Thank you. And if you are, I write this as an admittedly inferior expression my indebtedness to you.

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notes on the Jumpman (a search for beginnings).

In 1985, Nike released the first Air Jordan sneaker, and after 37 years and 36 iterations of their flagship line of basketball shoes, Jordans have become a transcendent cultural talisman memorializing Michael Jordan's career and professional basketball's cultural influence on American life and a burgeoning asset class drawing investors of all kinds looking to grow and generate wealth.ⁱ More than just mere basketball shoes, Jordans have moved off the court to become a staple in the closets and on the feet of millions of people around the globe. However, the story of the Air Jordan's origins is complicated. Like most things of immense value, there are many fathers who all would be chomping at the bit to claim ownership: Phil Knight, the cofounder and former Chairman Emeritus of Nike; Rob Strasser, then director of marketing for Nike; and Sonny Vaccaro, then marketing executive for Nike who is credited with signing Michael Jordan to the company.ⁱⁱ Despite these key players, many designers, agents, lawyers, photographers, and executives have had a role in building the Jumpman, and this does not even include maybe the most important actor in the social and material construction of the Jumpman, Michael Jordan. During the summer of 1984, David Falk, Jordan's agent; Peter Moore, the graphic designer who would go on to design the Air Jordan 1 and 2; and Robert Strasser gathered in Falk's Washington, D.C. office to discuss Nike's potential signing of a relatively unknown rookie basketball player.ⁱⁱⁱ After an exchange of pleasantries, Falk looked to Strasser and says, "Rob, I've got an idea. I want to marry Michael to your airbag technology."^{iv} Falk then pauses for dramatic effect, and reveals, "Air Jordan."^v This meeting not only sources the mythic legend of Michael Jordan and the commercial ubiquity of Nike Basketball but unpacks a hidden truth marrying the merged definitions of Michael Jordan's and Nike's "Air." Jordan's "Air" is what Michael Eric Dyson refers to as a "perform[ance] of self that is rife with the language of physical expressiveness: head moving, arms extending, hands waving, tongue wagging, and legs spreading.... [and] the subversion of perceived limits...which centers around the space/time continuum," around hangtime.^{vi} "Hangtime," the scholar argues, "is the uncanny ability to remain suspended in midair...while executing a stunning array of basketball moves....[and] technically a misnomer."^{vii} Truthfully, Jordan's hangtime "can be more accurately attributed to...his acrobatic leaping ability and his intellectual toughness in projecting an aura of uniqueness around his craft than his defiance of gravity and the laws of physics."^{viii} Michael's "Air" asserts physical genius as illusion, making hangtime a matter of faith more so than practical reality. This version of "Air" is the canvas of imagination that realizes the aphorism "seeing is believing" while challenging the reality of sight and the truth of belief.

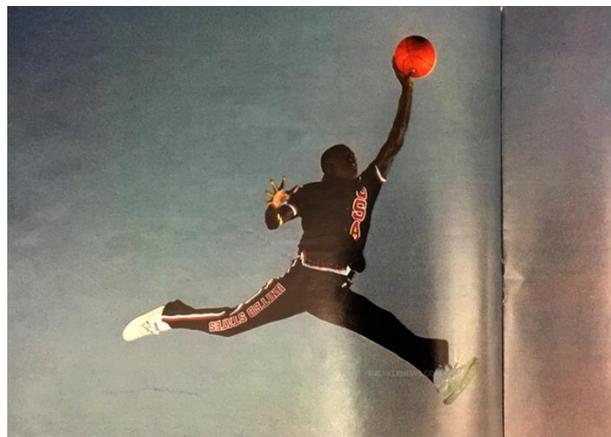


Figure 1.1 Jacobus Rentmeester's 1984 photograph of Michael Jordan for *Life Magazine*

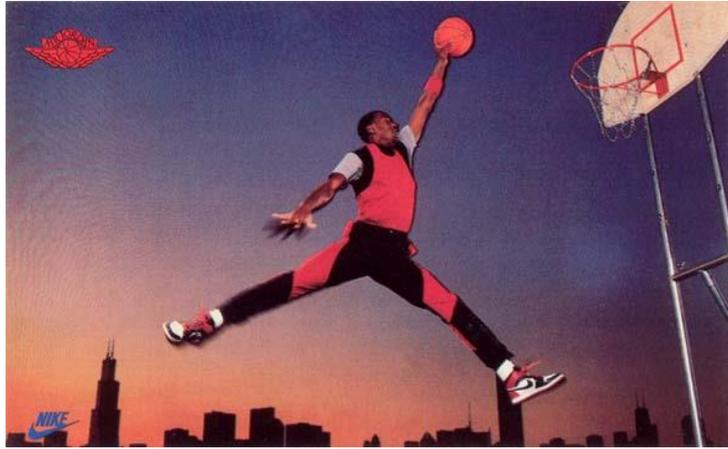


Figure 1.2 Photograph from the Original Air Jordan photoshoot and image for the Air Jordan hangtag

Nike's airbag technology is the technological other side of the "Air" equation. Nike's "Air" are "pockets of pressurized gas [developed in 1977,] which eventually became recognized as the industry's benchmark cushioning technology and the first to capture the consumer imagination."^{ix} The Nike Tailwind, a running shoe debuted in 1979, first utilized the Air technology, and as "Scoop" Jackson reports, the customer response was instant and powerful.

Between the foot and the sole of the shoe, there were two pieces of polyurethane film molded together. It was less than a half-inch in thickness, weighed less than a half a pound. People ran in it. The shoes sometimes fell apart, but the people kept running. They were in love with the insole (technically called a midsole). They'd never experienced such a feeling. Some would pull the inside out of the shoes, look at them, examine them; some would buy an extra pair of Tailwinds just to destroy the insole of their original pair to see what in the hell was giving them that "bouncy air bag feeling."^x

Nike Air was a curiosity. It was unstable and unreliable, but runners became enamored with the idea of a cushioning technology they couldn't see and much less understand. People knew they loved the sensation of Air even though it's how remained a mystery. Speaking about this journey to stability and, for our purposes, the journey from running to basketball shoes, Bruce Kilgore, famed sneaker designer and "one of the original 'Air'-men," says, "The first 5-7 years of dealing with the full-length air midsole was about taming the material and properties of the shoe.... The question became: How do you take something inherently unstable and put [it] into [a basketball shoe] that is all about stability?"^{xi} And more to the point, how do you sell and market something people like but do not understand? Peter Moore says of Nike Air, "It was frankly nothing like what it is today. You couldn't see it and we were considering dropping it."^{xii} The seemingly simple concept of explaining Air eluded the company for the better part of a decade, but six years after the development of Nike Air, David Falk cracked the code of Nike's transparent, little black box. While Nike was concerned with the narrative of cushioning, the ability to walk on air, Falk saw Nike's Air technology differently. The technological innovation of Nike Air could hide in plain sight within the blackened magic of MJ's "Air" in the same way a magician hides the mechanical and technical realities of a magic trick in the stupefying awe of the illusion. When it debuted on the Air Jordan 3, the Jumpman logo was displayed alongside a windowed sole, allowing the consumer to see Nike's Air. Granted, this resolved the problem of the Tailwind, yet the Jumpman coupled with the visible Air bubble made visible another "Air." Michael Jordan's hangtime. As an interesting irony, at the time of its release, of all Nike's shoes on the market, the Air Jordan had the smallest airbag. "In other words,

the first Air Jordan had so little air that it was tantamount to having no air at all.”^{xxiii} It was as if Nike realized Jordan’s realized was bigger, in more ways than one, than the Jordans mundane technical reality.

In an internal memo written in 1983, Strasser explained the importance of individual athletes: “Individual athletes, even more than teams, will be the heroes; symbols more and more of what real people can’t do anymore—risk and win.”^{xxiv} The *fantastic* play of Michael “Air” Jordan for all intents and purposes became an intermediary for Nike’s Air technology. Bruno Latour defines “intermediary” as being “what transports meaning or force without transformation... For all practical purposes, an intermediary can be taken not only as a black box, but also as a black box counting for one, even if it is internally made of many parts.”^{xxv} Moreover, intermediaries are illusory in and of themselves because they “can be easily forgotten.”^{xxvi} Strictly speaking, the spectacle of Michael’s “Air” literally turned Nike’s Air into a parenthetical, something the modern consumer should forget. In other words, who cares about what’s in these midsoles, we got dunks to watch. But more specifically, this marketing ploy to shift the attention of consumers from mundane pockets of polyurethane to on court performances, while indeed innovative, centers an incredibly old assumption of spectacular fungibility governing how we see Black bodies. That is, the Black, whether in chains, on plantations, or in sneakers, is an object always already available to the whims, desires, and imaginations of humanity. “This violence which turns a body into flesh, ripped apart literally and imaginatively,” writes Frank Wilderson, “destroys the possibility of ontology because it positions the Black in an infinite and indeterminately horrifying and open vulnerability, an object made available (which is to say fungible) for any subject.”^{xxvii} Obvious to Strasser’s description of the role athletes will play in the financial future of the then burgeoning shoe company is a storyteller’s romanticism. Sneakers existed, then and now, as a primary text in which a body’s momentary athletic brilliance becomes crystallized as a neat talisman, wrapped, boxed, and made available for purchase. The names of these heroes ring off the tongue sharp and proud like a trumpet’s blare: Bo Jackson, Penny Hardaway Kobe Bryant, and Lebron James. These names chronicle nearly half a century of Nike’s spectacular and profitable display of bodies. Though, none of this would be possible without Nike’s big bet on Michael Jeffrey Jordan.

Michael Jordan wasn’t the first professional Basketball player to endorse Nike. At the time, it had roughly 70 players wearing Nike shoes including stars like George Gervin and Bobby Jones.^{xxviii} “But those players,” says Peter Moore, “didn’t make any difference in sales, and frankly the shoes weren’t much – just cup-soled leather [sneakers] that had a swoosh on them... High performance technology meant it didn’t give you blisters.”^{xxix} At the time, Adidas had established themselves as the leather basketball shoe company and most of the NBA greats were signed to Converse.^{xx} In fact, Converse and Adidas had such a dominant grip on the basketball landscape Michael Jordan declined Nike’s first invitation to their headquarters in Beaverton, OR.^{xxi} But, because of Jordan and Falk’s steep asking price, Converse and Adidas refused any proposition for a sponsorship deal with Jordan, telling Falk, “it would never work.”^{xxii} “Falk made his pitch more like an unequivocal demand,” David Wolman reports. “If Nike wanted Michael Jordan, Jordan needed his own signature line of shoes and apparel, up-front advertising support, and a cut of future sales. All this was essentially unheard of—a stunning deal for a rookie in a team sport, just one knee injury away from disaster.”^{xxiii} Nike needed Michael Jordan, or at least a star like him. They needed something that could *jump over* the meandering task of explaining Nike Air and tell a highly stylized narrative about its meaning. However, this does not begin to detail the ominous financial position that Nike was in at the time of and right before Jordan’s signing:

After the company went public in 1980, its stock languished. In 1984 the company posted its first losing quarter ever. As layoff notices landed in a monthlong wave that some within Nike called the “St. Valentine’s Day massacre,” America fawned over newcomer Reebok, which had snuck up on Nike to capture the era’s aerobics boom.^{xxiv}

As Strasser’s memo details, Nike needed a hero; more specifically, the ailing shoe company required a body brimming with transcendent, seemingly superhuman physical ability, and Michael Jordan fit the bill. In what may be the most glowing praise heaped on a basketball player by a fellow competitor in real time, Celtics legend Larry Bird said of Michael Jordan after an overtime playoff win in 1986 where Michael Jordan scored 63 points, an NBA playoff record, ““I think he’s God disguised as Michael Jordan...He is the most awesome player in the NBA.”^{xxv}

Also inherent to Strasser’s claim, though not as obvious as the romantic notions of athletes as heroes, is a delicate division of bodies. The former Nike director of marketing explains, “Individual athletes...will be the heroes; symbols...of what real people can’t do.”^{xxvi} First, his use of “real people” heralds an ontological philosophy of human designation, begging the question who and what is allowed the privilege of being “real?” Moreover, his use of “real” denotes normalcy and sameness as opposed to ostensible actuality. Said differently, Strasser is not interested in some imaginary or fictitious race of Man; instead, his words evince a specific, articulable, and natal content of humanity where the self as a disembodied proposition of enterprise, limited only by a person’s imagination and spirit, comes to name reality and the truth it purports. Second, in parsing “real people” from “individual athletes,” Strasser articulates the body as threshold for articulating the difference between real and fiction. That is, the content of these athletes, their “heroic” exploits – “what real can’t do” – conveys corporeal excess, the ability to jump and run higher, faster, and farther, as representational fiction. It’s not that we imagined the feats Jordan et al. Rather, their real (as in actual) athletic achievements syntax a cultural apprehension of fantasy and unreality. Sneakers, then, are an opportunity to inscribe the voyeuristic pleasure of fiction on the flesh. Lurking underneath Strasser’s comments, following this division of bodies, are powerful and longstanding interrogatives of racial embodiment, which also, and this cannot be stressed enough, distinguish categories of humanity. The force and endurance of racialization manifest the human project as being one of whiteness. As Richard Dyer writes in *White*, “Whites are everywhere...because of...their placing as norm... [they are] people who are variously gendered, classed, sexualized, and abled. At the level of racial representation... whites are not of a certain race, they’re just the human race.”^{xxvii} The unspoken racial connotation of Strasser’s words has proven to be an almost limitless wellspring of profit for Nike and the sneaker industry more generally. That being said, if the goal of Nike and the industry writ large was to not make shoes but material folktales of corporeal fantasy for immense profit, the only way to do this is to *brand* Black bodies as never-ending, always titillating spectacle. Michael’s “Air” seen as a racialized impossibility of physics, that Black thing leading Larry Bird to call him God, branded Nike Air to the intimately American pastime of consuming Blackness.

For Nike, the mid 1980s and 90s to be a period of unbridled success and growth, triangulating aggressive marketing campaigns that “associated its shoes with luxury and performance,” innovative technology and design, and a manufacturing scheme investing heavily in cheap, offshore labor.^{xxviii} In 1981, Nike boasted a retail offering of 140 shoe models, and by 2001, this number had jumped to 500.^{xxix} Joshua Hunt explains just how important off-shore labor was to Nike’s industry dominance:

Nike was pioneering in its use of offshore manufacturing, which proved to be immensely profitable for the company: a single factory like the one run by South Korea's Samyang Tongsang could produce up to 4 million pairs of Nike shoes each year, for lower wages than Knight could legally pay workers in the United States, and without any big investments in construction, raw materials, or training of a labor force. Contractors also proved useful when Knight sought to distance his brand from the problems that arise when manufacturing in countries with weak or absent laws to ensure worker safety.^{xxx}

This indefensible reality of labor where, on one side, are the lauded accomplishments of Nike designers and, on the other, the languish and toil of workers whose pay was documented being as low as “.14 cents per hour” would subject the company to immense criticism and protest.^{xxxi} 1997 proved to be the year the simmering tensions between the company and its critics would reach a fever pitch. While assembling shoes designed thousands of miles away at Nike headquarters in Beaverton, Oregon, Nike factory worker Nguyen Thi Thu Phuong was killed instantly when a neighboring worker's sewing machine exploded, launching metal shrapnel into the 23-year-old's heart.^{xxxii} “Nike's response to the young woman's death was to boldly and defiantly claim: *‘We don't make shoes.’*”^{xxxiii} The apathy of Nike at Phuong's tragic death presents a discontinuity of labor, which centers, a then, new vision of capitalist work. That the efforts of famed sneaker designer Tinker Hatfield and his peers were of immense value to his employers at Nike; to the people who consumed his products; and to the larger fashion, sporting goods, and design industries, and the toil of Nguyen Thi Thu Phuong was invisible and valueless posits not just the oppressive churning of a global capitalism hungry for the steepest of profit margins but an emphatic shift in the ways in which labor happens within the construction of capitalist systems and institutions.

Nike's statement, “We don't make shoes,” should be read in the most literal of senses where the manufacture of sneakers is a costly technical encumbrance to Nike's real work of design and branding. “We don't make shoes,” invites a bifurcated reading of labor and, more importantly, a reimagining of the capitalist identity of worker. First, the infinitive “to make” is inherited to the hands of mostly South Asian sweatshop laborers, but their piece-meal construction is the final and most superficial stage of a cognitive and post-industrial process of idea generation in the minds and on the sketch pads of designers. Second, the pronoun “we” stamps a sense of capitalist identity where corporate personhood is given to those who do something beyond the mere and simple act of making. “We” is Nike. “We” is the sneaker designer. “We” is not those who are invisible and replaceable, toiling in sweatshops. Though a callous admission, one given its mortal context is indeed frightening, “We don't make shoes” accurately gathers Nike business practices then and now – especially now. “We don't make shoes” also, for me, presents an opportunity to theorize how Black bodies exist as a fabrication, totally lacking “the DNA of culture” and how sneakers exist, with material specificity, as the literal moldings of Black men's feet – the material extensions of flesh.^{xxxiv} The number that populates “we” stands in stupefied awe not in the athletic brilliance of Black athletes but the impossible fantasy of Black bodies. As such, “if the Black body [has always been] the vehicle of the other's power, pleasure, and profit,” the sneaker as proxy – that which stands in and for the Black's overwhelming subjugation – functions as fantastic thrill ride.^{xxxv} These walkable amusements tangle the benign spectacle of sports with how the peculiar institution of slavery disclosed the vantage of white enjoyment and/as supremacy. Nike's denial of manufacturing, which, in reality, is innovation as exploitation, unfolds a genealogy of capitalist profitability and cultural viability where the branding of Black flesh and the stocking of Black bodies details both the origins and future of the industry.

AIR JORDAN®

4365 White/Cement Grey
 4366 Black/Cement Grey
 4367 White/Fire Red
 4368 White/True Blue

Sizes: 6-14, 15

Upper: Full-grain leather with embossed leather trim.

Sole Unit: Contoured polyurethane Footframe midsole with maximum-volume heel and forefoot NIKE AIR-SOLE® units. Solid rubber outsole with Center-of-Pressure® design.

Profile: The Air Jordan® is a lightweight and responsive shoe featuring visible NIKE-AIR® cushioning and Footframe for stability. The three-quarter height is designed for players who want unrestricted ankle flexion as they move up and down the court.



Figure 1.3 Air Jordan 3 Promotional Materials

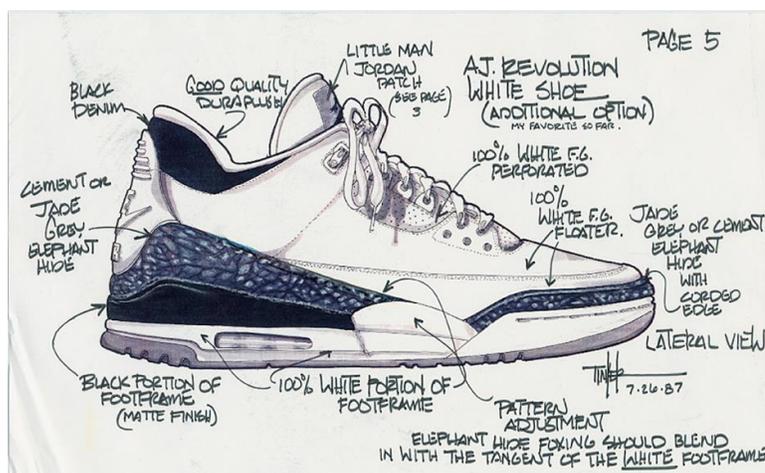


Figure 1.4 Tinker Hatfield Air Jordan 3 Design Photo with Notes

Since their inception, Air Jordans have been preoccupied with a mythic understanding of flight. The Air Jordans “Wings” logo was featured prominently on the Air Jordan 1 and 2 and designed to resemble pilot wings. In that initial meeting in D.C., Peter Moore quipped that Falk’s scribbling of the original Air Jordan logo was similar to that of the Royal Air Maroc airline.^{xxxvi} Falk first sketched the logo on his return flight to Portland from D.C. and was inspired by the pins that flight attendants give to children. His drawing sought to capture the fanciful magic of young children on their first plane ride. The story of the Jumpman logo, though, doesn’t begin on a plane but at a photoshoot for *Life Magazine*.^{xxxvii} Before he ever played for the Chicago Bulls, Michael Jordan made his professional debut in the summer of 1984 with the United States Olympic team. Jacobus Rentmeester photographed the young star in what is now an iconic pose.^{xxxviii} Of the photoshoot, Jordan said, “I wasn’t even dunking on that one... I just stood on the floor, jumped up, and spread my legs and they took the picture...”^{xxxix} Immediately after the shoot, Peter Moore of Nike paid Rentmeester \$150 for temporary use of two photo transparencies.^{xl} Later in 1984, the Associated Press reported, to avoid a suit from Rentmeester, Nike “paid him [an additional] \$15,000 for a limited license to use the image for two years.”^{xli} In 2015, however, Rentmeester sued Nike for copyright infringement, alleging the company used his photo to recreate the image, which would be seen on the hangtag of the first two iterations of the Air Jordans and, in silhouette, on every Jordan product thereafter.^{xlii} “Mr. Rentmeester,” the 2015 lawsuit details, “created the pose, inspired by a ballet technique known as a ‘grand jete,’ a long horizontal jump during which a dancer performs

splits in mid-air. The pose, while conceived to make it appear that Mr. Jordan was in the process of a dunk, was not reflective of Mr. Jordan's natural jump or dunking style."^{xliii} Later that year, in June, an Oregon court dismissed the case, finding Nike's photograph not "substantially similar" to Rentmeester's.^{xliv}

The origin story of the Jumpman is important for two reasons: first, it wrests ownership of the iconic posing from Jordan's athletic agency to the artistic and stylistic manipulations of the photographic eye and corporate marketing, and second, it interrogates everything a silhouette makes invisible through opacity. "The people to whom race is assigned are not passive, writes Achille Mbembe in *Critique of Black Reason*. "Imprisoned in a silhouette, they are separated from their essence... The *racial theatre* is a space of systemic stigmatization...the emblem of an essentially obscure, shadowy, and paradoxical desire."^{xlv} In the Air Jordan, as it were, Michael Jordan exists, forever and for always, trapped in the sneaker's silhouette. To say Air Jordans and sneakers, writ large, exist as shadows of Blackness revels in the obvious truth that shadows are indeed fantastic extensions of bodies. Shadows pirouette along the azimuth of light and dark. Being neither in the realms of the living nor dead, they host and breed nightmares as opacity rupturing the sterility of reason. In play, shadows adumbrate imagination as flickers and figments. All those hopping bunnies and howling wolves of our childhood tame darkness as toys. But what happens when we conceptualize Mbembe's "racial theatre" as a shadow box where exaggerated fantasies produce profit, and going further, how does the Jumpman as silhouette – as abducted shadow – conceive the traces of body it leaves behind as being intensely ephemeral, fiercely disposable, and locked in the commodifiable sensorium of white pleasure.



Figure 1.5 Air Jordan "Wings" Logo



Figure 1.6 Air Jordan “Jumpman” Logo

Obviously, the “Wings” and Jumpman logos signify flight, and yet, this signification diverges along the axis of agency and imagination. Flight, for Jordans’ “Wings” analogizes the agency and expertise of pilots. These highly skilled technicians use their training to perform flight through the pull, tug, and twist of the airplane’s yoke. In this sense, flight happens in the cockpit and through a mastery of technological practice. But also, and maybe most importantly, the “Wings” allegorize those wistful moments when a child’s bedroom dissolves into infinite sky, when children’s waving hands power death defying barrel rolls and nosedives, and inch tall toys become larger than life. For Michael Jordan, the Wings logo define him as the dunk’s most masterful pilot. Here, mastery marks Jordan as expert practitioner and Jordans as an apparatus for deploying a child’s imaginative whimsy. However, the Jumpman frames flight not through the agential pilot but the absented and fetishized plane. Nike’s investment of money and resources into the Air Jordan – the company’s many engineers, doctors, scientists, and designers – treated Jordan’s body as a flying vessel and worked tirelessly to make its most prized object, the Jumpman, fly better. By this, I am not claiming Air Jordans or sneakers, generally, are enhancing technologies, though the world’s greatest athletes wear them to perform amazing feats. Instead, they are a vehicle of sorts, allowing its wearers to step in the shadow’s fiction as blurred proxy of intimate cultural fantasy and the outrageous, how-is-that-possible truth of seeing is believing. It is no accident the Jumpman looks like a fighter jet. Fighter Jets are evocative of certain era of American cool when seemingly every kid wanted to be Maverick’s Goose, when every kid wanted break the sound barrier. I’m talking about aviator shades and perfectly quaffed hair. In this sense, Jordan didn’t belong to the Chicago Bulls or the National Basketball Association (NBA) or even Nike. Unlike those south Asian sweatshop workers, Jordan belonged (and belongs) to America – as did his bound and shipped ancestors.

There was a time where Air Jordan, just like the F-15, for instance, was America’s most recognizable cultural commodity, and maybe that time is still now. The Jumpman transforms Michael Jordan into a thing that routinely breaks the laws of physics. I mean – c’mon – the sound barrier is only an understandable concept thanks to Bell Aircraft’s Bell X-1 jet, just as hangtime, for most who witness it, breaks the laws of gravity. Lieutenant Colonel Douglas Kirkpatrick of the U.S. Air Force, in a commercial for Air Jordans, characterized the athlete’s dunking ability as being able to “overcome the acceleration of gravity by the application of his muscle power in the vertical plane, thus producing a low-altitude orbit.”^{xlvi} The Jumpman, as mediated text, compels its readers to reckon with the Western origins of race and the racial imaginary – how the Black body, as eternal chattel, is a formation of and for white enjoyment, as articulated more in chapter three. While the Air Jordan’s original “Wings” logo represents, at the very least, agential performance, the Jumpman

forwards race as concept of perpetual suspension. That is, Blackness exists as a material conceit without the complicating problematic of identity, eternally fetishizing and commodifying the Black body – an iterative silhouette in which white ideations can become manifest. “Be(ing) like Mike,” as such, only makes sense through intertwined narratives of pilot-ability, shifting agency away from Michael Jordan to legions of consumers. Wearing Jordans does not make us passengers on Air Jordan where MJ is the pilot. Rather, every time we play in or just wear a pair of Air Jordans we don the role of pilot, and the aerial amusements of the Jumpman becomes availed to our consumptive whims.

plugs of authenticity.

With this extended anecdote, my desire is to constellate a beginning for this philosophical expedition of sneakers at the intersection of Blackness and material media. In developing this starting point, I do not wish to argue the release of Air Jordans in 1984 were the first sneaker or even the first sneaker of some cultural consequence. Frankly, this would be patently false and unproductive. To my mind, the notion of firsts, especially within the nebulous milieu of scholarly criticism, enacts a zero-sum game of historical flag planting – that is, there is an imperially inflected power inherent to being presumed first – eliding the creative and boundary pushing work of sitting with a thing that seemingly has always been there. Put differently, in line with the general orientation of media archaeology, I read firsts as happenstances of history, a knick-knack of record keeping, and in our materially laden world brimming with all sorts of novelties, no one needs or wants to keep track of another thing. Beginnings, though, speak to intentionality and the narcotic of excavation and archaeology, especially when said beginning occurs in the middle – “the sedimented and layered... folds of time and materiality.”^{xlvii} To quote Jussi Parikka, “the proposition of [*Deadstock*] is that you start in the middle – from the entanglement of past and present, and accept the complexity this decision brings with it to any analysis of modern media culture.”^{xlviii} I take seriously Parikka’s sentiment here. However, *Deadstock* asks, what happens if we saw beginnings, particularly this beginning, as an overlay of middles? What are the consequences of considering Parikka’s middle, which he describes as “an emergence of a new sense of history... offering a presence for the past” alongside the Middle Passage – that eventless demise rendering Black captivity as the condition of possibility and impossibility for the sovereign human figure?^{xlix} Michael Jordan’s ability to, as Sonny Vaccaro puts it, “fly through the air,” Strasser’s desire for a body “to merge the brand, the product, the advertising, and the athlete into one personality,” and an insatiable, industry altering demand for more product – always more product – structures this middle as being obsessed with the economic function of Black corporeality.¹ Moreover, Air Jordans, considering all this, sell, more than basketball legacy and fantasy and more than even well designed shoes. Air Jordans, as a brand, object, and billion-dollar sports empire, promote an idealized vision of Black bodies made real, or – at least – real enough.

The Air Jordan 1 High OG “Patent Bred,” one of 2021’s most coveted sneaker drops, released on December 30, 2021. Yet, on the night of December 29th, Finish Line dashed the dreams of many eager customers in a smartly worded tweet: “We sold all pairs of the Air Jordan 1 High OG “Patent Bred” to our most loyal customers through STATUS Exclusive Access. No release will happen tomorrow morning. Join STATUS to learn how to get STATUS Exclusive Access to future must have drops.”^{li} A commodity’s fluctuating level of stock is one thing, but the contorted machinations of retailers, markets, and consumers to make out-of-stock-ness not merely a regular occurrence at the point-of-sale but a crucible proving the consumer’s worth to purchase is another. The “L” is a quantifiable metric of profit that differentiates retail pricing and resale markup. For

example, I bought Air Jordan 1 collab with Brazilian artist Pomb, “Los Primeros,” via Nike’s SNKRS app at the retail price of \$160.

L [/el/]: (noun); a shortened form of lose or loss. In the sneaker community, this refers to an inability to cop a sneaker at release for its retail price.

collab [/kuh-lab/ or /koh-lab/]: (verb and noun); an abbreviation of collaborate or collaboration. This term refers to a product developed through a cross-brand promotional partnership with a designer, celebrity, or brand. A collab is often indicated with an “X,” such as Travis Scott X Air Max 1 or Joe Freshgoods X New Balance

To say this purchase was lucky would be an understatement. Currently, they are listed at \$1794 on Stock X (my size is 13). The price increase of \$1634, a 1121% markup, quantifies the “L.” Moreover, the sneaker industry also contravenes the idea of a thing being out-of-stock – something unavailable and inaccessible. Out-of-stock via Nike or Adidas or the litany of first-purchase brick-and-mortar and online retailers function as productive and profitable limes into the teeth of sneaker culture. In a market reality where sneakers are sold out before or minutes after their release, and the exorbitant markups of resellers is not only normal but a feedback loop of profit and excitement, *stock* exists not as a reality of shelf space but inventory the capitalist imaginary of commodity availability and demand. In other words, operating as a cudgel, stock interrogates the material contexts of the sneaker industry allowing for products to be both always and never available. So much so, that if you want a fresh pair of Kobes, normal retail outlets are the worst places to look – you need to find a plug.

plug [/pluhg/]: (noun); originally, a person connected to large quantities of illegal and illicit paraphernalia (like drugs or guns) and supplies smaller, neighborhood dealers; now, describes someone who is able to find rare or sought-after sneakers, almost always outside of the mainstream sneaker market.

The plug whose clandestine presence seemingly disappears merchandise from the grip of capitalist bureaucracy to the eager, waiting hands of sneaker enthusiasts operates through a symphonic performance of online drops and bots, mostly useless procurement apps and lottery systems, social media postings of success and many more of failure (the notorious “L”), nondescript warehouses brimming with countless shoeboxes and “authenticators,” and the dap’s percussive veneer of urban (read: Black) authenticity.^{lii} As useful digression, authenticity must be read as a colonized afterimage of consumption, “a potent expression of longing for the ‘primitive.’”^{liii} The notion lies as the horizon line whereby the wafting mirage of memory is distinguished from the ever-diminishing facticity of history. Its lustful appearance strokes the Other as an erotic and intimate media aesthetic where assuaging accountability and guilt happens alongside a defiant denial of historical specificity and connection. Authenticity is reality spectacular – a sensuous fiction where the folded triangulation of the watcher, watched, and act of watching approximates actuality as being intensely identifiable and recognizable but just as ethically absent. That is, the authentic performs montage under the guise of fact and upon “the blank landscape of whiteness.”^{liv} For Air Jordans, authenticity via retro is a mercantile production of agedness “which entail older ways of looking...and being, not just as consumption and leisure, but as lifestyle, identity, ethics, and even new forms of labor.”^{lv}

retro [/re-troh/]: (adjective); of or designating an earlier time (nostalgia), especially if that designated item evokes a modern or stylish sensibility of cool; a contemporary object containing elements of, but not replicating, an object or style from a previous era; a release or re-release of a sneaker colorway after its initial release, most often associated with Air Jordans.

Authenticity, also, speculates an imaginative depiction of the past where likeness discloses not history but a shared collage of ever-changing memories. Furthermore, being authentic requires a robust labors and apparatuses of authentication. “The counterfeit sneaker market is valued at \$450 billion,” to combat an expansive industry of forgery, which is larger and more valuable than the primary and secondary sneaker markets,^{lvi} plugs and consumers, alike, rely on a technically intensive and advanced regime of human and algorithmic labor.^{lvii} Online resale platform GOAT boasts “machine learning technology, digital authentication, and in-hand verification,” and Stock X, with their infamous authentication centers, offer a “100% guaranteed authenticity” by analyzing over “100 data points,” spanning everything from box construction and label font to smell.^{lviii} In fact on a video posted to their website, Stock X authenticator Justin claims, “The smell test is real. Each shoe, each Jordan, each Nike, each Adidas, each anything is going to have their own proprietary smell based off the glue that they use.”^{lix} To spend hundreds or even thousands of dollars on a rare [pair of sneakers], one must believe the seller’s assessment of its worth. The authenticity of the vintage goods for sale circulates in tight feedback loops with the credibility of sellers. Authentication happens through a systematic loop of scientific-seeming and data-driven recognition running parallel with a romantic imaginary of memory, objectification, and then, consumption. Consumption is not totalizing end but an opportunity of disappearing (re)imagination and (re)presentation where the churning digestion of commodity offers bile and digestion as catechism of aesthetic. In other words, “vintage is considered better than new” and discontinuation, obsolescence, as well as media death eulogize better, more human and, quite possibly, humane times.^{lx} Seeking the authentic, then, attempts grabbing sand where, upon the metaphorical hand’s opening, all that is left imagines what once was not what is actually gone. Better said, authenticity does not report the past as history but envisions it as fable. Running counter to an austere interpretation of capitalist flows, an emotionally laden understanding of authenticity recognizes emotion as being the center of capitalisms economic sphere.^{lxi} Plugs, then, render familiarity and kinship not through personal proximity but corporate intimacy – the boundless and masturbatory desire for the sense of very emotional selves become known through and around keepsakes as capital.

chapter summary.

This work asks an obvious question that has no easy answers: why is the Black body so intimately and intractably adhered to sneakers? To approach a response, I accept three claims as unequivocal truth. First, for most of its life within the colonial system of race, the Black body has been conceived as antithetical organism to the human subject – that which defines humanity through incessant negation. Second, in and through bondage, the slave exists as essential matter on which the modern world is built upon. Lastly, the bondage of Black bodies is a universal answer to the oftentimes confounding quandary of sustained profit generation. The singularly transactional existence of Black people, that is, how our ancestral position as bound chattel corrodes any possibility for humanity, yes, but more profoundly, how this corrosion, which happens alongside the movement from one side of the ledger to another, situates Blackness as living mineral, detached from the social whole but evoking “a kind of geoaffect or material vitality... [that] draws human bodies to apparently dead things – to objects, stones, bits of matter, [and the slave].”^{lxiii} Put another way, claiming sneakers originate from Black people, as most cultural critics and journalists readily do,

cannot just be about a sort of ephemeral and era specific interpretation of Black cool or an aesthetic artifact of Black culture. Instead, we must take these origins as being literal and in line with the chattel roots of Blackness. By this, I am referring to the relative newness of Black “people” as a distinction and the proximity of sneakers as a forceful phenomenon of culture to this novel act of naming Black bodies, people. As a philosophical intervention, this project hopes, just for a moment, to undo the often-impenetrable distraction of culture and style in order to imagine sneakers as raced objects – not merely things read through the frame of race but objects where Black flesh is material component. As such, this project contextualizes the Air Jordan’s origins and nearly 40-year hold on the zeitgeist through a corporate inscription and production of race. Hortense Spillers writes, “‘Ethnicity’ perceived as mythical time enables a writer to perform a variety of conceptual movements all at once. Under its hegemony, the human body becomes a defenseless target for rape and veneration, and the body, in its material and abstract form, a resource for metaphor.”^{lxiii} Air Jordans stand in and allow the market to stand in the fantasy of Black bodies or, better said, ethnicity as mythic (hang)time. The surprise and persistence of their popularity forced an industry-wide response where the selling of sneakers is a consequence to the inscription of mythos onto Black flesh.

The following chapters reckon with an industry and object that treats the Black body as soft chattel. By this, I am referring to the culture and class formation happening in and through sneakers which displaces the horrors of shackled Black bodies for the powerful and profitable branding and ownership – to debatable degrees – of Black bodies. This work invokes objectification as the definitional premise of the Black body. This claim roots the Black body in function not being and imagines objectification as lynchpin holding the world together.^{lxiv} As such, sneakers, as an industry deeply reliant on branding Blackness and an object we stand in, especially as an object we stand in, expose a traceable genealogy of objectification, beginning with slave ships, where the Black body as mere thing accesses white desires. Unequivocally, the “mere”-ness is the point. The Black body being nothing more nor than a thing, completely fungible and always disposable, a pittance in the face of Humanity, structures the ephemeral whims of pleasure. That is, for the Black, death is a continuum of incessant remark erecting the possibility and plausibility of pleasure. Saidiya Hartman in her seminal work *Scenes of Subjection* describes the relationship between pleasure and possession as happening along a racial axis where whiteness structures ownership and Blackness defines property. Through sneakers, I wish to isolate the kinds of expectations and the qualities of affect distinctive to the economy of slavery traceable through leather and laces. The relation between pleasure and the possession of slave property, in both the figurative and literal senses, can be explained in part by the fungibility of the slave – that is, the joy made possible by virtue of the replaceability and interchangeability endemic to the commodity – and by the extensive capacities of property – that is, the augmentation of the master subject through his embodiment in external objects and persons.^{lxv}

Much has been written on the commercial and cultural aspects of the sneaker, but much less has been written on the role Blackness as material ingredient has played in their design, marketing, and consumption. As a starting point, this dissertation takes the position that sneakers are a prosthesis of Black materiality, a thing where Blackness to varying degrees is recognizable through traceable associations even without the presence of Black bodies filling their soles and wearable, meaning the fantastic and fleshed excesses defining Blackness. *Deadstock, A Philosophy of Sneakers and Materiality in the Afterlife of Black Bodies* excavates sneakers from the strict confines of culture and fashion, asserting their existence as objects wherein bodies act in space and act upon bodies and space. Furthermore, this work incites an understanding of materiality that stares directly into the void of Black existence where within its bottomless opacity, the interrogative of matter’s very

existence rests on a proposition of bones made chattel and the predicate of human ontology organizes subjectivity in and around the death of all those lost souls. At the heart of this effort is a provocative question of immense consequence: how do sneakers make Black bodies matter and, conversely, materialize Black bodies? Moreover, what happens if we consider sneakers with a material specificity emphasizing their honest existence as blackened proxies of vulcanized rubber, leather, and laces – the literal molding of Black men’s feet – where racialized fantasies of corporeal productivity materialize? Inherent to these queries is a definitive assumption of Blackness as bodies made matter through brutal and mineralogical frameworks of extraction and objectification (**dead.**) and capitalist regimes of accumulation, fungibility, and dispossession (**stock.**). To which, any answers gleaned articulate the intimate and undiscussed connections between sneakers as material objects and Black bodies. Put another way, I investigate how the social death marking Blackness enlivens inanimate cultural objects through a frenzied re-presentation of sneakers that rouse and inventory racial imaginaries about the productive nature of the Black body. That is, how do sneakers as cultural talismans charm death as matter and matter as death where culture exists in concert with a smogbound occult of Blackness. *Deadstock* claims the sneaker as an object and industry projects a fantasy of Black abjection where the body as absented vessel – only allowed agency through capitalism’s totalizing conquest of matter and interminable quest for profit – is an elemental component of sneakers as a cultural technology.

Instead of a putting forth an argument with a relatively linear trajectory, *Deadstock* opts for targeted jaunts into the nuanced and layered world of sneakers. These chapters function as discreet and extended meditations on the possibilities and provocations of *Deadstock* as a philosophical construct. Each chapter, instead of presenting a mere criticism of sneaker history, seeks material reconstitution for an object that has lived and been primed, for too long, by the mostly white ideations of the fantastic power of Black bodies. At no point does this work proclaim sneakers or the sneaker industry is racist – at least no more than any other Westernized capitalist industry. The cry of racism, which to some, reads as melodramatic handwringing and to others, rings with the saccharine melody of “See, I told you so,” leads to nothing.

Chapter 1 (**matter.**) focuses on LeBron James in order to constellate James’ public becoming in and through the sneaker industry. More specifically, it seeks to literalize and problematize James’ existence as “The Chosen One.” That is, I use his selection to think through the robust and always churning network of grassroots to consider how Black athletic talent filters from obscurity to prominence. Going further, and examining LeBron’s past as basketball prodigy, I forward what I am calling “the athletic anthropocene.” By this, I am attempting to explain the robust mining and surveillance regime of Black athletic talent. That is, after Michael Jordan’s retirement and with basketball reaching a fever pitch in popularity, sneaker companies needed a more reliable way to identify and cultivate prime stock talent – athletes who could transcend the presumed ordinariness of Black athletic greatness with their immense talent and cultivated celebrity. This happens, I argue, through a wide network of grassroots (AAU) basketball leagues and tournaments funded largely by sneaker companies. This network treats Black bodies as matter, emphasizing the term’s mineralogical connotation, waiting to be discovered and passed off from hand to hand until the talent is refined enough to become profitable.

Chapter 2 (**dead.stock.**) focuses on the death of Kobe Bryant as a launchpad for a consideration of his material afterlife. Here, death is doubled. First, there is the death of Kobe Bryant, the man, and second and most importantly, this chapter theorizes the formation of Bryant’s Black Mamba alter ego as a psychological amputation – the way Black social death always hews mind

from body. This chapter functions as a philosophical case study in which I work to define both “death” and “stock” within the complex and Blackened construct of sneakers. This chapter relies on Afro-Pessimism and materialist media philosophy to link how the Black Mamba in living death structures our understanding the controversy surrounding the Kobe 6 Mamba Forever (MAMBACITA), a pair of shoes designed to memorialize Bryant’s legacy.

“**hangtime melancholia.**” (chapter 3) examines the efforts to capture and render the dunk, and how this labor demands a consideration of hangtime as ‘ghosts and specters’ in the machine of photography, some combination of technical production and a centuries-old visual orientation to the vertical suspension of Black bodies. This chapter, like the first, is divided into two sections. The first presents the dunking ability of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Wilt Chamberlin as being understood through the racialized and sexualized fear of Black men, literal (and corporeal) terrors in the sky. Second, if the photographic impetus for documenting hangtime in the 1960s was understood through a phallic logic of aerial invasion, the following section considers more modern iterations of hangtime where dunkers are no longer thought to be aerial invaders. Now, they are more like celestial or angelic bodies represented through visual allusions to religious iconography. With this work, my goal is exposure, to reverse engineer the technical production of hangtime and provide a long view of processes and materialities of production that foreground the positionality of bodies (who were almost always black) and the men (often white) who documented the dunk’s spectacle.

matter.

Below is a ledger of names. Some of them, like LeBron and Zion, you know. Others – the overwhelming majority – you do not. They were boys, then – please remember that – tender and soft. Some were as young as nine and ten. All are men, now – a few are broken. Some had mothers armed with birth certificates. Age ain't a number – its paperwork. They were assets. Some still are, most have been discarded. I clump them, here, as a clot of dirt – a sample only memorable in how easily it disappears back into the void. They were paid in gobs of sneakers and bags of cash. They were paid in trips to the mall and dinners to Outback. They were paid in girls and, eventually, women. They were paid in dreams. But remember, dreams are fantasy not currency.

There are the names of coaches, as well. Schemers and prospectors, the whole lot: panhandling neighborhood streets, local parks, high school gymnasiums, and playgrounds all to find, evaluate, and groom that next nugget of talent. Fathers were rare. Circumstances – roving as third strike laws, addiction, and, sometimes, just a combination of immaturity and pain – always seem to absent Black men. Coaches were the men leftover. Too eagerly, they donned the cloak of fatherhood. Fatherhood is union buster – it could break the loyalty of free shoes. Fatherhood is proximity scheme – who would question a father just starting a team for their own son.^{lxvi} Fatherhood *brands* ownership – “These are my kids.” But property, especially of immense value, can always be stolen. Even paternalism *figures* into the equation of player development. The hoop dreams of coaches happen as hunts: “hunting kids is the best part.”^{lxvii} Their hoop dreams emerge as empire: “[Nike] changed everything.”^{lxviii} Their hoop dreams are built in bodies: “[coach] tried to touch [John Doe’s] genitals.”^{lxix}

Never forget, *they used to be boys*.



Figure 2.1 Sports Illustrated “The Chosen One” Cover featuring LeBron James

“the chosen one.”

In 2003, William Rhoden wrote a column for *The New York Times*, editorializing the uneven economic landscape for National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) coaches and players:

Major intercollegiate sports function like a *plantation*. The athletes perform in an economic atmosphere where everyone except them makes money off their labor. In the revenue-producing sports of football and basketball, athletes are the *gold, the oil, the natural resource that makes the NCAA engine run and its cash register ring*. Coaches climb the ladder on the shoulders of players. Too often the only thing players receive are sore shoulders.^{lxx}

Just two short months after the publication of Rhoden’s article, the Cleveland Cavaliers selected LeBron Raymone James as the 2003 National Basketball Association (NBA) Draft’s number one overall pick. Though his selection was the culmination of intense media scrutiny and attention, him being the Draft’s first selection was the least controversial aspect of his arrival to the league. NBA scouts dubbed him a “hoops prodigy” where the limits on his potential were more celestial than mortal.^{lxxi} In fact, the seeming inevitability of his on-court dominance is best expressed in what I imagine is the deadpan delivery of an annoyed scout harried by the incessant question, “just how good is he?”: “Whatever you have heard about him is true.”^{lxxii} Rhoden, though, was not the only person to name the NCAA’s athletic exploitation in such stark terms. In 1994, when LeBron was just ten years old and terrorizing Akron youth football leagues with his speed and size, Walter Byers, the former first executive director of the NCAA, took the podium to make an acceptance speech at the Kansas City Sports Commission’s annual gala for an award to honor “his exceptional contribution to amateur sports.”^{lxxiii} Today, the name given to “amateurs” who share their athletic talents for universities across the country is “student athletes.” The term now evokes a nationally sacralized vision of amateurism and, more importantly, the role and legacy of college campuses: *mens sana in corpore sano* – a sound mind in a sound body. Originally, though, at its inception, the NCAA wielded the label as weaponized jargon against having to dole out disability payments for athletes injured during play. In his book, *Unsportsmanlike Conduct: Exploiting College Athletes*, authored in 1995, a year after his acceptance speech at Sports Commission’s gala, Byers paints a sobering picture of the NCAA’s financial gamesmanship:

We crafted the term student-athlete [in 1950], and soon it was embedded in all NCAA rules and interpretations as a mandated substitute for such words as players and athletes... In a nutshell: the performance of football and basketball players frequently paid the salaries and workmen's compensation expenses of stadium employees, field house ticket takers, and restroom attendants, but the players themselves were not covered.^{lxxiv}

He puts a finer point on the matter when he describes the rise of boosters and alumni giving in college athletics: “The NCAA, in effect, had put in place a nationwide money-laundering scheme.”^{lxxv} However, back at that gala in Kansas City, Byers would have his most damning reprobate of the NCAA system. “It’s a disservice to these young people that the management of intercollegiate athletics stays in place committed to an outmoded code of amateurism,” claims Byers. “I attribute that to, quite frankly, to *the neo-plantation mentality* that exists on the campuses of our country and in the conference offices and in the NCAA. *The coach owns the athlete’s feet, the college owns the athlete’s body.*”^{lxxvi} And as if he was a broken record, in his book Byers laments this system of exploitation he helped create: “The college player cannot sell his own feet (the coach does that) nor

can he sell his own name (the college will do that). This is the plantation mentality resurrected and blessed by today's campus executives.”^{lxxvii} While much can be made of Byers invocation of amputation, for now, it must be said my interests in LeBron James, explodes the contested ownership of “the athlete’s feet” to consider how the sneaker industry has usurped the college campus as a commercial and manufacturing throng of literal Black men’s feet – limbs bound in stock. What’s more, a question emerges: what does it mean to LeBron and this “neo-plantation” that his talents (seemingly) afforded him an outlet of escape?

As a junior, in 2002, LeBron became the first high school underclassmen to grace the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, which dubbed him as “The Chosen One.”^{lxxviii} Also that year, LeBron tried to petition the league to alter their draft eligibility rules so the burgeoning star could skip not just college but his senior year in high school to play in the league.^{lxxix} If you were wondering, James – by most accounts – would have gone first in that draft, too. All this is important not just because LeBron is a great basketball player. We have seen transcendent basketball talent before. Kareem Abdul Jabbar wowed fans and scouts alike at UCLA. Kevin Garnett was a high school wunderkind before entering the 1995 draft. There are scores of names – some we remember and many more we do not – that have been hailed as being “the next big thing.” Instead, the specifics of LeBron’s basketball prodigiousness require explanation because, in almost real time, the world got to witness the ever-churning machines of sports, corporate interests, and sneakers congress to witness and confirm the discovery of the heir apparent (read: *Air* apparent). However, LeBron’s discovery – emphasizing the term’s archaeological and anthropological connotation – was not some incredible coincidence but the direct result of a robust surveillance and mining apparatus dedicated to finding, refining, promoting, and – inevitably – branding high end basketball talent. Unlike Michael Jordan who is the first global athletic superstar that also, famously, did not make his high school basketball team as a sophomore deemed “too short to play,” the stakes of being unable to identify the immense earning potential of James and other athletes like him is too great to leave to chance. What if we thought of Jordan’s career both on and off the court, especially off the court, as a happy accident – the innocuous convergence of circumstances that not only made him a branding machine and billionaire but single handedly reshaped an industry? That is, Jordan and his talent were in the right place at the right time. Then, if we accept this premise, what if we thought about LeBron’s “chosen-ness” as an industries-wide course correction? What if his discovery only happens because in the twilight of Jordan’s career, the sneaker industry realized the danger of relying on people who could and, most likely, would mis-assay or grade the future value of a prime *stock* athlete? Better put, the sneaker industry – the primary source of Jordan and LeBron’s immense wealth – could not risk having no one – no body, actually – ready to transition into Jordan’s shoes.

LeBron, though, was already “big” at the tender age of seventeen, so for him, the prospect of becoming “the *next* big thing” was, even by then, old hat. At that age, he was already on magazine covers. Michael Jordan was asking about his mother, Gloria, during warmups before MJ’s game with the Cleveland Cavaliers. Jay-Z was just a “cool dude” he met that one time at a hotel.^{lxxx} And finally, he played high school ball at the University of Akron’s 5,000 seat arena to satisfy demand – tickets for his senior season were going for \$100-120 per game; drawing attendance numbers doubling that of the university’s men’s team.^{lxxxi} In fact, his destiny was so certain, Gloria James, for her son’s eighteenth birthday secured a \$50,000 car loan to purchase LeBron a pewter H2 Hummer decked out with televisions and hook-ups for the latest game systems.^{lxxxii} Given their humble life at the time, NCAA and the Ohio High School Athletic Association (OSHA) flagged the purchase as suspicious. “[When] asked how she could secure such a loan, a person with knowledge of the

family's situation who spoke on condition of anonymity said, 'LeBron James is collateral enough,'" reports Frank Litsky.^{lxxxiii} Being especially noteworthy, the handshake rapport between Michael Jordan and James, then, forecasted his own billion-dollar relationship with Nike.

LeBron is thought to possess all the elements necessary to do for some apparel company what Jordan did for Nike...It's why LeBron is a year from signing what's expected to be the most lucrative shoe deal in history for an NBA rookie, estimated at \$20 million over five years, and why Jordan, who represents his own division of Nike athletic wear, would want LeBron in the Swoosh family.^{lxxxiv}

"I'm a Nike guy... They showed me [Nike's relationship with LeBron] was going to be a long-term thing," exclaimed LeBron at the press conference announcing his signing with the Swoosh while flaunting the Nike apparel covering his body from head to toe.^{lxxxv} Seven years at \$87 million termed his first Nike deal, but it is reported that Adidas offered him less than \$60 million and Reebok, a whopping \$115 million.^{lxxxvi} His choice, a self-imposed discount, if you will – a stake (wager) in the longevity of his body, its ability to compete for decades to come, and Nike's best skill, *branding*. The prospect of James being, in and of himself, collateral – a fleshed guarantee of potential earnings, a thing potentially forfeited in the event of default – projects a landscape of athletic talent where Gloria and LeBron's American Dream and the corporate futures of billion-dollar brands rests on staking a claim upon LeBron's flesh. Moreover, that this prospect is in no way alarming and, most vitally, cements an extensive infrastructural regime of talent discovery and athletic becoming cites LeBron as just another in a robust genealogy of bodies worked or exchanged or leased or sold for profit, dating back to the modern world's birth. To say in the early 2000s, we hadn't witnessed basketball player like LeBron James has little to do with his talent. Instead, his unicorn-like stature in the game of basketball showcases, for the first time to mainstream audiences, a robust and data-driven infrastructure of surveillance and mining – financed largely by sneaker companies – for the next Michael Jordan. By this, I am referencing not what we know now – James as an obvious generational athletic talent. Rather, that "Michael [Jordan] built the Nike buildings," according to Sonny Vaccaro, stiffens flesh as quarry of material profit and corporate expansion, no different than brick and mortar, steel and glass.^{lxxxvii} Therefore, as Jordan's career neared its twilight, Nike Adidas, and other sneaker companies enacted a theatre of war in and around the nation's and, eventually, the world's, basketball courts. "We never want another kid to go pro...without Nike being involved," proclaimed CEO Phil Knight in 1996, surrounded employees and surrogates at one of those buildings MJ built.^{lxxxviii} The, now, quaint seeming days when players the caliber of Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, and Larry Bird could "grow up in basketball obscurity" are gone. In their place, is a landscape where some players are chosen and many more, discarded – both outcomes determined by the anticipatory and endless managerial acts of arranging, ranking, and prescribing of mostly Black bodies.^{lxxxix}

Rhoden never mentions LeBron in that 2003 article. However, in 2002, just weeks before *Sports Illustrated* published its "Chosen One" issue, *The New York Times* sports columnist does write about the benefits of skipping college: "The great player who goes directly from high school to the N.B.A. skips *the processing plant* that big-time college sports has become."^{xc} This article, which does mention LeBron, is largely reported from the perspective of Kwame Browne who, then, was a struggling rookie and top draft selection for the Washington Wizards and, now, a NBA bust more famous for trading insults with former NBA players than anything he did on the court. Rhoden asks Browne directly about the prospect of LeBron leaving high school early to join the league. His

answer exposes a beleaguered mind and fragile psyche, a young man who would rather do anything else than play professional basketball: “You come out of high school, particularly after your junior year, they're going to eat you up... Right now, he's probably the man at his high school. You go from being the man to being nothing, you don't matter.”^{xcii} While Browne could not have been more wrong in his prediction of LeBron's rookie year, his words along with Rhoden's 2003 article unearth deep argumentative threads explored here. In that article, Rhoden called the NCAA a plantation where its players exist as “the gold, the oil, [and] the natural resource” of the industry. His use of metaphor, here, and (maybe, not so) coincidental proximity to what would end up being LeBron's NBA coronation affords us the provocative interrogative imaginary of literalization. That is, realizing Rhoden's metaphor asks, what happens if we take seriously his rendering of the ground as material horizon line, where beneath are ores, metals, and fossils, stratified geophysical spoils, and above, structural ensnarement as the condition of both possibility and impossibility for the sovereign human figure?

“the gold” and “the oil.”

For a moment – 33 seconds to be precise – it seemed the eyes of the world had settled on Durham, NC. On February 20, 2019, in Cameron Indoor Stadium, the Duke University Blue Devils played the University of North Carolina Tarheels. This rivalry is one of the most storied in all of sports. Every February, and then in again, usually in early to mid-March, Duke vs. Carolina dominates the sports media landscape. However, this season, for Coach Mike Krzyzewski and his Blue Devils something else eclipsed this over a century old spectacle – known by just one name: Zion. The talents of this 6'7", 275lb, South Carolina native captured the attention of an entire nation. Earlier in the season, rapper Jay-Z appeared courtside to watch him play against the University of Pittsburgh, and LeBron James and Rajon Rondo saw him two weeks later against the University of Virginia.^{xciii} For LeBron and Zion, it was a full circle moment of sorts: LeBron, “the King,” as he is known now, bearing witness to the next phenom just as Jordan did for him all those years ago. Then, on that faithful night in February, President Barack Obama appeared courtside, along with celebrities Spike Lee, Ken Griffey, Jr., and many others, to witness the spectacle.^{xciii} When asked by a fan if he was a “Duke man” or here for the event, MLB Hall of Famer Ken Griffey, Jr. smiled and replied with one word, “The event.”^{xciv} “The event,” as Griffey, Jr. slyly describes, was not the game or seeing the top end collegiate talent. The event was beholding Zion Williamson. That season we all – a “we” including everyone from my mother who abhors sports to Barack Hussein Obama – no matter if in person or on television – needed to verify the rumors and questions: “Is he really *that* big... He can't jump *that* high, can he... Is he as good as *they* say he is?” In those 33 seconds, we were all as the miners biting coins checking for the softness of actual gold. It was as if the world needed to authenticate the next Chosen one.

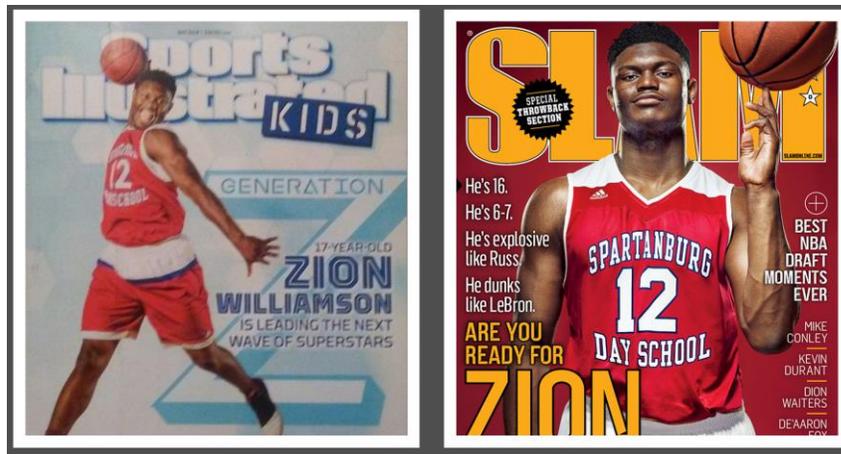


Figure 2.2 Sports Illustrated and Slam Magazine featuring Zion Williamson

When he was 16-year-old, playing for Spartanburg Day School as a junior in South Carolina, Roy Williams, now retired basketball coach of Kansas and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC), “told Zion he was...one of the best high school players...since Michael Jordan.”^{xcv} In a stroke of serendipity, Zion’s grandmother glimpsed the promise of his future, naming him after Mount Zion.^{xcvi} “It is beautiful in its loftiness, the joy of the whole earth...is Mount Zion, the city of the Great King,” extols the psalmist in Psalm 48.^{xcvii} As he dunked over and through the pitiful, local high school competition, the crowds screamed, “Mount Zion,” as if they were in some country revival tent.^{xcviii} And maybe for that moment, in that gymnasium, watching that player dunk – they were. Putting a finer point on the spectacular proportions of his elevation, Adam Figman, in his 2017 cover story on Zion for *Slam Magazine*, stated with palpable awe, “I’ve been to five NBA Slam Dunk Contests. I’ve never seen anyone dunk like that.”^{xcix} Grandmothers always know. Being after the accidental and almost cute discovery of Michael Jordan and the institutional coronation of LeBron James, finding Zion results from the endless refinement, accumulation, and surveillance of three generations of talent prospecting. The similarities between Williamson and Zion almost need not be stated. Their celebrity is on a first-name basis. Like Cher or Drake, it extends far beyond the insular world of basketball. Zion had text message conversations with the likes of Drake, just as LeBron had conversations with Jay-Z. In fact, the moment Zion’s celebrity exploded can be traced to a single Instagram post from hip-hop producer Mike Will-Made It, which featured himself, his artist Trouble, and Drake wearing Zion’s high school jersey.^c “I remember as we were running,” explains Zion’s coach, Lee Sartor, “I could imagine how The Beatles felt, with people running after them.”^{ci} The atmosphere of LeBron and Zion’s high school games transcended sport to resemble the electric frenzy of rock concerts. But unlike LeBron, Zion, due to NBA regulations, could not skip college for the NBA. Instead, he chose the tutelage of Coach Mike Krzyzewski and Duke University to warehouse his talents for one year. In this sense, Duke and Coach K, are just another link in the supply chain, tasked with shepherding Zion’s body more so than his person through a “concatenation of global production.”^{cii} The journey, which didn’t end or begin in Durham, NC, encompasses a life span – written literally – where the innocence and joy of childhood is tucked away in the parallel of a *product’s life span* “from extraction of raw material to consumption and disposal by the end consumer [(Nike)].”^{ciii} A trek bringing us right to those aforementioned 33 seconds.

Why just 33? On Duke's first possession, after a missed shot and offensive rebound, the Blue Devils reset their offense. Zion gets the ball at the top left wing, beyond the three-point line. He takes a few dribbles, maneuvering toward the foul line, and collapses, clutching his knee in obvious pain. The next few seconds are blur, but what happened to Zion is best articulated in the words of President Obama: "His shoe broke."^{civ} Zion left the court on his own power after only playing 33 seconds in the game, holding the shreds of his Nike PG 2.5 (the signature sneaker line for Los Angeles Clippers star Paul George); he would be diagnosed with a mild knee sprain. However, the effects of the incident would linger much longer. "The mishap was 'a major brand failure'... Beyond injuring the man many see as the nation's top college basketball player, the incident was a 'very visible shoe structure failure for a company committed to performance and technology of its products.'^{cv} Days after the incident Nike's stock dropped 89 cents to \$83.95, "a \$1.1 billion drop in market value."^{cvi} For college athletes, especially in the revenue generating sports (Men's football and basketball), Universities like Duke, and North Carolina, for that matter, who is also affiliated with Nike, are not bastions of education or even venues for talent and skill development. They are grooming facilities acclimatizing athletes to sneaker brands. Since 1992, Duke University has been affiliated with Nike, meaning every athlete is compelled to wear Nike branded apparel and sneakers.^{cvi} These branding relationships with colleges athletics, now, seem to just be a way of life, but that wasn't always the case. It was 1985, during the Final Four in Lexington, KY, when Nike "took control of the market," according to famed sneaker executive Sonny Vaccaro – all four teams, Villanova, Memphis State, Georgetown, and St. John's all were under contract with the swoosh.^{cvi} Today, college campuses represent territorial footholds where sneaker companies (Nike and Adidas, most commonly) pay for unfettered access to the next professional athletes.

Later in July 2019, barely a month after being selected first in that year's NBA Draft, Zion posted a short animation, featuring him in a conspicuously blank basketball jersey, spinning a basketball on his finger. The animation displays the tagline, "KINGDOM COME," with a flashing Jumpman logo.^{cix} The grooming process worked, and Zion signed a 5-year, \$75 million dollar sneaker contract: the deal is one of the most expensive contracts from Nike; only "Michael Jordan, LeBron James, Kevin Durant and Cristiano Ronaldo... have larger deals."^{cx} In a statement, Zion said that he felt "incredibly blessed to be part of the Jordan Brand family."^{cx} Zion's blessing – that he was chosen – is the dream of kids across the world – one that, inevitably, fuels the willingness of parents, coaches, and institutions *to hunt Black gold*.

Predation, capture, and extraction govern both the industrial complex of forming the West and the territorial zoning of athletic space. Going further, and reading both Rhoden articles together, how can we make sense of LeBron and Zion's "going pro" being structured around the plantation as geographic hold and the northward, territorial logics of escape – the singular path from death to life? And then, what of Browne's pessimism? Are his words just one NBA player's recollection of his NBA tenure or something more? For me, the stench of death serves as necrotic connective tissue, overlapping the sentiments of both Browne and Rhoden. With Rhoden, to invoke the plantation is to signal the slave, familiar rhetorical territory for the journalist. In 2006, he authored *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete*. The journalist argues the economic model of sports relies on a plantation-adjacent model of labor accumulation and control – as does Walter Byers, the system's founder – and modern Black athletes, who, in relatively few cases, have indeed made exorbitant sums of money, exist as natively alienated cogs in the business of sports rooted in the economic logics of slavery. At times, Rhoden's work reads as a crotchety man wagging his finger at Black athletes who wear their pants too low, listen to their music too loud, and,

from his vantage, seem unconcerned about Black life beyond the field of play. Rhoden wrote long before #BLACKLIVESMATTER and Colin Kaepernick took a knee, but nevertheless, his point, while showing its age, still has merit. The industry of sports has pillaged Black talent and labor from Akron to Angola without investing resources back into these often-blighted communities. Being so, his implementation of “the slave” – in any form – marks the extractive accumulation of and predation against Black bodies as “precondition of the modern capitalist social structure.”^{cxvii} Doom devours the slave’s whole person, and the institution of slavey functions as a substitute for violent death. By this, I do not claim slavery as a pardon for death. Instead, as Orlando Patterson explains in his seminal treatise, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, “In his powerlessness the slave became an extension of the master’s power. He is human surrogate... ‘Without the master the slave does not exist.’”^{cxviii} Within the institution of slavery, death occurs as Midas’ touch: the living dies but gains new life as commodity. But Rhoden isn’t the only or first person to link basketball to the slave trade. “If you have a kid that’s a great thirteen-year-old, [sneaker companies will] definitely go after him and steal him. I call it the African slave trade. It’s here we go again, buying young Black men,” complains Elvert Perry, California AAU coach, to Dan Wetzel and Don Yaeger for their 2000 book *Sole Influence*.^{cxix} Perry is still a fixture in the California AAU basketball scene, guiding several local talents to Division 1 programs.^{cxv} Thus, even metaphorical usages of the plantation must be read as, then, invoking the noose, whip, and brand as Black death *qua* the capitalist’s ledger. Kwame Browne, though, doesn’t mince words when detailing the mortal threat awaiting James: “They’re going to kill him. He may be a great player – I heard he’s a real good player – he’s going to get killed.”^{cxvi} What awaited James and Zion in the league is not some demonstrable, celebrated freedom; rather, a slow, asphyxiating claustrophobia. To Browne, there is no escape, no greener grass, and no Underground Railroad. Only the unstoppable inertia of being made inert remains – the isolating existence as remains.

I propose: what if we thought of LeBron and Zion being “chosen,” or any Black athlete for that matter, not as mere headline or some scout’s prediction of talent but as mineralogical claim – as designating an always locatable, leasable and brandable commodity? To this end, I argue, imagining their arrival as resulting from an excavation and totally corporatized legacies through the miner’s whee of “Eureka!” generates several useful philosophical threads. First, with burial, in death and as mineral, the earth’s binding forever ensnares the body as elemental component. By its essence, the privilege of home is severed from the corpse and the mineral. Indeed, both, are from *nowhere* but the earth. Second, LeBron’s selection, by definition, requires potent infrastructures of surveillance, evaluation, extraction and refinement, and disposal prevailing alongside technologically abundant and data-driven territories of surveillance, speculation, mining, and trade. That LeBron (and Zion) did indeed arrive details third party selection instead of first party choice. As such, “the Chosen One,” declares an intentionally capitalized system of nomenclature where his oneness does not correlate to him being singular, as in *the* one but *that* one. In James’ 2003 NBA Draft class, three of the top 5 picks will make the league’s Hall of Fame when eligible (LeBron James, Dwayne Wade, and Carmelo Anthony), and one has already made it (Chris Bosh). There is consensus among journalists, historians, and players alike that this draft class in its entirety was one of the league’s best.^{cxvii} Assuredly, then, no austerity of talent guided LeBron’s designation as *that* one. Instead, his selection, both in the draft and as brandable object, indicates the specific peculiarities of a body being primed for vending. As such, I contemplate LeBron’s chosenness as one of talent prognostication, of course, but also an index of profit and branding potential.

Being less about LeBron, the man, my goal, here, is to *uproot* the stakes of his commodification through sneakers. Here, with stakes, I am denoting both the corporatized wager and winnings of his becoming and the act of territorial flag-planting, marking borders and tethering his body – as product – to place. Moreover, I wish to appreciate LeBron not just for his obvious greatness; that is, not just as generational athletic talent. Instead, my emphasis on LeBron gathers his presence as generational athletic product, historicizing a specific and racialized subjectivity of Black bodies within a logistics-centered operation of discovering, promoting, and branding talent. In other words, how his becoming serves as lens to observe and comment upon the institutional infrastructure (grassroots basketball) of discovery and recruitment. But also, and emphasizing the granular, infinitesimal silt appearing as waste – those bodies dithering between never stood a chance and almost became – I seek to contextualize Blackness as the rebar by which disposability and accumulation are possible. Said better, LeBron as found gold proves the need for the expansive territorial mining project, which devours a near limitless number of bodies to, hopefully, discover who’s next. As examples, I offer anecdotes about two basketball courts:



Figure 2.3 Atlanta Boys and Girls Club “Candyland” Basketball Court (Reebok x Hasbro)

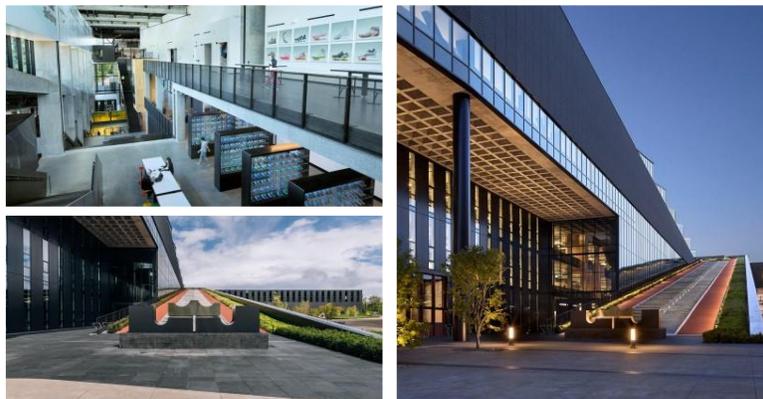


Figure 2.4 Images of the Nike LeBron James Innovation Center

One. To commemorate the launch of their Candy Land themed apparel collection, Reebok and Hasbro refurbished the basketball court at the A.R. “Gus” Barksdale Boys & Girls Club in Metro Atlanta.^{cxviii} Bursting with vibrant, newly painted colors – polka dots of lavender and bubblegum as well as blocking featuring electric lime and sunset orange, among an array of other colors – the court displays the board game’s uncanny playfulness and whimsy. Designed by Project Backboard, a non-

profit organization whose mission, according to their website, “is to renovate public basketball courts and install large scale works of site specific art on the surface in order to strengthen communities, improve park safety, *encourage multi-generational play*, and inspire people to think more critically and creatively about their environment.”^{cxxix} Nobly, this court reclaims community from the unforgiving ravages of urban disinvestment so often plaguing Black communities. But also, it is community outreach as brand campaign. The court and backboards are stamped with the Reebok and Candy Land logos.

Two. As Michael built buildings for Nike, so too does LeBron. In October of 2021, Nike announced the LeBron James Innovation Center. “Spanning more than 85,000 square feet across four floors, the newest building at Nike World Headquarters brings the company’s ecosystem of office space, design studios, research centers and fitness facilities to nearly 80 structures.”^{cxxx} Not just named after LeBron, the building features his now famous crown “LJ” logo, and if that weren’t enough, “the floor features a series of dots throughout that represent every NBA field goal made by James, who has scored more than 35,000 points over the course of his career.”^{cxxxi} The building features the “most sophisticated” basketball court in the world – whatever that means.^{cxxii} Actually, it means “Sensors underneath the floor can measure the force from a player’s every step, while motion capture can track not just a single player at work but the movements in an entire game.” While indeed a massive structure – it houses the world’s largest motion capture facility – the LeBron James Innovation Center is about blending the more intimate aspects of sports and play as well as apparel design and science.^{cxxiii} Matthew Nurse, PHD and VP of the Nike Explore Team Sport Research Lab says, “The [Nike Sports Research Lab (NSRL), which is housed on the top floor of the Innovation center,] is the epicenter of where we work with athletes of all abilities, all backgrounds, all skills and all sports. Athletes can move here at full speed, full motion — *they can just play*.”^{cxxiv}

Instead of mere and innocent play spaces, the basketball courts in Atlanta and Oregon constellate a trajectory of discovery. Connecting the Candy Land court and the LeBron Innovation Center reveals beginnings and endings. In both examples, spokespeople of Reebok and Nike emphasize the presumed innocent intimacy of play. With Reebok, that the Boys and Girls club court could start the grooming process for the next LeBron happens alongside the sale and promotion of sneakers and apparel intertwines the future discovery of profit with the happenings of the current marketplace. In other words, the seemingly virtuous desires of Project Blackboard to “encourage multi-generational play,” and Reebok to “*provide kids with the opportunity to play and move*” reveals the corporate operations of staking Reebok’s claim in the potential of all the bodies who matriculate across the blacktop.^{cxxv} In truth, Reebok, here, is filling a need. In a mid-90s interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, George Raveling, a 20-year Nike executive in charge of their grassroots basketball program after the departure of Sonny Vaccaro, stages the sneaker industry’s investment in children’s play in clear, patriotic terms.

The first thing that everyone in America needs to understand is social dynamics and the role that big business plays in social dynamics... When I was growing up as a kid, municipal and state governments provided young people with opportunities to grow and prosper in sports. They provided playgrounds, [and] they provided summer leagues... But like most of what has happened in American society today, many municipal and state and federal fiscal responsibilities have been transferred to the private sector... So, on one hand, government wants big business to be participatory, but then when you become participatory what they say to you is you have some ulterior motive for doing it. The ulterior motive is civic pride.

Okay, we make a profit. We put money back into society. What we do...is we try to provide opportunities for kids to fulfill their dreams. If that's not as American as apple pie and motherhood and the flag, then I don't know what is.^{cxxvi}

Raveling's invocation of the American Dream – regardless of whether it's John Locke's political philosophy of “life, liberty, and property” or Thomas Jefferson's, in his drafting of the Declaration of Independence, “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” imbricates, maybe permanently, children's playful innocence with the adult burdens of capitalist-tinged prosperity and the corporate thirst for ever expanding profit margins. In other words, Reebok's Candy Land court, like every other blacktop and basketball across the nation, are sites where play and industry collide.

Nike, though, does not hide that their architectural behemoth is both technology of surveillance and data storage. Kathy Gomez, Nike VP of Footwear Innovation explains, “Our goal every single day is to make athletes better and to make the world better for athletes. Understanding *more types of bodies, more genders, more backgrounds* and different ability levels helps us create better and more specific product.”^{cxxvii} As endpoint, with the LeBron James Innovation Center, Nike is looking for a fourth-generation sneaker star through a filtering process of “more types of bodies, more genders, and more backgrounds.” This is datafication at its finest. Where Reebok presumes play through an innocent and ebullient patriotism of sorts. Nike, to be vanguards of sporting futures, sees play as the crunching of numbers, which, in this case, happens to the squeak of sneakers.^{cxxviii} Currently, LeBron's “overall signature business, including shoes, apparel and accessories, is estimated to generate around \$600 million annually...a basketball industry-best for an active athlete.”^{cxxix} And while, Nike has signed LeBron to a lifetime contract; the Center hopes to visualize, through a robust infrastructure of cameras, biometric and body scan technologies, scientists, and engineers, Nike's third chapter of shoe dominance. In this sense, the sneaker exists as barcode, a language written by machines for machines where the “eyes” of management prompt the bespoke designing and printing of product “within the logistical sequence.”^{cxxx} The Center boasts “more than 80 machines...allow[ing] designers and developers to create fully functioning sneaker samples on the spot” that athletes can immediately play test. Finally, with this building, Nike and LeBron, for that matter, understand the players own mortality. At 37, LeBron, in terms of sheer games played, has logged more than 381 games played than Jordan over the course of their respective careers.^{cxxxi} So, while anticipating LeBron's inevitable end through state-of-the-art science, engineering, and design, Nike also attempts to discover ways to preserve LeBron's athletic prime, squeezing every last drop of profit out of the star while he can still play. In the words of LeBron, “Having my name on the Innovation building feels very fitting because I'm always trying to figure out ways I can continue to innovate and continue to break the timeline of what they say is your prime.”^{cxxxii} In this sense, to Nike and LeBron, himself, the athlete's athletic ability is itself, a “zombie media,” where “planned obsolescence” and biological and anthropometric “hacking” function with give and take to not erase his inevitable end but to bend it to the financial benefit of Nike and LeBron.^{cxxxiii} The point here, if nothing else, then, and to use LeBron's own words, is to “break(down) the timeline” – to see an athlete's past as branded logistical discovery and shipment, their present as branded maintenance and amplification, and their always dwindling futures as branded projects of extension. Where all three, crease and enliven the Black body as material production to be, as they ever were, perpetual generators of profit.

Reluctantly, then, I find myself in agreement with Nike's defiant proclamation, “We don't make shoes,” and in the place of traditional manufacture, I offer the mining and refining of Black

bodies for branding as being the material project of Nike and the entire sneaker industry. As philosophical project, I seek to materialize the metaphorical *pipeline* to frame it, in truth, as a plantocratic and geological tool and technique of world-building. *The pipeline unearths* and delivers the young, virile, and fantastic Black body as en fleshed fossil of the slave. Jussi Parikka writes, “In later parlance of the information age, we can say that fossils are the data that geology processes.”^{cxv} The very ground, then, stretching from nowhere to anywhere and everywhere, records bondage as civilization’s rooting and stratified *matter of record*, as its topsoil, gravel, “oil,” and “gold.” If true, the slave as being unburiable (that never ending death) *and* precondition for the beginning of the world, renders Blackness through an equation of raw and limitless dimensionality and profitability.^{cxvi} *The pipeline exhumes* the plantation as material, scientific, and economic model for industrial and geographic modernity and the Black body as exploitable and disposable “natural resource.”^{cxvii} Racialization exists along the color line of geology as material intimacy “cutting across all categories, material and symbolic, corporeal and incorporeal...life and nonlife” where the found gold of brandable Black athletic talent “shows up as bodies and bodies are the surplus of mineralogical extraction.”^{cxviii} At stake, here, is how Blackness not as identity but material designation of objecthood, which originates from (pseudo)scientific and mineralogical discourses about and upon the Black body, center the historically present youth basketball landscape of fungibility, accumulation, and dispossession. Mining, then, defines the original premise of Blackness through a geological empire of accumulation and dispossession. Personhood fractures and dissolves, giving way to a market where children get exchanged for and changed to gold. Here, bodies are “multiple,” “layered systems,” and “finite, contingent products.”^{cxix} What follows, to that end, presents the Athletic Anthropocene – a term invented here – as Man-made and antiblack world where the pipeline loosens (mostly) Black athletic talent from the earth’s “secret treasury” of hidden depths/deaths through scientific infrastructures of mining and refinement. It is this new world, then, that stages Big Box Sneakers or the Sneaker Industrial Complex’s (read: Nike, Adidas, Under Armor, Reebok, and New Balance) possible and perpetual branding and commodification of near limitless Black bodies.

“that’s the rule of the jungle, man.”

LeBron has “Chosen1” tattooed across his shoulders. It is one of the most recognizable tattoos in professional sports.^{cx} Additionally, in 2018, Nike narrativized the tattoo’s origin story in a commercial featuring a CGI rendered LeBron. *Sports Illustrated’s* headline, Nike’s branding, and LeBron’s tattoo unearth a trinal understanding of material value hinging upon LeBron’s Black body. No, that seems incomplete; value, here, doesn’t rely on LeBron’s body but that bodies like his can be reliably found. Said better, if Jordan’s value was in his rarity, LeBron indicates an industrial epistemology of value where rare talent can be reliably found. “The Chosen One” is a mineralogical projection of value based on staking the claim of discovery, physical potential, and a universally understood fungibility, a gold standard. The commercial brands LeBron’s part CGI, part organic body as pseudoscientific product completely available to the globalized whims of corporate interests. All three, the tattoo – the headline, and the commercial – are undoubtedly origin stories.

[Origins] are not immune to narrative overtures that trouble questions of origination elsewhere in political geography. Graphia of rock [and body] is no less subject to world building than attempts to calcify origins in projects of nationalism. Origins draw borders that define inclusion and exclusion, and their focus is narrow, narrating a line of purpose (read

Progress) and purposefulness (read Civilization), while overlooking accident, misdirection, or the shadow geology of disposable lives.^{cxl}

Kathryn Yusoff's words crystallize origins as being important precisely because they are often arbitrary. Said better, it matters less who was first but who gets to say they were first. And for LeBron, this is no different. But a question emerges: to which first is he referring. I've talked about how James was the first pick in the 2003 NBA draft, but there have been many first picks – 68, in fact since the NBA first held a draft in 1947. Indeed, it as Yusoff claims, that thing making LeBron's arrival special enough to deserve the moniker's almost messianic religiosity and prophetic mysticism are the politics of his finding. James is "The Chosen One" because his selection seemed the result of a near infallible system of talent prospecting where talent describes a union of on court performance and off court bankability. That is, after Jordan, scores of top tier athletes have matriculated through the league. Some of them, like Kevin Garnett, Kobe Bryant, and Tracy McGrady, have been selected directly from high school. However, after Jordan, only one has combined supreme talent and transcendent marketability in such a way that compares to Michael. It's funny, really. I'm sure James thinks of his tattoo through a vogue and Christian-slanted zeal like those who celebrities who thank God at award shows and athletes who point to the sky after they make an amazing play. However, as I see it, the tattoo, a self-*branding*, haunts LeBron's flesh with the biometric ghosts of corporeal theft, surveillance, and property. Together, these three ink Black death in the matching hue of Black life.^{cxli} It is a soft reminder of the economic possibilities and labor relations implied in the formation of the "racial state."^{cxlii} The tattoo tells the third personal story of the "white racial frame" – a paternalist way of seeing the ground as forever being excavatable territory in which bodies are marked "black and fine" or "lusty and strong," as slaves, and the "Chosen1" or "The Chosen One," as athletes. Again, this branding should not be confused for the slave master's hot iron – athletes, most especially, LeBron Raymone James, are not slaves. Rather, I argue the two are coordinated along axes of geology as transaction and "the total Black, being spoken from the earth's inside."^{cxliii}

Peculiarly enough, the *brand's* force applies religious zeal. As a kind of return to form, in 2007, Nike unveiled its "Witness" campaign. In a press release, the shoe company explained, "The Witness campaign pays tribute to James and acknowledges the *legions* of fans worldwide who are 'witnessing' his greatness, power, athleticism and beautiful style of play." Being one of Nike's most iconoclastic campaigns, "a 110-foot-high by 212-foot-wide billboard [was hung] adjacent to Quicken Loans Arena in Cleveland," featuring the tagline "We Are All Witnesses." The shocking poster depicts LeBron with his head lifted to the sky and arms spread. The allusions to crucifixion are obvious, but most striking is the doubled reference to God and the deity's incarceration in LeBron's body. Instead, and eschewing James' intent of marking himself as one of God's blessings, his tattoo and the poster establishes "bone deep" carceral claims which permanently mark his body as not being his own.^{cxliv} I read his brand – and Zion's too – as Hail Marys "articulated through the Judeo-Christian stewardship of empire" where the "redemptive narrative of [white enterprise] saves the world...while maintaining the protective thick skin of innocence."^{cxlv} That is, the force of James' prayer for the American Dream and Zion's reference to the hereafter begin, literally, with the swoosh as both "Our (white) Father" and imprimatur who delivers blessings as maximized talent and almost limitless earning potential.

But basketball talent even before Zion and LeBron was always entrenched, for better or worse, in specific politics of geography. "You go back in the day, in the 1970s, and it was the City Game" explains Dan Wetzel of Yahoo Sports, providing a useful, albeit broad strokes, history of basketball regionalism, "The best point guards are from New York City because they grew up in a

housing project. They went down to park right below their apartment, and they had nowhere to go all day and played ball for twelve straight hours because there were games going. They could always find a run, and you learn how to [dribble]. Your best shooters were from rural areas. They're Larry Bird. They're Ray Allen. They had a basket taped up somewhere and had no one to play with, so they just shot, and they learned how to shoot the ball better than anyone.^{cxlvi} This reality made finding athletic talent, or “assets” as Wetzel refers to them, an expensive and highly cumbersome. Coaches had to travel to find players, and sometimes assets would get lost or missed altogether. Crucially, though, Wetzel’s mention of the “City Game” alludes to *street* basketball. Asphalt, here, induces talent and skill through a near endless gauntlet of chain link nets, doubled rims, and the rough-and-tumble, racialized aesthetics of “call your own foul” and “And-1.”



Figure 2.5 Adidas 3SSB and Nike EYBL Logos

Grassroots basketball offers a handy logistical solution to Wetzel’s problem of regionality. “Those things are all blurred now,” says Wetzel speaking about the intense and once siloed regionalization of basketball.^{cxlvii} “Today, you can get AAU games all day long. You don’t have to live in Coney Island to get a game. You can get specialized dribbling training. You can get specialized shot selections.”^{cxlviii} But Wetzel makes it sound so easy, doesn’t he? That’s because as logistical apparatus, grassroots basketball, through maintenance and capitalization from billion-dollar shoe companies, reorient the very foundation of basketball territory. More than anything else, logistics is about modeling spatial and temporal outcomes of commodity from the smallest detail to largest concern. That is, an international product, like LeBron James, is only possible when the duties and details of arrival are scrupulously coordinated to intimate conceptions of the domestic. “Grassroots is the word that the shoe companies use. They call it their grassroots basketball departments or divisions - you know, as and Nike and Reebok... These nine and 10- year-old prospects [are] getting *mined* by these men who are attempting to make money off them and sort of leverage their futures for big money.”^{cxlix} Nike EYBL (Elite Youth Basketball League; though its acronym, pronounced “eyeball,” is a Foucauldian fever dream and truly a fitting name) – never forget, the spectacle isn’t the talent; it’s the surveillance, the thrill of watching the watchers *watch* – Adidas 3SSB; and Reebok Series are marquee tournaments in the youth basketball circuit, and coaches, agents, recruiters and spectators flock to see the next big thing in basketball. These tournaments are the infrastructural and ecological machinations of “men in boardrooms and locker rooms plotting the futures of [the world’s] most gifted players.”^{cl} In this model, assets are consolidated and displayed on travel teams and in tournaments, usually funded by wealthy benefactors – either sneaker companies looking to get their hooks in a prospect as a child or parents looking to give their kid a chance at winning the

lottery. Where there was once one or a few star players in a city, AAU travel teams, rather than simply housing players, sink bodies into a logistics systems where cumbersome scales of distance, access, data, and inventory disappear and, in its place, and always ready and transportable supply chain emerges.^{cli} There are even teams that don't practice together because their players are scattered about various cities across the country. Instead, they just meet to play at large tournaments.^{clii} However, George Dohrmann, in his book *Play Their Hearts Out*, offers a graver take on the matter. His book tells the story of one California youth basketball team and their coach, Joe Keller, and describes the mining and detection role of youth basketball in plain terms, "Nearly every great American-born basketball player or the last [20] years – from Kevin Garnett to Kobe Bryant to Tracy McGrady to LeBron James – has been a product of the AAU basketball system."^{cliii} Earlier, I referred to colleges as player warehouses, but grassroots teams are fulfillment centers to satiate the sneaker industry's demand for distributing and displaying stock. Grassroots basketball isn't cartography but imagination, or better put, how cartography imagines the world through the promise of latent potential. It is a coordinated and necessarily malleable system of coordinates always "aware of where things are in time and in space requires a reliable way of mapping those locations and agreed-upon methods for understanding both where and when."^{cliv} The sneaker, as such, in this sense, is a prosthetic of contact, where the pedestrian act of children's sports is enlivened as uneven locomotive of aeration, shepherding players from here to there.^{clv} Put simply, the sneaker delivers the cultural imaginary as logistical excellence, forever linking "Just Do it" to a child's precocious dream of "getting [their] family out of the ghetto."^{clvi}



Figure 2.6 Demetrius Walker, photograph by Robert Beck/*Sports Illustrated* (2004)



Figure 2.7 New York Times Magazine “He’s 13” Cover feat. Allonzo Trier, photograph by Lauren Greenfield (2009)

Both Rhoden’s metaphorical claim “[Black] athletes are the gold, the oil, [and] the natural resource” combined with the naming of youth basketball as “grassroots” imagine and enforce Katherine McKittrick’s claim in *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* “that dispossessed Black bodies are naturally in place.”^{clvii} Here, the author speaks to converging dissonances when conceptualizing Blackness. First, dispossession reinforces how Black bodies are eternally landless. We, as stolen people, through diaspora and displacement, are completely severed from the blessed heritage of homeland.

Born “We.” This entire project, from its ideological and philosophical largesse to its more granular sentence construction – collapses two distinct albeit connected formations of Blackness. First, skin color, the spectral reading of melanin which designates Africa as geographic originating point for certain bodies, and second, racialization, how skin color justifies the endless and spectral condition of slavery. Here, I use “spectral” to envisage this duality – the ways in which the epistemological conceit that some bodies are colored is inseparable from the ontological result that the Blackness adhered to brown bodies designates slavery as death by design. Two threads converge: (1) Armond Towns’ claim that the Anthropocene exists as a “factory” where “highly productive” and “overextractive processes...structure Western media” where the Negro is included –maybe originally so – in this plurality and (2) Stuart Hall’s position that black folks have implemented our own bodies to “work on ourselves as the canvases of representation.”^{clviii} As such, that earlier image of the Black mother carrying and waiving her son’s birth certificate as proof of age – that his body is naturally and biologically in place descends from what Dorothy Roberts describes as the breeding of slaves (read: Blacks) “with a view to increasing the number and quality to one as of the other.”^{clix} That mother – Kisha Houston, mother of Demetrius Walker, who in 2004 was the best eight grade basketball player in the country, standing 6’3”, 175lbs – and all those, not mothers, but birthing bodies, “the prenatal property” of whites where slave masters held “devisable, *in futuro* interest in the potential children of their slaves” are inextricably linked along the generational and gestational supply chain of Black matter.^{clx} Karl Greenfeld wrote of Walker, “That kid is 14 going on LeBron.”^{clxi} His usage of LeBron designates the star as biological schematic and corporeal specification for the sneaker industry’s *in futuro* investment into neighborhoods and children across the nation. That is, for Demetrius Walker, Kisha, and countless other mothers and sons, birth certificates enroll Black bodies in a logistical mining project instead of just marking the innocuous details of birth.

Our beginnings – if one could really call it that – are frayed from birth ties and kinship, of nativity and names. Any past to which we cling imprints hallucinatory hauntology onto the conceit of lineage. We (were?) are nothing but the master’s – or coaches – wishes. But we are also “naturally in place.” By this, McKittrick elegantly gestures toward how the slave trade and colonialism established the transcription of biology as race where skin color emerges as the pathologized, essentialized, and “spectral form of division and human difference.” The Black became, for all intents and purposes, a metonym for the dark, humid mysteries of Africa where abjection collapses onto an intensely savage yet infinitely available and minable prehistoric naturality. As Frantz Fanon laments, “The Black man is nothing but biological. Black men are animals. They live naked.”^{cklii} Fanon’s “nakedness” conjures an intimacy with nature where the self is forever shackled to charred flesh, pollenating a never-ending metaphor of damnation. Working alongside this understanding of Blackness and nature, we must also, if only for a moment, interrogate how the institutions of slavery and the Transatlantic slave trade bore a society based around the premise of nature being capable of yielding a permanent surplus. In *Uneven Development*, the geographer Neil Smith explains, “This transformation to a society characterized by the appropriation of surplus is necessarily accompanied by the development of the state and slavery, and the solidification of this division between producers and consumers of surplus into...two classes: masters and slaves, exploiters and exploited.”^{ckliii} Smith claims slavery as the first great social division of a burgeoning modern world and pushes for an understanding of nature beyond that which is wild and cannot be produced (as in nature is just and always there) to one centering the bourgeoisie of unified capital and uneven distribution.^{ckliv} Said better, slavery, maybe more than anything else, terraformed not just the land (thought of here as virginal space) but humanity’s intertwined understanding of nature, production, and the penetrative promise of civilization. “So completely do human societies now produce nature, that a cessation of productive labor would render enormous changes in nature,” writes Smith.^{cklv} The world has become scenery. Nature is no longer untouched – even the wilderness costs. If Yosemite National Park, for example, is a production of nature, so too is Nottoway. In 1855, John Hampden Randolph founded his sprawling sugar plantation, boasting “400 acres of highland and 620 acres of swamp.” Today, far and away from its original purpose, Nottoway is a “a AAA Four-Diamond property, and a member of Historic Hotels of America [and] the South’s largest existing antebellum mansion.”^{cklvi} Being a living example of what Smith calls “the urbanization [or capitalization] of the countryside,” the slave is still producing – all these years later – nature’s beauty: that is, ghost stories qua geography.^{cklvii}

A Ghost Story. As a Black man from the American South, I have suffered the peculiar pleasure of being invited to my fair share of plantations. They are at once tourist destinations, wedding venues, resorts, and...crime scenes. I have never been to Nottoway, thankfully. However, related to our discussion on nature, I offer their website’s registry of “majestic” Oak trees.^{cklviii} Complete with trunk diameter, canopy spread, and age – the youngest of which being just over a century old – I wonder which of these trees bore “strange fruit.”^{cklix} That we can tour what can only be described as murder weapons and call it nature eviscerates the soul with the saccharine taste of antifreeze.

More than mere aside, the plantation as intentional production of nature, I argue, is the blacktop’s spatial antecedent where Blackness is, yet again, “situated *in place*.” In this sense race becomes alive and culturally and materially minable through “the built environment and the material landscape... that are intensely experiential and uneven, and deeply dependent on psychic, imaginary work.”^{cklxx} Katherine McKittrick in *Demonic Grounds* explores how the siloed assumption of material, physical, and imaginative designations of space and place intermingle. As such, humanness is always geographic, and Blackness is forever adhered to space while being perpetually dispossessed and

destitute. Her work investigates “the complex position and potentiality of a Black woman’s sense of place.”^{clxxi} While obviously not being about the geographic struggles and domination of Black women, this work implements Black feminist scholarship as shovel to unearth how sneakers *qua* grassroots basketball surveils, mines, transports those found and, many more, lost boys, paying attention to how the exploitative churn of industry makes these bodies particularly vulnerable. However, and also emphasizing grassroots basketball’s emphasis on the sprouting and maturation of youth, no conversation about the livelihood and maturation of sons can completely forego the role and manipulation of motherhood, nor should it. Hence, underneath my admittedly overt attention paid to maleness and boyhood, this chapter also, and more subtly, delves into how accessing and ever younger Black talent base requires an intentional and intense absencing of Black parents, particularly mothers. Along these lines, finding talent, like LeBron James or Demetrius Walker or Allonzo Trier or anyone, really, requires a system flexible enough to fleece parental control from parents through methods recontextualizing Moynihan’s indictment of the matriarchal Black family structure. In the controversial Moynihan report, the plight of the Black family is blamed on the absence of fathers, which doubly, indicts Black mothers as being always insufficient to the task of raising productive men. “Ours is a society which presumes male leadership in private and public affairs, wrote Moynihan in 1965, which Hortense Spillers quoted in her monumental “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” “A sub-culture, such as that of the Negro-American, in which this is not the pattern, is placed at a distinct disadvantage.”^{clxxii} Through a routinized deluge of practices, games, and tournaments across the country, coaches often implement the “father figure” as wedge to wrest control – which, from the mother’s perspective provides for their children well-being, but for coaches, this control occurs as the agency to make logistical decisions (go to this tournament, run this drill, choose this high school) – from parents, under the guise that fatherhood, even in its most manipulative semblance, cures the “tangle of pathology” happening on the mother’s watch.^{clxxiii}

As such, these players’ time, attention and, most importantly, their play become “operative battlegrounds” mediating the various scales [and territories] of logistics through “the profitable erasure and objectification of subaltern subjectivities, stories, and lands.”^{clxxiv} On blacktops and in gymnasiums across the country and around the world, play – literally – happens through the margins and (in)visibility inherent to territory. Its toil, and these children are literally drowning in drudgery, occurs not through an open system of space and place but a “hierarchal series of destinations...producing hyper-specified conditions through flexible, underspecified techniques.”^{clxxv} That is, both the plantation and blacktop –at once – enliven the black body as determinative, foundational agent for reading and, indeed, imagining the landscapes Black bodies inhabit. As such, the *brand* – uniting Spillers’ “hieroglyphics of the flesh,” which transfers bodies and brands through time, and the marketing schemes of the sneaker industries happening in, through, and alongside an almost endless run of basketball games and tournaments – cartographs the toponyms of sneaker territories where “the Negro [as resource of basketball talent] is the middle point...measuring the [longitudinal] path from Western tribalism to civilization.”^{clxxvi}

In 1996, four months after Adidas signed Tracy McGrady, Antoine Walker, and Kobe Bryant, a *coup* for the company, Nike responded with a “broad-based” and heavily financed campaign to identify young prospects and feed them into [their] grassroots basketball program.”^{clxxvii} Returning briefly to the Reebok Candy Land court in Atlanta and the LeBron James Innovation Center in Oregon, these two courts *brand* “Black geographic togetherness and community ties,” on one hand, and, on the other, implements play as essential data point and material labor – invoking NBA star Alonzo Mourning’s defiant claim, “I work for Nike.”^{clxxviii} Here within these meticulously designed sites of corporate sponsored play, sneaker companies manage and oversee the burgeoning,

current, and finished, basketball careers of both amateurs and professionals, children and men, spanning every athletic achievement to the most infinitesimal biometric and anthropometric corpora. So then, the blacktop is only a *playground* at surface level, but this work attempts depth to look *through* – literally – the blacktop? Beneath this surface of epidermalized geography and geology lies, I argue, how “Blackness push[es] up against the science of taphonomy (the study of decay), necrology (the study of the death of an organism), and diagenesis (the changes that take place after the final burial)... and brings into the production of space and the cityscape, into the soil, the physical, chemical, and biological remains of blackness.”^{clxxxix} As surface, its black top renders competitive selection as the collision of flesh and earth, “how capitalist’s value systems” always seem to stake profit in “the ghettoization of difference,” and as complimentary surface, the Blackness atop bodies, manifesting as shit-talking, crossover dribbling, rim hanging corporeal vulgarity.^{clxxx} It is a carnival of “local hopes and local aspirations, local tragedies and local scenarios” where sport excavates style as a property of exhilarating impurity.^{clxxxi} As such, Blackness cements the unseen naturalness of built urban environments – the literal foundation upon which the cityscape and City Game were built. The Blackness of the black top dyes depth as burial and death as pit.

“little rats.”

George Dohrmann penetrates the schmaltzy veneer of origins to particularize a cutthroat landscape where grown (often white) men see (mostly Black) children as investable property. If the children develop (either in skill or in physical dimensions – a growth spurt can change the trajectory of a family, child, and most significantly, coach’s life) and perform, for these coaches, they can unlock a world of riches, notoriety, and, more than anything else, access to more talented children. To these coaches, in places like Compton, CA, Kansas City, MO, and Akron, OH, “youth basketball is a growth industry.”^{clxxxii} However, when most of them inevitably fail, they are discarded as “little rats.”^{clxxxiii} Myron Piggie, who, infamously, was a crack dealer and shot a DEA agent before his stint as head coach of the Kansas City Children’s Mercy Hospital 76ers, as a Nike “consultant” made \$70,000 per year.^{clxxxiv} “Nike takes care of me like nobody could ever believe, Piggie blithely recalled, “Nike has been behind me 100 percent. I’m behind Nike 100 percent. Every day I wake up, I walk out of the house with Nike on. Nike shoes, Nike shirts, Nike this, Nike everything. I’m loyal to Nike. Me and Nike are family. We’re always going to be family.”^{clxxxv} When pressed about his dubious background by Dan Wetzel and Don Yaeger, Piggie merely retorted with a question, “Are you a perfect man? Have you committed sin?”^{clxxxvi}

Some coaches, like Pat Barrett, received a salary of \$100,000 and another \$50,000 in shoes and athletic apparel, for which Nike happily paid for to align themselves with young (starting as early as elementary age) basketball assets.^{clxxxvii} Among these financial benefits, Barrett has also received a championship ring from UCLA for his funneling of star recruit, Ed O’Bannon to the university. When former NBA player Tyson Chandler, another Barrett alum, signed his first professional contract with the Chicago Bulls, he paid the coach \$200,000 and promised more payments upon signing future, more lucrative, contracts.^{clxxxviii} Furthermore, these payments aren’t uncommon at all. They seem, on their face, at least, to be merely Chandler just doing right by those who helped them along the way. For Chandler,

[Barrett] had allegedly bought [him] a Cadillac Escalade, moved [his] family from San Bernadino to a house closer to [his] home in Orange County, and taken him on shopping sprees...that often exceed \$5,000. If Chandler met a girl at an out-of-state tournament that he wanted to see again, Barrett bought her an airline ticket to California.^{clxxxix}

Instead, though, what if we thought of Chandler and McGrady's payments to their respective coaches as return on investment? Here, it cannot be understated that some part of Barrett's investment in Chandler and other players comes from sneaker money. As an eighth grader, Chandler played for Barrett and his Nike affiliated Southern California All-Stars (SCA). In high school, he played in Compton, for Russell Otis at Manuel Dominguez High School. The school is a basketball powerhouse, and, most vitally, a Nike affiliate.^{cxv} Otis, in addition to his coaching income, received a \$15,000 salary from Nike plus all the gear him or his players could ever need.^{cxvi} So committed to the brand, Otis even wore a Nike sweatsuit to his December 2000 hearing to face charges of "oral copulation and sodomy and a misdemeanor charge of child annoyance or molestation"^{cxvii} Otis denies all charges, of course, and ironically, through his lawyer, Leonard Levine, the coach attributes the multiple accusations of players and other children to "gold-digging motives."^{cxviii} When asked directly about those charges, then Nike spokesperson, Eric Oberman said, "We at Nike have always had a policy of innocent until proven guilty."^{cxix}

Otis, however, isn't alone. There is Jim Tavares, coach of the Nike sponsored New Bedford Buddies in Brockton, MA, who watched his young players take showers in 1998, and who was charged with "indecent assault and battery in 1968" and "sodomy and unnatural acts on a child under 14 in 1974."^{cxv} There is Jack McMahon, an Adidas sponsored coach, who also in 1998 was accused of molesting and having improper sexual conversations with his players.^{cxvi} Then, there is Henry "Scoobie" Richardson of Georgia who "pled guilty to charges of contributing to the delinquency of a minor and furnishing alcohol to a minor" for getting a few of his players drunk and, then, driving them to a motel to spend the night.^{cxvii} And finally, there is Ricard Propsero, an affiliate of Pat Barrett who was hired to "help handle thirteen- and fourteen-year-old players," but prior to was convicted of "unlawful sexual intercourse with a sixteen year-old-girl."^{cxviii} Of his hire, Barrett told the Los Angeles Times, "He's paid his debt, and he deserves a second chance."^{cxix} By no means is this list exhaustive. Though, as opposed thinking of these crimes as just outlier encounters – the unavoidable way evil always seems to infiltrate even the most innocent institutions – we should consider these actions and actors in their truth: proof positive there is no ethic for exploitation and no desire to0 perverse to inflict upon those many dominated, extracted bodies.

At this point, I can't help of think of something Tom Stengel, wealthy benefactor of Joe Keller's Inland Stars/Team Cal, father of Tommy, another player, and one of Keller's assistants, said to his sixth graders while in some hotel room preparing for a game: "Keep your mouth shut and play. You know real men don't complain. Grow some hair on your balls and be men. If you're not going to stop acting like men, you might as well get a slit down there."^{cx} Stengel's expectation of manhood cannot be extricated from his (rhetorical) inspection of it. It also grounds, literally, Otis' and other sneaker company affiliated coaches sexualization and denial of Black boyhood. Here, the words of another parent, the mother of one of Jim Tavares' victims, become prescient to our discussion of territory and demonic grounds:

When I look back on what happened, I cringe. My son, who loves basketball, was trying to send me a message. But I didn't get it, because while I loved going to his games, I didn't see what happened in the locker room. I didn't know until another boy stepped up that this coach had these boys in the hot tub with him, *no clothes allowed*. I didn't know that he walked around hotel rooms in front of them naked. This coach had it all. He was successful, had Nike's blessing. His program was one everyone wanted to play in because he promised parents he'd get their kids scholarships. *I counted on someone to know his background*. But no one

else seemed to worry about that because he won, and his players went to college... And while they did the right thing by tossing him after I found the information, the system hasn't changed. *They still don't do background checks. They still don't know how is coaching our children.*^{cci}

In her case, and that of countless other mothers, the spectacle of play – their sons' love of the game and their love of their sons – blinded them to the truth. I can only imagine her palpable disorientation; the terror at, now, seeing what was once beyond her perception. These terrifying and grotesque moments, these moments of disorientation, become phenomenological scaffolding. The mothers in the stands and the players in the locker room, both, are lived experiences where time and space are both perceived differently because of orientation. Looming over their perceptions, though, are the "specter of absence and nonpresence:" the myriad ways even the most precious bodies must, for a time, exist outside and beyond their perception and protection.^{ccii} Orientation, then, is not just a way to see the world. It also builds the worlds we live in. Bodies are there because our orientated awareness tells us they should be and because objects and technologies enroll them as being in their rightful place. When they are not or when something goes wrong – as in the dreadful cases listed above – we become disastrously disoriented. This is especially true of Kisha Houston, that mother wielding her son's birth certificate, but also the background checks of youth coaches or lack thereof. Of the accusations, Tavares said, "I don't see why anyone should have a problem with me. All that happened 27 years ago... Should I be punished for something 27 years ago for the rest of my life? I never lied to anyone... *There was never a box I should check* or anything on a form where they asked for that information."^{cciii} George Raveling said, "At some point the past has got to be the past."^{cciv} Within an infrastructure where domination and extraction of bodies is the point, these predators cosplaying as coaches were presumed given – their pasts can be just that, but, also, through a presumption of harmlessness – a perversion of the 5th amendment's innocent until proven guilty – their pasts are always invading the present and violating the innocent, vulnerable bodies therewithin. Their histories, in fact, were less important, less worthy of credentials than that of Demetrius Walker. History happens as a repetition of gestures (efforts of labor) – orientations are a loop of tendencies, arrivals, and departures. To check the background of these bad actors or the many other coaches is an unallowable and, more importantly, cost prohibitive departure from the plantocratic machinations of grassroots basketball. In fact, as condition of their arrival – that which is "behind" but also that which structures some bodies "social givenness" over others – their backgrounds could be and, I would assert, should be thought of as the mud in which grassroots basketball stabilizes. In other words, it doesn't matter who is overseeing the cargo, as long as it arrives on time and in good condition. The sneaker industry, considering these ghoulish realities of production, produces sneakers as an end result where the reward system of talent discovery is inherent to intensely generational and geographic forms violence. In other words, "having 'things,' owning lands, invading territories, *possessing someone*, are, in part, narratives of displacement that reward and value particular forms of conquest" is just another part of the demonic (think of Piggie's response to Wetzell and Yaeger grounds of grassroots basketball.^{ccv} To quote Coach Elvert Perry again, "That's the rule of the jungle, man."^{ccvi}

In 2001, after Tyson Chandler was drafted second, he signed a 5-year, \$1.75 million contract with Nike – a paltry sum when compared to LeBron and Zion but enough to mark the brand's life-long commitment to the athlete but also a bet on the chance he became the next global superstar. The story of Chandler prompts two key questions for thinking of the mineralogical relationship between the sneaker industry and Black athletic talent. First, what if we thought of the "life span" of a player's sporting career as being just that, *for life* – or, at least, as close to it as a corporation can get? In the words of Kenny Brunner, former Georgetown blue chip recruit and SCA Alum, "I've been a

professional since I was thirteen.”^{ccvii} And finally, what if we thought of grassroots basketball as a theatre of operations, a “soles-for-souls fight,” where the sneaker industry’s logistical concerns of moves supply – Black sporting bodies – through time and space to a just-in-time arrival where profit potential intersects with a maximized output of talent and skill?^{ccviii} The answers to these questions converge around a geographic and geologic understanding of territory. “Territory is not simply land, in the political-economic sense of rights of use, appropriation, and possession attached to a place; nor is it a narrowly political-strategic question that is closer to a notion of terrain. Territory comprises techniques for measuring land and controlling terrain,” writes Stuart Elden in *The Birth of Territory*.^{ccix} Territory schematizes the Black body along a periodic table of domination. Therewithin, *Bron* – the elemental designation of fungible and minable material for branding – is sifted from all those disposable tailings, sediments of crushed hoop dreams, blighted communities, and broken bodies. As such, measurement and science bind flesh to earth, not as property via the slave, but as a collection of detectable, minable, refinable, and ultimately, profitable properties. That is, sneakers as an industry of finding and delivering bodies mediates this domination of geography and geology. Furthermore, if space really “just is,” a reference to how “space and place are merely containers for human complexities and social relations” and always a surface concern, then sneakers as brandable technologies that connect our feet to the ground, penetrate this veneer to excavate how modern spatialization exists, in one way or another, thanks to the movement of bodies whose humanity is buried under their existence as cargo.^{ccx} With Otis facing serious prison time and out of favor with Nike, there is nothing really special about Manuel Dominguez High School. As the sheen of top-end hoop talent and expensive sneakers dissipates, only the systemic realities of generational underfunding, gang violence, poverty, and over policing that plague its Black and Latinx population remain as filth – the school, literally, comes back to earth. “Without Russell [Otis], without Pat [Barrett] feeding [him], Dominguez is *just another run-down school*,” bemoans Sonny Vaccaro.

“i don’t do asians.”



Figure 2.8 Joe Keller (pictured left) and Demetrius Walker (number 23) and the Inland Stars, photograph by Rob Bock

At this point, it is necessary to contextualize the specific racialization happening on these grassroots basketball teams. These sneaker companies and coaches don’t just want kids – they want talented (and isolatable) Black kids. Remember, only Black bodies can sell shoes. It would be untrue to say white players don’t get shoe contracts. In 2019, Luka Dončić, the 23-year-old, Slovenian, Dallas Mavericks superstar, signed a 5-year shoe contract with the Jordan Brand, but even with this deal Nike had territorial expansion in mind – the company was looking for an athlete to establish a strong foothold in Europe.^{ccxi} Moreover, in the NBA, the white American player is going extinct – as

of opening day of the 2016-2017 season there were only 39 white American born players in the NBA.^{ccxiii} Chandler Parsons, a former NBA player who is also white said, confirming the prevailing assumption about whiteness in the league, “The NBA is a collection of some of the most athletic guys in the world. And white guys just aren’t that athletic.”^{ccxiii} Parsons expresses the corporeal property of athleticism as the kind of innocuous eugenics that, frankly, prop up our assumptions of bodies in and as popular culture. That *White Men Can’t Jump* is not just a movie but a soft corporeal regime of epidermalized metaphor – the scientific fictions of racial embodiment. But these fictions as lived reality come to dictate violence as transcription and decree upon the Black body – that we inhabit the metaphorical “floating world of ideas” of unliving spaces and bodies.^{ccxiv} Joe Keller, in speaking to the supposed eugenic promise of commodifiable properties assumed exclusive to and intrinsic in Black children, which drove him to dismiss even the thought of having a more diverse group of players on his team, musters all the softness of concrete:

Talk turned to the point guard for the team from Orange County, an Asian kid with whom [another] coach was clearly impressed.

“He’s killing people,” the coach said. “You like him?”

“I don’t do Asians,” Keller responded quickly, as if he’d anticipated the question.

“What do you mean?”

“Asians don’t get tall enough. That kid is fast, sure, but how tall is he going to be? Not tall enough.”

The young coach wasn’t sure Keller was serious. “That kid is blowing by everybody, Joe. You wouldn’t want him on your team?”

“Nope. I don’t do Asians.”

Keller liked the way that sounded and that he was enlightening a younger colleague. The guard again broke free for a layup, and Keller looked at the coach and while shaking his head said, “Still ... no Asians.”

One could sense the young coach taking notes in his head.^{ccxv}

Blackness manifests as starting line for Keller and others like him. Their dreams to be the guy that can always and reliably locate bodies capable of baring *the brand* technologizes black flesh as scopic regime. Keller’s “no Asians” stance enforces the varied and often underreported ways Black bodies are filtered through “the circuits of power and capital.”^{ccxvi} Stuart Hall writes, “[Popular Culture] is the space of homogenization where stereotyping and the formulaic mercilessly process the material and experiences [of bodies] it draws into its web.”^{ccxvii} Here, the cultural theorist describes how the incessant churn of globalized capital, industry, and technology process the Black body as being one of popular culture. In other words, the assumed naturalness of Black athletic talent as detectable property – that we can with certainty and without fail run and jump beyond those white and, especially, Asian bodies *and* men like Keller with their tools of surveillance and detection, one-on-one drills, ranked basketball camps, message boards, and scouting reports, can reliably discover and stake their claims upon youthful bodies. Together, the sentiments of Parsons and Keller forcibly extract the Black body from its historical, cultural, and political sedimentation. These children, in practice and theory, are crammed into the siloes of biological categories. In other words, the scripts of fiction become ground for which plantation logics are exhumed and commodities are excavated.



Figure 2.9 Tracy McGrady for Mt. Zion Christian Academy, photographs by Dean Hoffmeyer



Figure 2.10 Sonny Vaccaro (left) talking Basketball with Coaches Mike Krzyzewski and Roy Williams at his ABCD Basketball Camp

To this point, my implementation of the mineralogical to contextualize Blackness has been more metaphorical than material. Now, though, we must reckon with how the geologies of excavation and colonial world-building define, materially, the Black body as mineral. When the head scout for Mt. Zion Christian Academy in Durham, North Carolina, Alvis Smith, discovered the 6'9" Tracy McGrady in the tiny town of Auburndale, FL, he knew he had discovered "the gold mine of all gold mines."^{ccxviii} In 1996, Tracy McGrady entered Sonny Vaccaro's ABCD Camp as an unknown commodity. In fact, he was issued the number 175 to formalize his ranking in relation to that year's camp participants – there were only 175 in total.^{ccxix} "Nobody had a clue who Tracy McGrady was," remembers McGrady in his Basketball Hall of Fame Induction speech, "Sonny Vaccaro gave me that platform, and I played against the best players in the world at that time. I left that camp the no. 1 player in the nation, 175 to no. 1."^{ccxx} Wetzell and Yaegar's characterization of Smith discovering McGrady invokes history dating back to the beginning of the world. "The manufacturing of origins is a need and tyranny of the nation, which is predicated on extraction and exploitation. Black and brown death is the precondition of every Anthropocene origin story," writes Kathryn Yusoff.^{ccxxi} To call McGrady gold, any Black child, really, matters their flesh along and through the ledger's record of transaction, which dates back to the "protocapitalist moments" and sites of the slave trade.^{ccxxii} As such, we must consider the color line not as the racial difference between white and Black but as the corporatized and globalized transformation of Black to gold. Smith saw McGrady, in that moment, not as talented child athlete but as dollar sign. Literally, McGrady's life was embedded in a genealogy

of material profit linking shoe contracts and sponsorship deals to “each spoonful of sugar...puff of a pile, and every bit of rice.”^{ccxxiii} And, for Smith, McGrady made do: “When Tracy McGrady signed a \$12.3 million endorsement deal with Adidas in 1997, [after he was drafted ninth by the Toronto Raptors,] he made sure that his high school coach and [Smith] each received...\$900,000.”^{ccxxiv} Vaccaro says of the money paid to Smith and Mt. Zion Academy, “That’s part of [McGrady’s] contract... The check came from Adidas and not Tracy directly in an effort to save [him] on taxes. There was no stipulation in [his] contract that said Adidas had to pay that money to Mt. Zion. That was [his] choice.”^{ccxxv} This payment, which was written into McGrady’s deal as a tax break – just another wily maneuver in fiscal management – stands not as contractual obligation, as Vaccaro stated, it was Tracy’s choice, but as credits and debits, the movement of money, earned off the back of McGrady, across the ledger to the coffers of Mt. Zion. Just as Jordan built Nike, Tracy made Smith and his coach, Joel Hopkins, millionaires. Moreover, McGrady’s ascension – that rise from 175 to no. 1 – forces us to reckon with, yes, tournaments and camps like the ABCD as “junior meat markets” and Adidas as “flesh peddlers”, but more importantly, how ascension is just a romantic way of considering the particulars of excavation *qua* the racialized, spatialized, and material realm of the underground.^{ccxxvi}

That McGrady Adidas deal changed the landscape of high school recruiting. “The country realized that there was now big money at stake in amateur basketball. Where once you might be able to sell a player to a cheating college for tens of thousands in dirty money, a shoe company could legitimize you with hundreds of thousands,” report Wetzell and Yaeger.^{ccxxvii} While McGrady, now, is long retired; today, sneakers still have a seemingly unassailable foothold in college basketball. In the spring of 2022, the Kansas Jayhawks beat the UNC Tarheels, 72-69, to win the NCAA National Championship. This is the Jayhawks second national championship under coach Bill Self. While this should be a time for celebration, an NCAA inquiry into the program’s alleged “egregious” and “serious” violations that, according to reports, threaten to “significantly undermine and threaten the NCAA Collegiate Model.”^{ccxxviii} “Coach Bill Self and assistant Kurtis Townsend ‘embraced, welcomed, and encouraged’ Adidas employees and consultants to influence high-profile basketball recruits to sign with Kansas,” reports Mark Schlabach.^{ccxxix} Merl Code, an Adidas “bagman” – the person who, literally, has and distributes bags of cash to players, parents, coaches, really, anyone who can guarantee a recruit’s commitment – who is serving time in federal prison for “providing former Jayhawk recruits and their families money as an inducement to play,” alleges Self and the University of Kansas basketball program, during the recruitment of Zion Williamson, was open to providing the standout’s father with “a job plus ‘cash in the pocket’ and ‘housing for him and his family.”^{ccxxx} I do not have the expertise of patience to wade through the legal jockeying between Self, Adidas, Kansas, and the NCAA. Instead, I’d like to position Kansas’ 2022 Championship and their apparel deal with Adidas worth \$14 million annually, which, in 2019, was extended to 2031, as the glitzy landscape of the athletic Anthropocene and the under the table payments and “bagmen” as the murky and subterranean underground. Emphatically, it is from this underground, as indicated by the tactics to get Zion to Lawrence, KS, that Black talent emerges – at least that’s what the maneuvering of sneaker companies would have us believe.

“The underground [is] both a poetic and an engineered realm of technology,” writes Jussi Parikka in *A Geology of Media*. In this work, the author attempts, through an analysis of the intersection of geology’s deep time and the overwhelming speed of digital technologies, to argue that media history is as old as the rocks and minerals in the earth. Geology, he argues, is “the mediated vision” of the earth – while, for example, the Hubble telescope positions its “technological gaze” skyward, toward the intergalactic depths, geological surveys, mining technology, and satellite-based

mapping projects directed that gaze inward, toward the earth's layered strata.^{ccxxxi} Moreover, his work underscores how the human perception of the underground throughout history are rooted in the fallacy of "an artificial infinite."^{ccxxxii} As such, "the earth had become a resource. Metals and mineral were tightly linked to the emergence of modern engineering, science, and technical media."^{ccxxxiii} But also, so too were the slaves, uprooted from their homelands to work sugar and tobacco plantations, rubber factories, as well as gold and salt mines. Put another way, to access the many and vast resources of the earth, Man required tools and, not quite in the same way Jordan built Nike, slaves – an artificially infinite stream of Black bodies – became that. "Nature cannot be removed from the Western conception of certain people's presumed proximity to nature."^{ccxxxiv} Personhood for profit: geology, then, is a "transaction zone."^{ccxxxv} Armond Towns, in his book, *On Black Media Philosophy*, argues that any questions of "the human," which Parikka correctly identifies as the essential perspective for visualizing the underground," requires the colonial production of Blackness as "elemental/natural" extension of Man throughout the world.^{ccxxxvi} That is, as Towns puts it, "the Negro becomes a medium" – "a storage device for white imaginations" and also, in the case of McGrady playing ball at his Auburndale high school, for potential profit. Towns approaches the underground through a meditation on Black escapism and the Underground Railroad. He claims that the underground, in this sense, offers an alternative transversal of space where the slave's assumed proximity to nature – their tribal inferiority – offers novel avenues of escape into possible Black futures beyond the purview of those who would give chase through the use of "constellations, sticks and rocks."^{ccxxxvii} While this subterranean path offered escape for many slaves, it also, again through their proximity to nature, rendered the slave stuck in a triangulation of "technology, capitalism, and planetary destruction."^{ccxxxviii} Moreover, we can think of the brutality of slavery as the subterranean underworld engineering the antebellum South's pristine beauty, indicated by earlier reference to Nottoway. "The underground is the place of hell...the Underworld is marked by death to any animal approaching it."^{ccxxxix}

Vaccaro was asked in 2011 by the president emeritus of Penn State, "Why should a university be an advertising medium for your industry?"^{ccxli}

"They shouldn't, sir," he soberly replied, "You sold your souls, and you're going to continue selling them. You can be very moral and righteous in asking me that question, sir, but there's not one of you in this room that's going to turn down any of our money. You're going to take it. I can only offer it," a response befitting both Parikka and McKittrick's brimstone-streaked characterization of grounds and undergrounds.^{ccxli} For when it comes to sneakers, no moral *highground* exists. And so, it is from this stasis in material hell where white ideations of profit and fantastic imaginations of race converge alongside an enterprising and optimistic white paternalism, now and forever, guards the planet as its eternal steward and everything and body therewithin.^{ccxlii} Grassroots basketball recreates this geologic coordination of nature, minerals, and Black bodies. Wetzel and Yaegar claim the sneaker industrial complex (athletic Anthropocene) as a corporate battleground. I agree, and I would add, that through AAU basketball tournaments as trench warfare and university campuses as a network of bunkers, "the underground haunts the military imaginary and reality."^{ccxliiii} Parikka argues that our smart phones, in truth, are "small pieces of Africa" carried in our pockets.^{ccxliv} In turn, sneakers, I claim, are small bits of black bodies worn on our feet. Towns asks, "if the Negro functions as a medium, as an extension of whiteness [and the white over- and underworlds], what happens when the medium decides not to work?"^{ccxlv} Here, the point of my exploration of the racial implications of grassroots basketball asks, how does the Negro at play enliven new but still pernicious and exploitative geologies of labor?

The mineral (the player) and the corpse (the slave), both, exist as inevitable and unavoidable elements of nature. Deadness as inertia bind the two, forever, *naturally* in place. The emptiness of stock defining both the corpse and mineral as utterly exteriorized performs the stockade – rendered as heaping mounds, tectonic plates, and stratum of dirt and crust, magma and gasses, the earth as prison and coffin where ore is mined, and bodies laid to rest. What’s more is we must contemplate how and why both the mineral and corpse’s subterranean nature become interchangeable. But interchangeable for what? Kathryn Yusoff’s *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* considers the discipline of geology as “hinging on the twinned discourses of [the material] and humanism.”^{ccxlv} Through geology, matter always embodies property and properties – that which can be counted on to produce profit and also distinguished through counting. Her work argues that the formation of the Black as racial category is inseparable from the material and economic impetus of mining the New World. She makes the point race is defined through the white *geologies* of colonial extraction and dispossession. That is, the formation of humanity as being categorically white and male required the deformation of Black bodies, through death, to matter. This designation is also predicated on the corporeal and mineralogical “division into active and inert.” “Extractable matter must be both passive (awaiting extraction and possessing of properties) and able to be activated through the mastery of white men. Historically, both slaves and gold have to be material and epistemically made through the recognition and extraction of their inhuman properties.” Yusoff writes, and inevitably asks:

Geology is often assumed to be without a subject (thinglike and inert) ... Thinking Blackness in terms of the relations of materiality, of coal black, black gold, black metal, and how these... lexicons of matter uncovers the transactions between geology and inhumanism as a mode of both production (or extraction) and subjection (or a violent mode of geologic life). How does Blackness and the terminology of geology slip into each other as equivalent substances?^{ccxlvii}

I am not here to argue for a triangulation between the slave, matter, and capitalist extraction and exploitation; Yusoff does that work better than I ever could. Moreover, I am also not interested in claiming slavehood for rich and successful professional athletes. Instead, I ask how these racialized *geologies* of scale extend themselves through time and territory to inform a sneaker industry unabashedly preoccupied with the discovery, cultivation, and branding of Black bodies. However, the answer to this inquiry is not metaphorical. In other words, claiming that Black bodies are *like* minerals does little here; rather, that the slave trade, at its core, occurred as a corporeal mining project and the plantation, a human quarry, *still* constructs Blackness as being definitively and naturally exploitable. Then, it is the elemental notation of Blackness that marks the slave as the atomic unit of the modern world. As W.E.B. DuBois notes, “Black labor became the foundation *stone* not only of the Southern social structure, but of Northern manufacture and commerce, of the English factory system, of European commerce, of buying and selling on a world-wide scale; new cities were built on the results of Black labor.”^{ccxlviii}

My reference to time marks the remarkability (properties) and marketability (property) of history and/as depth. Famed sneaker executive, Sonny Vaccaro who was unceremoniously fired from Nike in 1991 implemented youth as an important stratagem to grow the profile of his next employers Adidas and Reebok.^{ccxlix} “I had to go younger,” declares Vaccaro, “The only place I could do battle with Nike was at the youth level.”^{cccl} Clark Francis’ *The Hoop Scoop*, an online grassroots basketball hype-machine cosplaying as player ranking report, “saw gold” in covering younger and

younger players.^{ccli} At one point, Dohrmann reports, his site was ranking fourth graders.^{cclii} Francis saw the “inexact science” of evaluating children younger than high school as his art, one that, at height of his powers, he charged \$495 for yearly subscriptions.^{ccliii} Yet, this science or art, whether exact or not, recognizes and evaluates basketball properties as event. Using the equation “exchange value = type [sex, size, age] + properties [skill, future surplus],” excavates objectified racialization as being deep background not to call these athletes slaves but to name the slave as definitive progenitor.^{ccliv} Today, the site still exists. Francis is named as Editor Emeritus, but most importantly, at the top of its homepage, *The Hoop Scoop* has an image of a young LeBron James above the headline, “11 Reasons Why You Want to Subscribe to The Hoop Scoop.”^{cclv} Next, territory occurs as frontierism and imperialism where production, profit, and conquest form ground, and humanity is scaled off as lostness. For players, lostness manifests itself as some combination of isolation (that they always seem to be alone) and disposability (that they can be discarded when someone more talented comes along). Yet, for coaches, lostness is just another quantitative property in the equation of just how much they would or should invest in a player’s future. “The perfect team,” muses Joe Keller, “is a team full of single mothers,” an all too perfect example of McKittrick’s thought “racial-sexual domination is an ongoing spatial project.”^{cclvi} Chauffeuring their child to and from practice, and games and tournaments all around the country, was a luxury even the most well-intentioned parent could afford, but always seeing opportunity, coaches like Keller exploited lostness as a way to build relationships through forced proximity and unfettered access, unimpeachable control, and manufactured affection. Keller voices the toxicity of this combination when best when considering the futures of Demetrius Walker and Terran Carter, two of his players with tumultuous homelives: “I’m thinking about holding D[emetrius] and Terran back a year in school. They’re young for their class.” This moment, Keller’s snatching of parental control for the mere possibility of potential profit, brings the Black mothers full circle with the haunting past of their wombs being assembly lines. The words of Dorothy Roberts come to mind: “We often find the hallmark of slavery’s inhumanity as the slave picking cotton under the overseer’s lash. As much as slaves’ forced labor, whites’ control of slave women’s wombs perpetrated many of slavery’s greatest atrocities.”^{cclvii} Indeed, depth clumps together the profundity and gravity of consciousness (“that’s deep”), the surrealist and hallucinatory fantasies of bodies and performance (“down the rabbit hole”), and those buriable matters of the past (“skeletons in the closet”) to position time and territory as a three-dimensional and politically charged underground schematizing “space, place, and Blackness as the uneven sites of physical and experiential difference.”^{cclviii}

Sedimentation invokes history as always being underneath the surface, waiting and ready for excavation and transformation. However, taken literally, sedimentation describes the accumulation and deposition of mineral particles. Sediments are biological and geological detritus, and sedimentation, through the process of weathering and erosion, is where particles settle in place. Considering these definitions of sedimentation, one mineralogical, the other historical, and the ways in which some Black bodies become “gold” and “oil” while others, remain silt present more questions than answers. Specifically, in the case of James, what happens to his arrival if we take seriously and literally Rhoden’s claim of the material import of him and his peers within the economic infrastructure of sports? Further, if we buy Rhoden’s characterization of the athlete’s position as “natural resource” how can we reimagine the narrative of natural athletic ability as being one that exists along a mineralogical and Marxist axis of transformation where nature becomes commodity? In other words, how do we account for those systems and technologies that surveil, detect, and mine the ground in hopes of striking gold? Yusoff writes, “The biopolitical category of nonbeing is established through slaves being exchanged for and as gold.” Again, William Rhoden’s

specific implementation of the Black athlete as “gold” and “oil,” here, is productive. LeBron’s selection was less the result of some genetic lottery but a time and capital intensive, precision, just-in-time, filtering and logistics apparatus. These grounds – those generationally underresourced neighborhoods from Akron to wherever; unassuming sneaker sponsored basketball courts, tournaments, and leagues; high school zoning districts, and college campuses and recruiting trails – are territorial transaction zones for the grooming, exchange, and branding of bodies. In the words of Sonny Vaccaro, “I’m not hiding. We want to put our materials on the bodies of your athletes, and the best way to do that is buy your school...or buy your coach.”^{cclix} I imagine Vaccaro’s *placement* of “materials” on bodies through a selection of subjects/bodies where colonially descendant and globally incorporated economies of valuation simultaneously take place and *take* place. His brashness, maybe Vaccaro’s most recognizable trait, emphasizes the point of corporate logistics as “world-making enterprise...emphasizing awareness, foresight and preparedness.”^{cclx}

“just a kid from akron”/ “more than an athlete.”



Figure 2.11 Uninterrupted x Nike LeBron 17 “More Than An Athlete”

After winning the 2013 NBA championship in thrilling fashion with the Miami Heat, sports journalist Doris Burke interviewed a sweat drenched LeBron James. Burke asked LeBron, “You are constantly faced with the din of noise from the outside, scrutiny, and pressure. How, when everybody is coming at you, do you keep your head and perform at the level you do?”^{cclxi} Before he spoke, LeBron gathered his thoughts with a deep inhale and replied, “Listen, I can’t worry what everybody says about me.”^{cclxii} His voice cracked as the pressure of becoming a champion flowed from his exhausted body. James paused, and then, looked off into the distance as the American Airlines Arena’s crowd rained their raucous adulation upon him.¹ “I am LeBron James, from Akron, OH, from the inner city,” He exclaimed, “I’m not even supposed to be here!”^{cclxiii} Three years later, after defeating the Golden State Warriors for the 2016 NBA Championship – this time for the

¹ One June of 2021, Miami bid adieu to the American Airlines Arena. Now, it will be known as the FTX Arena, which, interestingly enough, the name of the cryptocurrency exchange.

Cleveland Cavaliers – LeBron James echoed these sentiments, saying, “I just always want you guys to remember that I’m just a kid from Akron, Ohio.”^{cclxiv}

“Just a kid from Akron” implies the movement and trajectory of history and territory as romantic and seductive straight line. It affords LeBron the privilege of being unfinished, a schmaltzy interpretation of infantile potential and hopeful tomorrows, the humming nostalgia of hard work and humble beginnings, and, finally, license to explore to what degree personhood can and should exceed labor. Said better, his background has facilitated his “having got here.”^{cclxv} For LeBron to have gotten “there,” to have arrived ready for the critical moment of selection, the corporatized problem of “moving goods through time and space” must be solved.^{cclxvi} In “Orientations Matter,” Sara Ahmed forwards an interpretation of orientations foregrounding a dual interpretation of matter. First, orientations are “significant and important,” featuring how bodies and objects made to be “in-place” and out of place.^{cclxvii} Second, orientations are “about physical and corporeal substance,” reckoning with the various ways objects and bodies take up space and how subjectivities are formed around objects and bodies.^{cclxviii} The scholar re-presents Husserl’s phenomenological study of the table whereby “the sameness” of an object is only given through how it “holds or is shaped by the ‘flow’ of perception.”^{cclxix} Perception, then, is an act (used loosely) of temporal multitudes, a collision of pasts, presents, and imaginaries – a (re)collection. Going further, the scholar reckons with the backgrounds and arrivals of objects and bodies, why some objects go unnoticed, and others are conspicuous. Husserl treats backgrounds as being a product of familiarity. That is, objects go unseen because their immediacy and pronounced intimacy elides their “thereness.”^{cclxx} By considering in what manner the background connotes that which must take place in order for something, somebody, or some *body* to arrive, Ahmed extends Husserl’s model. Likewise, the background constellates a thing or body’s temporal and identifiable meaning. “What is behind refers to what is in the past or what happened before... [and] to other kinds of histories which shape an individual’s arrival into the world.”^{cclxxi} In “facing the background,” Ahmed identifies the presumed givenness of certain bodies as world shaping. For example, the ways in which gender is naturalized as property showcases a habitual loop of becoming whereby it “becomes naturalized as a property of bodies, objects, and spaces partly through the loop of this repetition, which leads bodies in some directions more than others as if that direction came from within the body and explains which way it turns.”^{cclxxii} The Black body, then, ensnares itself as ouroboros. Here, the slave is naturally property where, through its accumulation and fungibility, the constitutive elements of civilization are formed. Next, the slave, even as buried entity, defines the Black body as still and always replete with natural properties that, once excavated and exploited, constitute the capitalist market.

Ahmed’s notions background and arrival are particularly relevant to understanding the racial specificity of LeBron James. Ahmed uses “sedimentation” to describe how arrival is predicated on an understanding of history that centers the often-invisible work of prior generations and the ways work becomes an essential condition for the arrival of another. Orientations, then, should exhibit the work that stages the possibility of an arrival. This understanding of sedimentation must inform how we consider Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods, the immediate antecedents to LeBron James. Jordan and Woods’ economic profitability shrouds their Blackness in translucence, a permeability where the flows of meaning barely penetrate the depths of skin. In this sense, their own Black flesh buried them. Their Blackness, absent of politics and history, was only allowed to be skin deep. Yes, we were told humanizing stories about both. We, for instance, mourned the murder of Jordan’s father and admired the omnipresence of Tiger’s. However, in acknowledging only the visible fact of their Blackness, opportunities for the public to reckon with how their seemingly sudden arrivals

were formed around a generational history of bodies were absented and, in its place, stood a prototype of the post racial progressivism induced with the election of President Barack Obama. That a white consumer base adored the sporting brilliance of Jordan and Tiger, and in turn, bought in to their ability to represent their beloved products functioned as affectual proxy for an unchallenged and assumed innocent racial animus. Said better and to paraphrase John Turturro's portrayal of Pino in *Do the Right Thing*, “[Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods,] they're not niggers, they're not Black... I mean, they're Black but they're not really Black – they're more than Black.”^{cclxxiii} Furthermore, the constantly manicured neutrality of Michael and Tiger, how “they performed [and continue to perform] comportment” and to what degree these performances “orient [both us and them] toward some objects and bodies more than others” contour a historical specificity that, in the moment, was largely obscured.^{cclxxiv} Namely, in facing and ultimately dismissing, the obvious fact of Tiger and Michael's black skin, any opportunity to interrogate or, in the least, recognize how the specificity of Blackness within an American background of oppression stages the trajectory of their corporeal and cultural biographies becomes impossible.

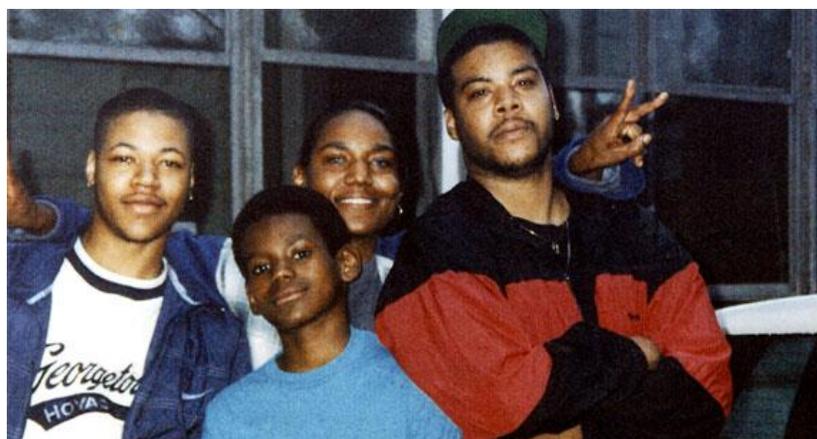


Figure 2.12 LeBron James (lower center), Gloria James (upper center), and Bruce Kelker (right)

Again, Rhoden's use of “gold” and “oil” is productive, here. “Sedimentation,” in Ahmed's usage, invokes history as always being underneath the surface, waiting and ready for excavation and transformation. However, taken literally, sedimentation describes the accumulation and deposition of mineral particles. Sediments are biological and geological detritus, and sedimentation, through the process of weathering and erosion, is where particles settle in place. Thinking through these definitions of sedimentation, one mineralogical, the other historical, and the ways in which some Black bodies become “gold” and “oil” while others, remain silt present more questions than answers. Specifically, in the case of James, what happens to his arrival if we take seriously and literally Rhoden's claim of the material import of him and his peers within the economic infrastructure of sports? Further, if we buy Rhoden's characterization of the athlete's position as “natural resource” how can we reimagine the narrative of natural athletic ability as being one that exists along a mineralogical and Marxist axis of transformation where nature becomes commodity? In other words, how do we account for those systems and technologies that surveil, detect, and mine the ground in hopes of striking gold? LeBron's past is only remarkable, only noteworthy in the ways it evinces the impossible probability of escape. Emphasizing James as being “*just a kid from Akron*” discloses obscurity as environmental conceit. Sedimentation must always invoke its material truth – that which, through its plentitude, is leftover, overlooked, useless, and cumbersome. Before LeBron was chosen, before he was special, the most notable aspect of his life was how completely

Akron's harsh landscape buried him. "Just a kid from Akron" admits LeBron was merely another body, and his selection transpired as a *Where's Waldo*-esque game of discovery. In other words, LeBron was one kid plucked from a near limitless quarry of "kids." In a feature article for *ESPN The Magazine*, Eli Saslow reports on LeBron James' tumultuous fourth grade year:

Back then, little about James' life was certain, and nothing about his future was preordained. During fourth grade, he moved perhaps half a dozen times and missed nearly 100 days of school. The identity of his father was a mystery to him. The man he called his dad was in jail. He had never played organized sports, and he had no clue who he was or what he wanted to become. Long before he tattooed Chosen 1 across his back, James was in fact indistinguishable from so many other *lost* kids in Akron.^{cclxxv}

But how exactly did LeBron James find his way to lostness? The answer, emphatically, is that LeBron James never *was* – an identity of nonbeing and “dark matter...the often-invisible substance...that structures the universe of modernity.”^{cclxxvi} While “Just a Kid from Akron” unfolds the rigidity of visibility delimiting the modern Black subject, it also exposes an interpretation of being found through the *geologics* of material discovery. That is, interrogating LeBron's upbringing as *Black boy lost* must also pursue the stakes of him being found, of his excavation. Bruce Kelker noticed LeBron James as a fourth grader.^{cclxxvii} He was 5'5", already taller than his mother, and could run faster than any of his peers. Kelker's decision to recruit LeBron to his youth football team was an easy one.

[LeBron] took his first handoff for the East Dragons 80 yards from scrimmage for a touchdown. After that, the pieces of LeBron's chaotic life slowly began to congeal... Kelker became the most reliable adult in James' life... Two weeks into the season, Kelker invited his new star player to live with him. He wanted more stability for James, and he also wanted to make sure his best player continued to show up for games. When Gloria said she felt uncomfortable having her son move in with a virtual stranger, Kelker invited her to come too. He already had a live-in girlfriend, Kelker said; he promised Gloria that his only interest was in helping take care of her son.^{cclxxviii}

Kelker had found gold. Then, that gold was passed to salivating sneaker companies when LeBron was a freshman in high school when Chris Dennis, the head of an Akron mentoring program, showed his highlight tape to Sonny Vaccaro, founder of the ABCD Basketball Camp, a funneling apparatus for young basketball talent to eagerly awaiting shoe companies. While LeBron and Kelker's story is noteworthy for its outcome, it is also quite common. Patrolling streets and neighborhoods across North America are scores of Bruce Kelkers hoping to strike oil.

Sentimentalization, here, isn't my point. In claiming the lostness of LeBron James, one must also ask how *being lost* locates the Black body as subsisting within a localized and precise network of pain and loss (“the inner city”) and how *being found* sketches the reality of athletic talent scouting and surveillance as a corporeal targeting regime where the geographic and indeed *geologic* regime of “accumulation and dispossession” are made manifest.^{cclxxix} Materializing *the pipeline* as sifting and processing technology of an athletic Anthropocene whereby Black athletic talent from blighted neighborhoods migrate to playing fields – and most likely back again – asserts a fantasy unable/willing to account for “past and current imperial injustices” and an understanding of becoming and discovery through an unforgiving trajectory of unregistrable Black life.^{cclxxx} On this trajectory's winning side, the obvious rarity of LeBron James essentializes the grounds/territories for

possible of enslavement where the chance at being “the next LeBron” seduces all those involved to participate in an intense, never-ending registration of Black bodies. Saslow’s reporting of James’ past as a “lost kid in Akron” is beautiful, a turn of phrase tugging the heartstrings of America’s pastoral fiction of do-it-yourselfers and bootstraps. This is something the athlete, himself, uses to significant effect. In an interview for *Sports Illustrated*, LeBron said this of his 2014 return to Cleveland:^{cclxxxii}

I feel my calling [in Cleveland] goes above basketball. I have a responsibility to lead, in more ways than one, and I take that very seriously. My presence can make a difference in Miami, but I think it can mean more where I’m from. I want kids in Northeast Ohio, like the hundreds of Akron third graders I sponsor through my foundation, to realize that there’s no better place to grow up. Maybe some of them will come home after college and start a family or open a business. That would make me smile. Our community, which has struggled so much, needs all the talent it can get.^{cclxxxiii}

His words engender an affectual proximity. That is, we all, seemingly and to the benefit of James, Nike, and the other corporate interests he represents, are *just kids from somewhere*. LeBron’s “calling” to return home to Cleveland rings honestly, at least to him, because he still sees himself as that kid from Akron, OH public housing just waiting to be found: no different than those countless and nameless bodies who were left behind and are still waiting.

Implementing “gold” and “oil” to describe the positionality of Black athletes within college sports is telling, especially when considering LeBron’s once lostness as a framework. What is the value of gold or oil in the ground? There is none. Gold, oil, and other natural deposits are only valuable through a technological and corporatized infrastructure of surveillance, detection, mining, and implementation – the ability of profit-motivated corporations to transform nature to commodity, the creation of a *pipeline*. My emphasis, here, is a cudgel, demanding acknowledgement of the innocuous inscriptions of matter upon the Black sporting body. For sports, the pipeline is not mere rhetoric but a global network of youth surveillance where the detection, discovery, and cultivation of *lost* Black boys tenders a seductive spectacle of matter *qua* flesh. Nike and other sneaker companies have created an “an exercise in plumbing – installing a network of catch basins to collect and channel young talent from youth teams to high schools to colleges and beyond.”^{cclxxxiiii} “Rather than seeing Blackness as biopolitical, we might also see it as a geopolitical act in the division of flesh and earth... What I propose is that the Anthropocene produces a geophysics of anti-Blackness enacted through sets of material and psychic relations in the designation of property and properties.”^{cclxxxv} Rhoden’s intervention, in this article and in *Slaves*, expresses less the similarities between the Black athlete and the slave as opposed to admitting that both slavery and sports openly avow the Black body’s existence along a subjective and “extractive axis” of matter and life.^{cclxxxvi} That James was, despite sheer odds, was found instantiates not just ground for the grass to take root but the potent material ground for sustained industry. Today, LeBron James leads a life of extreme wealth, yet to the athletic Anthropocene his wealth is inconsequential – mere investment in the “economic miracle.” The billions of dollars that have been and will be paid to James mortgage his complete and problem-free subsumption into globalized flows of capital. His past and protest are marketing campaigns and profit drivers for larger companies. LeBron being “More than an Athlete” and “Just a kid from Akron,” affirmations of both self-determination and healing expression, declare that Blackness is not and has never been the property of Black people. Rather Blackness is a relative and proximal nothingness, a paraontological subjectivity completely apart from not *a part of* being and bracing a constitutive white imaginary.

LeBron's return to Cleveland – his homecoming, as it was dubbed – and that championship, was about being *more than an athlete*. In 2018, via his production company, UNINTERRUPTED, and a partnership with UBER, journalist Cari Champion interviewed LeBron James and Kevin Durant. During the interview, LeBron said of Donald Trump, “He doesn’t understand, he doesn’t give a fuck about the people...While we cannot change what comes out of that man’s mouth, we can continue to alert the people that watch us, that listen to us, that this is not the way.”^{ccclxxxvi} After the interview’s airing, Laura Ingraham, conservative Fox News pundit, responded to James’ “barely intelligible” and “ungrammatical” criticism of Trump:

I’m numb to this commentary. Must [James and Durant] run their mouths like that. Unfortunately, a lot of kids and some adults take these ignorant comments seriously. Look, there might be a cautionary lesson in LeBron for kids: this is what happens when you attempt to leave high school a year early to join the NBA, and it’s always unwise to seek political advice from someone who gets paid \$100 million a year to bounce a ball. Oh, and LeBron and Kevin, you’re great players, but no one voted for you. Millions elected Trump to be their coach, so keep the political commentary to yourself or as someone once said, ‘Shut up, and dribble.’^{ccclxxxvii}

James in response to Ingraham took to Instagram. He posted a picture of a wall at the UNINTERRUPTED offices with “I Am More Than An Athlete” written with a formed neon lights captioned with the hashtag #wewillnotshutupanddribble.^{ccclxxxviii} Today, “More Than an Athlete” has transformed into another of James’ media empires. It is the title of a documentary series made in partnership with ESPN chronicling “the improbable journey of LeBron James” and his high school friends, teammates, and business partners. The show is now in its second season. The phrase has also fueled a boutique merchandising streetwear campaign where, in partnership with NIKE, James has sold apparel via the UNINTERRUPTED store. Again, romanticizing LeBron’s austere beginnings or championing his positions on racial and social issues is not my point. Instead, my goal is demonstrating how “Just a kid from Akron” and “More than an Athlete” wield the personal origins of LeBron James, the man, to platform LeBron James, the product, within a billion-dollar propaganda machine. “When he took his talents to Miami and left Cleveland in the summer of 2010,” reports Darren Rovell, “The franchise value, according to Forbes, dropped from \$476 million to \$355 million in a single year.”^{ccclxxxix} His presence is may have been the single most important factor to the economic rejuvenation of the Cleveland downtown area from 2004, when the Cavaliers drafted him, to now. “James’...was associated with a 13% increase in the number of bars and restaurants within one mile of the stadium, and a 24% increase in employment.”^{ccxc} “The King,” as he is known in and around the world of basketball, is well aware of the economic importance of his presence, and we can see this in that *Sports Illustrated* interview with how he conceptualizes the impact of his departure and arrival. He interprets the addition of his own presence in Cleveland and the area of Northeastern Ohio as one of material investment. In this way, LeBron’s homecoming, at least to him, and I agree, is no different than the arrival of an Amazon, Apple, or any another Fortune 500 company, a generational, philanthropic, and material boon to the lives and livelihoods of all those in his vicinity.

“the next LeBron.”

On a car ride back from some tournament, one of many for Joe Keller and his Inland Stars, George Dohrmann asked the coach, “What happens if D[emetrius Walker] doesn’t make the

NBA?”^{ccxcxi} At first, Keller scoffed at the question’s very premise. How could a kid who was 6’3” as a middle schooler not reach the league? But Dohrmann insisted, “Well, what if he doesn’t?”^{ccxcxii} While they drove Demetrius, or “D” as he’s known by all those who are close to him, slept, sprawled out along the car’s backseat.

Before Keller answered, he checked to make sure “D” was *really* asleep. “Well, then all this would have been a waste of time. Demetrius would have been a *bad investment*.”^{ccxcxiii}

On the back of “D’s” talents and, still growing, size, Keller earned his first sneaker contract with Adidas. The deal was worth \$60,000 in salary and \$100,000 in shoes and apparel and would last until Demetrius entered his senior year of high school.^{ccxcxiv} Moreover, as a part of the deal, the shoe company would sponsor regional tournaments that Keller would host, which had the potential of netting the coach and additional \$200,000.^{ccxcv} Daren Kalish, who was Sonny Vaccaro’s successor at Adidas, told Keller, “[Adidas] doesn’t care if Demetrius makes it to the NBA... We just care that we can market him now.”^{ccxcvi} He added as some mafia movie style warning, “Do whatever you want with the money. Just don’t ask for more.”^{ccxcvii} Days later, Keller’s apartment was bursting with Adidas shoeboxes, jerseys, and equipment, and if that weren’t enough, once the word of Keller’s (and D’s) signing with the three stripes became public news, ten pairs of Air Jordan shoes, all in Demetrius’ size, arrived with a note that read, “Best of luck in the future.”^{ccxcviii} Keller, today, is the President/CEO of Phenom America, a player development company that puts on youth basketball camps across the nation. It was Darren Matsubara – “Mats,” as he was known to his friends, peers, clients and enemies– who pitched the transition to Keller.^{ccxcix} In the early 2000s, he was “one of Adidas’ most powerful [AAU] coaches,” associated with prospects like Carlos Boozer, Brook and Robin Lopez, and DeShawn Stephenson.^{ccc} In 2002, he was named in a California lawsuit as receiving and undisclosed amount of money for shepherding Boozer and Stephenson to a particular agency.^{ccci} Today, though, like Keller, he has left coaching to become the managing executive for the Wasserman agency’s basketball division, which has negotiated over \$1 billion in shoe contracts.^{ccci}

Joe, it’s important to have the grassroots program,” said Mats to Keller, “But I am going to create something else for you. It’s called Project Seed [which would become the Phenom, Jr. slate of basketball camps]. There is grassroots, *but below grassroots is The Seed*. We are going to have each division set up, and there is going to be a continuity, a flow [of prospects and teams]. You be The Seed. You be in that space. You be where it starts. Joe, you are going to have the influence because you are before the grassroots. Kids [and parents] are going to ask, ‘Joe, where should I go, this camp or this camp?’ You can advise [them], and you’ll be someone everybody courts.”^{ccciii}

On its about page, Phenom America, which companies like Disney, Gatorade, and, most notably, Nike sponsor, boasts an extensive list of great and minor NBA players, including Zion Williamson, with the tagline, “Are you next?”^{ccciv} According to website Phenom is “where the player becomes known.”^{cccv} Knowability, then, happens as a racialized perception of labor where production and consumption as incessant and ever churning cycle. These Phenom basketball camps, which are located in every region of the contiguous United States, represent the underground as being primed for extraction where the backdoor transactions of children and shuffling of money happens; where bodies train to be not just athletes but “billboards;” where, in the words of Wesley Wilson, former standout basketball prospect, college coaches “look at you like they’re owners” and players “feel like cattle.”^{cccvi}

In 2005, *Sports Illustrated* named Demetrius, at age 14, “the next LeBron.”^{cccvi} The problem was, simply and quite literally, he never grew. As jargon, “grassroots” connotes sedimentation’s notion of spatialized history. It archives the story of Demetrius’ father, Big D, who is serving a 25-life sentence in prison for stealing some CDs at the mall due to California’s Three Strike Law.^{cccviii} The story of Kisha, Demetrius’ mother, who wielded her son’s birth certificate as stick to fend off all those who questioned D’s age. The story of Demetrius and Coach Keller’s marathon sessions of *NBA Live*.^{cccix} How the Coach became D’s best friend. And finally, it tells the story of outlandish gifts, special treatment, and nationwide attention; how, in the words of Ernie Carr, another California high school coach, “[They] grew up Nike kids.”^{cccix} It implies not just a three-dimensional perception of space, but, for these boys, specifically, a three-dimensional link between talent and skill cultivation (growing skill), aging (growing up), and marketability (growing their brand). Ultimately for Demetrius, his main obstacle were the limits of his own body. At 17, as high school senior, Demetrius Walker was still 6’3”. Walker’s fated stardom and his unfortunate decline were both written in flesh – one in LeBron’s trailblazing path and the other, in his own genetic shortcomings. However, it misses some things as well. It ignores his bachelor’s degree in Mass Communication and Psychology from the University of New Mexico and his master’s degree from Grand Canyon University. It overlooks how he has settled into a life beyond the churn of basketball. But more than anything else, it ignores his very much earned happiness and contentment.

But what of Keller and his assessment of Demetrius’ as a “bad investment?” Moreover, what does it mean that Keller’s success, ultimately – even if he and coaches like him would never admit it – happens through the accumulation and inevitable disposability of children as bad investments? Here, my interests are less in exposing the overall seediness of an industry predicated on the concurrent “can’t miss” e/affect of prodigious athletic talent – what Daniel Boorstin would call a pseudo-event, “how the making of illusions, which flood our experience, has become the business of America” – and the seductive, cruel allure that there will always be a “next LeBron” and many more almost, could’ve been, and not quite LeBrons. In other words, the horizon distinguishing good and bad investments is less one of a singular body but of accumulable and disposable bodies. That is, if – let’s say – Demetrius did indeed make it and fulfill the promise of being “the next LeBron,” what’s next? Keller receives a few lump payments, and then what, how does he ride off into the sunset? Even Keller admits how disposability predicates his fortunes: “Demetrius goes to the NBA, that’s like \$500,000 from his first contract right there. Then when a couple of my other guys — Rome, Terran, Justin—go to college, I’ll get some money from that as well, from the schools and from agents, maybe \$100,000 each... You see how it all works? I’m going to be a millionaire.”^{cccxi} Horizons are imaginative constructions of space and time. That is, we are always reaching, and they are always evading. We cannot see the horizon as distinct and distinguishable object. Instead, horizons make explicit the contours and limits of an environmental field. For Keller’s millionaire hoop dreams, the limit of this reality and the practicality of this dream construct themselves in and as a never-ending stacking and display of bodies.

coda: “engineered to the specifications of LeBron James.”



Figure 2.13 Atmos x Nike LeBron 18 “Sakura/Cherry Blossoms”

“Engineered to the Exact Specifications of LeBron James,” reads the cardboard shoe box for my pair of Atmos x LeBron 18 “Sakuras.” The shoes are a spectacle of color and wonder. Collaged quadrilaterals and triangles of all sizes and colors – delicate lavender, shades of oxidized blue steel, cornsilk, and seafoam – herald a cubist, neo-Tokyo hedonism. The collar and back of the upper is an understated ivory. Bridging the two sections is the iconic Nike swoosh appearing hand embroidered and bursting with an intoxicating embellishment of pink blossoms. The box, however, displays rather drab shades of gray and brown. Its chromatic ordinariness indicates an act of industrial subterfuge. Bursting with care and delight, this pair honors both the intricacies of centuries-old Japanese tradition and the vibrancy of the nation’s anime-inflected futurism known around the world. As a COLLAB with Nike and the Japanese based retailer Atmos, this pair narrates, among other tales, the expansive reach of sneakers from the thick global zeniths of LA, New York, and Tokyo to NBA arenas and LeBron’s athletic greatness to the feet of a regular nigger from North Carolina. They also, as one of many sneaker collaborations from Atmos, mark Hommyo Hidefumi’s rise from intimate storefront selling vintage sneakers to a ravenous but niche customer base Japanese sneakerheads to “a global streetwear and sneaker boutique known for steadily creating grails over the last two decades.”^{cccxi}

grail[/greyɪl/] (noun): a pair of shoes that, for reasons that could be about profit, style, or personal taste, is coveted beyond all or most others.

As common jargon within the rich and vibrant community of sneakerheads, the term obviously finds its origins in the mythological Holy Grail – the sought-after object (usually a cup or dish) providing its owner with eternal youth and everlasting abundance. In truth, though, the Grail’s existence makes sense not as object but adventure. Whether it’s the crack of Indiana Jones’ whip, Dan Brown’s literary trench of puzzles and thrills, or the conspiratorial deviousness of the Knights Templar, the Holy Grail frames our love affair with singular heroes and grand escapades, and so too does any “grail.” Any successful quest for a “grail” – or failed, for that matter – asserts a thirst for an ever diminishing and evermore fantastic vision of youth and lavishly able bodies more than any single pair of shoes. Said better, thrilling is the hunt; fleeting is the prize.

Jason Petrie, head designer for the signature shoe line since the LeBron 7, said, “To me...they are the pinnacle of sports performance at the time, through LeBron’s lens... They are there, in both performance and aesthetic, to push the game forward – and I mean that in basketball terms as well as the ‘shoe game.’”^{cccxi} My box’s tagline and Petrie’s comments articulate a peculiar material genealogy, one blending the obvious corporeal excess of LeBron James – his height, weight,

musculature – with meeting the excessive churn of an insatiable capitalist demand. To the imaginations of Nike’s marketing department, LeBrons (the shoes) incubate branding onto a cyborg of leather and flesh. My Frankenstein-esque imaginary of LeBron does not assume the company should get any credit for his on-court athletic brilliance. James’ generational brilliance is sneaker neutral. He could do this in any pair of sneakers. But, and Petrie is clear on this point, “LeBrons are built to perform.”^{cccxiv} My reading of the box’s inscription unfolds Nike’s precision calibration of smart fabrics, cushioning technologies, and principles of design aesthetic as mattering his body in such a way where distinguishing one from the other is a negligible endeavor. However, a relatively small question, though of great import, arises: just how do they LeBron into the sneakers? The answer to which is complicated and proprietary, meaning Jason couldn’t tell me, which, in a way, makes my point. A slew of “in-house innovations;” Brannock devices; intermittent proprietary “scans” done over the course of his career; and an “intimate, on-court” team of experts, including “biomechanists,” who work with LeBron’s always changing “foot morphology,” “if he’s having an issue... or needs modifications.”^{cccxv} For Nike, before his obvious athletic greatness and immense cultural impact, “the specifications of LeBron James” details his, albeit, partial existence as just scanned data. Therefore, his shoes, in part, are the printed material artifacts of these scans. That is, the hyper-specific work of engineering filtered through the banal logics of printing. For Petrie and his team, LeBron is schematic, which in all honesty, is fitting for a company proclaiming, “we don’t make shoes.” Nike and LeBron, for that matter, has transcended the encumbrances of material production to become a platform where designers come from far and wide to ideate new ways to tell the fantasies of Blackness.

Inherent to the box’s claim are two competing movements, a translation from schematical imaginary to material object and a transition from the corporeal specificity of one finely tuned athlete to a capitalized anthropometric and duplicable blueprint. For those wearers who currently are not starting for the Los Angeles Lakers, these sneakers, which are annually iterated upon like iPhones, sketch an embodied catechism of athletic performance. In other words, to “just do it” in LeBron James’ shoes proffers a psychedelic of everyday movement that demands a resignation to all the ways we will never perform as the King and a recognition of all the ways we wish we could. The definition of engineering highlights the stark difference between scientific discovery and the various structures, machines, gadgets, and materials that fulfill the objectives and limits of functionality. An etymology of the term finds its origins in the Latin, *ingeniator*, and the Middle English, *ingineer*. The Latin is a derivation of two words: *igenium* (a man of genius) and *ingeniare* (to contrive, devise, or generate). The combination of Latin and Middle English provokes an interesting reading of the engineer and the process of engineering. First, the engineer, being a person of immense intelligence or cleverness, is the supreme or agential figure. Their decisions and will are what shepherd an idea to the material world, and the engineer’s only hindrance are the God-given constraints defining their resources. And yet, the most resourceful of engineers, those true auteur savants, push beyond and make magic. Petrie describes it through the equation “imagination + technology = fairy tales.”^{cccxvi} So thinking through his work as magician, I ask, here, where does fiction end and reality begin? When asked whether he believes LeBrons are extensions of the player, Petrie answered, “Absolutely, at their best.” This essay argues sneaker extend the fantasy of Blackness athletic ability into the world through, primarily, a terraforming project. Jason claims, “LeBron is a national treasure...a world treasure,” and in some strange way, that claim brings us back to *New York Times* sports columnist, William Rhoden. “Oil” and “Gold” are treasures too. Though unlike that which the ground begat, James was buried not in dirt and rock like but a near limitless pit of Black bodies.

On the night of Wednesday May 31, 2017, right before his third straight NBA Finals clash with the Golden State Warriors, the front gate of LeBron's mansion was vandalized with graffitied racial slurs.^{cccxvii} LeBron James and, more importantly, his family were not home to see "Nigger" spraypainted on their home.^{cccxviii} Just after the incident, in a pre-game press conference for Game 1 of the Finals, LeBron addressed the incident:

It just goes to show that racism will always be a part of the world, a part of America. You know hate in America, especially for African Americans, is living every day. I think back to Emmitt Till's mom – actually, it's kind of one of the first things I thought of – and the reason that she had an open casket [for her son] is because she wanted to show the world what her son went through as far as a hate crime and – you know – being Black in America. So, it's like, no matter how much money you have, no matter how famous you are, no matter how many people admire you, Being Black in America is tough. And we've got a long way to go for us, as a society, and for us, as African Americans until we feel equal in America.^{cccix}

Later in the press conference, the superstar, being always the consummate spokesman said that "he's 'OK' with what happened to him — as long as it continues a dialogue about how African Americans are treated in society."^{cccxx} The response to LeBron's comments and overall reaction to the crime against him and his family were overwhelmingly positive. Though, for now, I'd like to – just for a moment – focus on the more critical reactions to LeBron's situation. Conservative sports and political columnist, Clay Travis, who boasts on his website bio "he's presently banned from appearing on both CNN and ESPN because he's *too honest* for both," wrote an article alleging the crime could be an act of "fake racism" – "seeming like a story that could be totally manufactured when you look at all the facts."^{cccxxi} In 2021, Jason Whitlock, a longtime sports columnist and host of The Blaze network's "Fearless" revisited the incident, comparing it to actor Jussie Smollett's staging of a hate crime and roundly mocking James' invocation of Till. Alternating between serious commentary and trite impression, Whitlock argued,

LeBron James is worth a half billion dollars. He spends most of his life with white and Black people worshipping him. [*impression starts*] How tough is it to be LeBron James?... How tough is it? Oh my god, it's so tough being worth a half billion dollars with all these people kissing my ass. It's so tough for me, LeBron James. I got to pay people to put hair on the top of my head. I've got people to groom my beard. Oh, it's just very tough, and they spraypainted the n-word on my LA mansion while I was in Cleveland. My servants had to clean it up before I could see it or any of my kids. Before I could even show the police, my servants cleaned it up...Doesn't that remind you of Emmitt Till's mama? [*impression ends*] James – like Smollett – is an intellectual lightweight removed from the reality of working class and poor Black people. Like Smollett, James is in bed with the left wing political and media elite. Like Smollett, James is obsessed with increasing his fame and fortune, and he's willing to use race to do it. The race bait industry is one of the most profitable professions available to celebrities with limited intelligence, secular value, and malleable world view.^{cccxxii}

Here, solving this racist whodunnit is not my goal. There is nothing I could add here to change the minds of Travis, Whitlock, and whoever else agrees with them. Moreover, Whitlock, especially – once you read past his palpable and oftentimes blinding disdain for LeBron James, yes, but also what he sees as a monolithic Black celebrity class being either unable or incapable of criticizing what he

sees as the “left wing political and media” machine – offers genuine criticisms of LeBron’s handling of this incident.

Indeed, LeBron’s comparison of the incident to the death of Emmitt Till is laughably bad. Also, him being “ok” with the incident speaks to a centering of self that does seem to verge on the soft narcissism of a man who is hyper aware of his own celebrity and influence. Said better, LeBron was emphatically not “ok” with having “Nigger” scrawled on his front gate; rather, he was “ok” being centered as an example of the Black American’s everyday experience with racism – a simultaneous and implicit invocation of being “just a kid from Akron” and “More than an Athlete.” Nevertheless, on the subject of the crime’s veracity, the sentiments of Whitlock and Travis do produce an opportunity for consideration. What if *no one* is to blame for the incident at LeBron’s mansion? By this, I mean, suppose there is no articulable culprit, no criminal responsible? A speculative interrogative that includes all possibilities from the incident being a true hate crime to a Black person trying to draw attention to racism to “one of LeBron’s employees trying to draw attention to himself...to prove how necessary [they] are to [the superstar.]”^{ccccxiii} As such, we must think of “nigger” as an unfortunate anachronism indexing the ways in which LeBron’s Black body exists as all Black bodies do, a jumping, running, dunking, and standing reserve where its anachronistic position always designates the potential to be mined profit. In doing this, we are afforded a chance to theorize what LeBron describes as society’s “long way to go” as a territorial conceit emphasizing the “future potential of exploitation [and] the past buried under our feet.”^{ccccxiv} That is, the gap between “Nigger” drawn on LeBron’s mansion to “nigger” marking the Black body’s bound nature is better conceptualized as “the grounds, ungrounds, and undergrounds...conditioning what is visible and what is invisible.”^{ccccxv} In other words, how the excavatable death/depth of antiblackness being a quarry of bodies becomes time – as opposed to the linear counting of days, months, and years.

What if “Nigger” is a feat of engineering, a transposition of the plantation’s territorialization and objectification of capital and commodity onto the Black body, making it and him, as James claims, “a part of this world”? “Nigger,” then, enlivens an inescapable and environmental label of material function. Think: “Nigger” do this and “Nigger” do that. It extends the Black body forward and backward through time, the generative and generational framework of Western epistemology, and territory, the mines, crops, and industries of civilization, where the normality and undeniable ordinariness of “nigger” “fits the description” of certain humans transformed into items.^{ccccxvi} Indeed, opportunity lies therein the claim *no one* defaced James’ property with “Nigger.” This concession, in fact, decries the cute, neatness of some racist ne’er-do-well skulking about the residential enclaves of this country’s rich and famous for something more productive—and I dare say, more pernicious—the event as mere and natural happening. In fact, niggers *are* natural, at least in how, as constant exploitable resource, they presuppose landscape of capitalism. Never forget that which the capitalist regime deems natural isn’t always. Niggers, then, are just like oil, gold, and any of this world’s exploitable resources and treasures. And James’ selection all those years ago enlivens a colliding “geomatrix” of old and new, of selection and deselection, where subjectivity stakes itself in and as matters of the earth.^{ccccxvii} If it was *nobody* behind the graffiti, then the only alternative culprit is the world. Moreover, pushing past the intellectual flatness of good and evil, we must weigh this act not as some malicious marking of James’ racial out-of-placeness but how, for the athlete, his family, and maybe all of us who think we can out- jump, earn, talent, or smart the deadening naturalness of being Black in an antiblack world—that we are always as those petrified leaves crunching underfoot: that philosophical “plant” in plantation where the roots are never far from the corpse. In fact,

“Nigger” marks just how cemented James’ being is to the elemental order, the perpetually expanding and innovating territorial regime enterprise. Forever, still dat nigga and still a “Nigger.”

In sum, this chapter argues that grassroots basketball exists as logistical apparatus for a sneaker industry hungry for the next body to brand. As such, the Black children are shuffled through a near endless array of coaches, teams, and tournaments for the chance to be the next whoever. The arrival of LeBron James as “the Chosen One” exposed this operation to the general public. Today, in the search for the next LeBron, young and virile Black bodies become the material ore upon which the sneaker industry processes. As we transition into chapter two, our focus shifts from the material life of Black bodies to its afterlife. What happens, chapter 2 asks, when the sneaker star dies? And more importantly, how can we use death as a tool of exhumation to understand how Black death is a precondition for the sale and resale of sneakers?

dead.stock. (The Material Afterlife of Kobe Bean Bryant)

I realize that the meaning of being Black is summed up in who comes to bury you, who gathers together in your name after you've gone, what they have to say about how you loved, and how you were loved in return.

—Greg Tate, “Love and the Enemy”



Figure 3.1 Kobe and Gianna Bryant



Figure 3.2 Kobe Bryant Memorial at Crypto.com Arena, photograph by Robyn Beck

Kobe died on a Sunday, and I was at home with my wife. For us, laziness is serious business and comfort, an artform. Oddly enough, my phone never gets this memo. On Sundays, the buzzing and beeping and ringing is constant. Quitting the NFL's narcotic has become an effort of

cumbersome compromises. I no longer watch games. Instead, I receive alerts I barely check from apps I forget are there.

Buzz: _____ is in the Redzone.

Buzz: _____ scores.

Buzz: _____ wins.

Phone notifications, ironically, have transcended their banal alterity to become a ubiquitous white noise of today's digitally rendered life. When device beckons, we concede. That Sunday, though, it never occurred to me that – this time – the alerts could be important. buzz. Buzz. BUZZ! The floodgates had burst.

“Basketball superstar, Kobe Bryant, dead...,” read my phone screen.

My world stopped. For a moment, probably longer, the news choked the very air from my lungs. It couldn't be true, not Kobe. I ran to our bedroom and woke my wife. “Kobe died,” I told her, the words barely above a whisper.

“Who? What did you say?” she asked, somewhere between wakefulness and sleep.

“Kobe! Kobe Bryant...the basketball player...you know, for the Lakers,” I stammered. I wasn't sure why I was crying, but I was. I never cry.

“My God, Aaron. No, he didn't.” Now fully awake, she reached for her phone. It's funny how we do that, isn't it? Our need to confirm important news on the internet, as if our devices are some ultimate arbiters of a purer, more distilled sense of truth. The hours that followed were a blur. We watched the news, I know. I texted a friend who adored Kobe. I know I should've called but listening to grown men sob has always made me uncomfortable. Kobe's death appeared as cracking ice, as if as if life or God was foretelling the ocean of death looming just around the corner. Then, my wife and I learned about Gianna (Gigi), his daughter. Fate's knife twisted deeper. “What about his wife?” she whimpered. Like everyone else, her thoughts shifted from mourning Kobe to lifting up Vanessa Bryant. Later that night, though, during the twilight hours, as the tv watched us sleep, thousands of mourners flocked to online stores in search of a piece of Kobe. It was as if through jerseys and t-shirts and sneakers, we all became that proverbial woman longing to touch the hem of God on earth.

Just days after Kobe Bryant died, I found myself in a sneaker store. As a point of clarification: Footlocker, Footaction, and Finish Line (the three F's) are not sneaker stores. They are emphatically and merely retailers that sell sneakers, servicing the mostly uninitiated mall crowd: teenagers lingering in food courts and parents shopping for school clothes. Here, my desire is not to be pejorative. Hopefully, my words sketch an accurate portrayal of the three F's importance and role in the multi-billion-dollar sneaker industry. They are liminal entry points into the complicated, contradictory, and often heartbreaking world of sneakers – an opening salvo of gamesmanship, especially on release days of new sneakers, for the sneakerhead's eternal quest to cop the latest and greatest heat.

cop [/kop/]: (verb); to catch or nab, to purchase, often outside of conventional means – usually related to narcotics

heat [/heet/]: (noun); a large and/or rare collection of sneakers; a term that means a person has some rare or aesthetically appealing shoes

On that day, however, I was not looking to buy; for the moment, I just *needed* to look. Honestly, I am constantly in and out of sneaker stores. They are a kind of sanctuary for me, existing as solitudinous realms where isolation comforts and never alienates. Unlike the three F's, sneaker stores are almost never crowded. Those who enter do so with an almost singular purpose, and those who are just looking – like me – amble about with a museum goer's reverence. Instead of someone cosplaying as Benjamin's never bored and always titillated *flaneur*, I am the *flyneur*, strolling in and out, here and there, in the West's cultural buttermilk.^{ccccxviii} Esteem and charm and aesthetic, all as self-surveillance through a gathering of broken necks and gaping mouths as we pass. "Fly" seduces as do shadows dancing to the flicker of candlelight. It "knows how to beat the devil out of a dollar while maintaining a Black agenda and keeps an ear out for the next dope house party."^{ccccxxix} But it is also to live on the razor's edge between cultures where being Black gives way to being the *right* Black. It is the ascendancy of Hendrix and Basquiat.^{ccccxxx} It is to stroll through an anti-Black world in sneakers looking like they never touched the ground. To be clear, my "just looking" constitutes a tortuous kind of scheming whereby my innermost thoughts maneuver money I (mostly) don't have to make sense of my outsized and extravagant desires. I am my most powerful when I look, my most wealthy, my most in control. "Just looking," for me, is self-flagellating narcotic. My brain wracks itself with a near infinite amount of almost purchases, and then, occasionally, is made heavy with a guilt-laden sense of buyer's remorse. This time, though, looking was a feeble and vain attempt to soothe a grieving mind. Kobe's death loomed heavy, especially at the sneaker shop. Instead of televisions showing rap videos, CNN detailed the tragic plane crash on one screen and ESPN celebrated the athlete's legacy on another. At the back of the store, the employees made a special display dedicated to Kobe. There was a framed Lakers' jersey, autographed by the star; an oversized sympathy card addressed to Staples Center, teeming with well wishes from the store's patrons and local fans, and two urns, one purple, the other, gold, and both filled with gorgeous arrangements of purple and gold flowers. The mausoleum's *pièce de resistance* were wall shelves, backlit in purple, exhibiting a colorful bouquet of rare and valuable Kobe Bryant sneakers. I stood, fighting back tears, and admired this vigil of laces and leather. Suddenly, bursting my bubble of melancholy, another customer walked up to the wall and casually grabbed one of the shoes. With sneaker in hand, the man approached the register, confirmed the availability of his size, and made his purchase. He left as quickly as he entered, and just as quickly, an employee filled the display's hole with another of Kobe's signature sneakers...

These macabre beginnings bring together the wake, what Christina Sharpe describes as "the power of and in sitting with someone as they die, the important work of sitting (together) in the pain and sorrow of death as a way of marking, remembering, and celebrating a life" and Jane Bennett's idea that "American materialism, which requires buying ever-increasing numbers of products purchased in ever-shorter cycles, is *antimateriality*."^{ccccxxxi} Bennett's characterization of American materialism, conveys the purchasing impulse within sneaker culture as an unremarkable behavioral tic within the consumptive regime of capitalism where a volumetric understanding of consumerism degrades any attunement to the material. In other words, the point of sale is death knell for materiality, the beginning of its digestion where, on the other side, is not *nothing*, but something worse, no *thing*. There is no place for accumulation and dispossession in Bennett's interpretation of vital materiality. Instead, vital materiality situates the material as being irreducibly on the outside of consumption, resulting in the obstinate and undeniably provocative character of nonhumanity. I read Bennett's work as naive eulogy, forcefully insisting, "not Flower Power, or Black Power, or Girl

Power, but *Thing-Power*: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.”^{cccxxxii}

Underneath this proclamation, though, a gap emerges. Jane Bennett’s “vital materials” structure a divergence in the philosophical genealogy of humanity. Her efforts and others undertake the political project of undoing Western conception of Man as being cis-gendered, straight, and white through a reorganization of epistemology where the human and nonhuman are aligned. Bennett defines vitality as “the capacity of things – edibles, commodities, storms, metals – not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.”^{cccxxxiii} This definition of vitality also frames Bennett’s presentation of “Thing-Power,” “an irreducibly strange dimension of matter...[that] attends to the it as actant [while] absolving matter from its long history of automatism and mechanism.”^{cccxxxiv} This is important work to be sure. However, and this caveat cannot be understated, the distinguishing lines drawn between human, nonhuman, and everything in between simultaneously assume the category of human as being synonymous with the western Man and an abstraction of white liberal political correctness. More precisely, with their inclusion of Black bodies as human, the racial lineage of enslavement and brutality via colonization and slavery is accepted as a fact of history while its organizing effect on naming the human is overlooked. Therefore, the human becomes an enticing fiction where colored skin creates an impenetrable barrier for (white) philosophical rigor.

Black Power, for Bennett, distinguishes itself from vital materiality: it is something completely human like Girl Power (Bikini Kill’s sloganeering of 90’s third-wave feminism) and Flower Power (simultaneously describing nonviolent resistance to the Vietnam culture and 60s and 70s hippie culture). First, this is a fundamental misreading of Black Power, one that only makes sense if we assume egalitarian and flattening assumptions of humanity. The Black Panther Party, specifically, and the Black Power movement, more generally, is a politics of self-determination in the face of systemic and generational brutality, the take-no-prisoners claiming of humanity where, based on skin color, it had always been denied, the guttural cry of a people tired of an eternally negated existence. Second, it mistakenly assumes the project is finished. We have moved beyond Girl Power (read: feminism has changed not patriarchy is solved) and the Vietnam War is over. Also, they are both movements that largely left out Black folks. The political reckoning essentialized in the clamoring of Black Power has not stopped: we are still vying for humanity and, in the case of some, dying without. “If Thing-power is not Black Power, then her assumption is that the call for Black Power is *an essentially human call* that is also to be read as consistent with Western historical distinctions between humans and matter.”^{cccxxxv} Third, and finally, Thing-power elides Black revolutionary politics and reduces the stakes of our seemingly endless fight for humanity becomes clunkily commensurate to the cultural angst of a specific generation of (white) youth culture and (white) women’s attempt at usurping the patriarchy. Her recovery of Black existence to the identity and experience of being, while noble in intent, is fiction, a saccharine reimagining of history whereby the historically present and presence of Black being is an antagonism by which human identity is structured. Said better, by way of social death and nonrelationality, “grammars of suffering,” made legible through slavery, rape, lynchings, castrations, mass incarceration, and the state-sanctioned murder of Black people, being is more accurately the racialized difference between life and death.^{cccxxxvi} Sharpe offers her own theorization of consumption and capital: “the history of capital is inextricable from the history of Atlantic chattel slavery.”^{cccxxxvii} Her “wake work” situates a deathful understanding of Blackness alongside the economic formation of the capitalism. The wake, the afterimage of slave ships cutting along the Atlantic, a port-to-port transformation of the African into

Black chattel, asserts afterlife as being a natal orientation to Black existence. Thing-Power, then, seared to flesh with branding irons and whips, originates Blackness as an irrevocable irony: the *antimaterial* pillars of American consumption, accumulation and dispossession, are the very same grammars of suffering that forever affix materiality and thingification to the Black body.

The death of Kobe Bean Bryant matters and *is matter*. As chapter 1 indicates, I mean that seriously. Kobe first came on the national scene as an arrogant high school star for Lower Merion High School in the suburban town of Ardmore, PA just outside of Philadelphia who, famously, took R&B singer Brandy to his prom. But before this minor celebrity, Kobe was a kid who literally grew up in basketball. His father Joe “Jellybean” Bryant played for the Philadelphia 76ers and was a star in Italy, and, his son, Kobe, was always by his side. Kobe literally grew up on basketball courts. More than that, though, Kobe lived and died under sneaker contracts. If chapter 1 focused on the material life of all those children filling the teams and tournaments of grassroots basketball, which Kobe was indeed involved, this chapter focuses on his death – how, in life, his totalizing Black Mamba moniker, realizes death *qua* psychic amputation is a precondition the deathful existence of Blackness and, in death, the legal battles over his the selling of his shoes and the clamor over those in contractual stasis enliven the notion even the greatest Black bodies are always “in the hold” as living or dead stock.

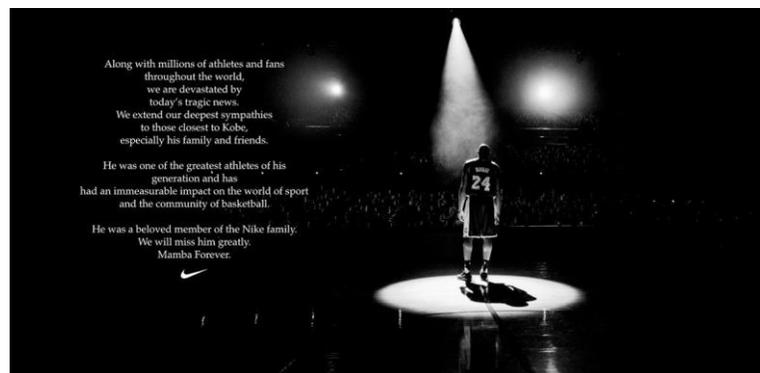


Figure 3.3 Nike Statement on Kobe Bryant's Death via Twitter

By saying they matter, I am not implying the deaths of Kobe Bryant and his daughter Gianna, while indeed tragic, are more important than any other Black death. Instead, I mean, taking his death seriously must sit with the material production of the afterlife – the ways in which things and objects constellate, in the case of Kobe and Gigi, a nebulous, far-spanning, and fiscally profitable sense of grief – as a generative entry point into a philosophical examination of the intertwined materialities of sneakers and Black bodies. This work takes seriously Kobe's death because his demise represents a watershed moment in sneaker history. Kobe is the first sneaker star to die. Jordan, Bo Jackson, Penny, Iverson – they are all still alive, and while retired, still relatively young. Curry, LeBron, Durant, and Harden are still playing. Today, it has only been six years since the basketball sensation scored 60 points in his final NBA game. Though not that long ago, the scabs and scars suffered at the hands of our new, Corona-colored normal have shrunk those hours, days, and weeks even further. Kobe's death matters for in its wake, we all, an intentionally universal proclamation, became no better than vultures picking at necrosed flesh. Immediately following his untimely demise, Nike, in response to his products selling out on their retail site and in stores due to incredible demand, the company made the decision not to restock Kobe products. Instead, the company released this statement:

Along with millions of athletes and fans throughout the world, we are devastated by today's tragic news. We extend our deepest sympathies to those closest to Kobe, especially his family and friends. He was one of the greatest athletes of his generation and has had an immeasurable impact on the world of sport and the community of basketball. He was a beloved member of the Nike family. We will miss him greatly. *Mamba forever.*^{ccxxxviii}

On their website, instead of his sneakers and other branded merchandise, if one searched “Kobe,” only a single purple and gold Lakers’ gift card appeared, as if the selling of actual product was some type of morbid *faux pas* but branded currency transfer was not.^{ccxxxix} When asked about the future availability of Kobe merchandise, a Nike spokesperson is reported as saying, “The company is assessing how to handle future releases.” Meanwhile, on Stock X, who is mentioned in the introduction and a sneaker website describing itself as a “real-time marketplace [that] works just like the stock market – allowing you to buy and sell the most coveted items at their true market price,” the value of even ordinary Kobe sneakers ballooned to near \$1,000 per pair.^{cccxi} Stock X released their own statement about the death of Kobe Bryant:

As is the case for any live marketplace, real-life events have ramifications on what people chose to buy and sell, and for how much. In the wake of Kobe’s passing, there was a surge in interest in products related to the basketball legend, including some of his most noted sneaker collaborations. The increased interest is a testament to his impact both on and off the court. Alongside Jordan, he was one of the most influential basketball players in the sneaker world.^{cccxli}

“Mamba forever,” proclaims the final line of Nike’s eulogy, an homage to the athlete’s self-appointed nickname, Black Mamba, and their own investment when the world had turned its back on Bryant. The name’s creation predates Bryant’s Jordan-esque stature as sneering, sinewed assassin during the game’s biggest of moments. Instead, it stems from Bryant’s 2003 legal troubles where he was accused of sexually assaulting a 19-year-old hotel employee in Eagle, CO. Before the incident, Kobe was the baby-faced ingénue whose million-watt smile endorsed high-profile brands like McDonald’s and Sprite. After the incident, though, the star was a pariah, losing millions in endorsements and the admiration of basketball fans around the world.

Disclaimer. Kobe Bryant ~~is~~ was a basketball player, one of the sports all-time greats. He ~~is~~ was not a hero. Personally, I loved rooting against Kobe. I loved watching his on-the-court brilliance. I enjoyed watching how fatherhood matured him. However, to love someone is to see them in full. It appreciates the pock marks of a life lived. Loving Kobe must not and cannot erase what happened in Eagle, Co. Kobe never did, so neither should we. I think of this work as unraveling the assertive and subtle knotting of greatness where its powers entrench romantic notions of overall goodness on our attention, thoughts, and, most importantly, vocabulary. Better put, greatness must be seen as lingering fly to the scholar, a nuisance establishing the fallacy of unimpeachability to those, for whatever reason, are blessed with faultless resumes. Though my work, indeed, shines a light on – a phrase I hate – or centers – another act of terminological apocrypha – Kobe Bryant, it must not devalue those women left behind: that young hotel employee in Eagle, CO.; Vanessa Bryant, his widow; and the scores of women who suffered in silence as the world just moved on. To mourn, at least from my perspective, is to be as the helpless vessel amid the tempest – battered, bruised, and

always sinking but (hopefully) never drowned by the raging complexities, nuances, and regrets of a life lived. From my very distant vantage, Kobe existed as a man standing in the rubble that was once his life, a man who has had his basest impulses displayed for his family and the world to see. And it is from this vile detritus, Black Mamba was born, something we must never forget.

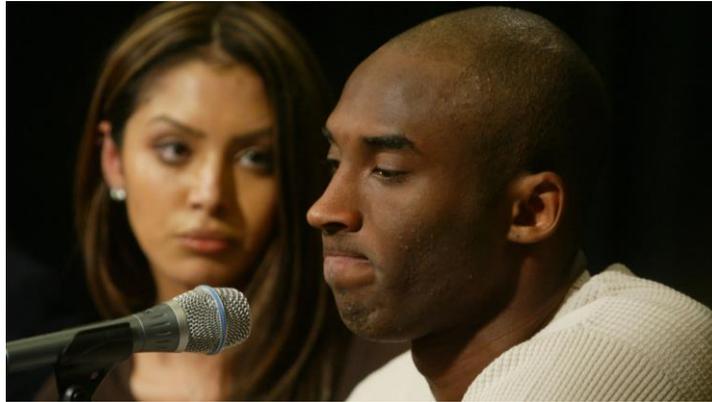


Figure 3.4 Kobe and Vanessa Bryant at Apology Press Conference

In the aftermath of Colorado, the loveable “kid” with his kinky and personality-filled afro disappeared. In his place, was a silhouette of charred stoicism. Of that period Kobe said, “They didn’t want the gritty shit.”^{cccclii} For Kobe, “they” is the world, the fans who once cheered his name and the companies whose products bared his image. And “the gritty shit,” that’s him and the perpetually unwanted matters of his life. Black Mamba, more than anything else, insulated Bryant from what he understood as an unforgiving world, largely through bifurcation where, on one side, he bared generational athletic greatness as a wounded animal’s menacing fangs and, on the other side, recoiled into a desperate veil of personal privacy:

I don’t know what would’ve happened had I not figured it out. Because the whole process for me was trying to figure out how to cope with this. I wasn’t going to be passive and let this thing just swallow me up. You’ve got a responsibility: family, baby, organization, whole city, yourself — how do you figure out how to overcome this? Or just *deal* with it and not drown from this thing? And so it was this constant quest: to figure out how do you do that, how do you do that, how do you do that? So I was bound to figure something out because I was so obsessively concerned about it.^{ccccliii}

On Christmas Day, 2005, Nike through the design efforts of Ken Link unveiled the Kobe 1 and Mamba Mentality was born.^{ccccliv} Then in 2008, the company promoted the nickname with a raw, found footage style commercial where Bryant leaps over an oncoming Aston Martin. Along with moving shoes, the Black Mamba casts the safety of shadows upon Bryant, allowing the man to withdraw and embrace the “grittiness” of his darker impulses as a new, corporatized brand identity. For Kobe, villainy became refuge. “If Kobe once forced smiles, the Black Mamba scowled. He hurled profanities across the court... [and] had little interest in being anyone’s friend... He just refused to apologize.”^{cccclv} For Kobe, apologies are open wounds, personal exposure letting vulnerability as blood. Where the man was forced to apologize, the Black Mamba through a fortification of scales and venom, frees itself from such burdens. The moniker, also, performs the scab’s healing work through which the matters of the man, the personal makings of identity, are shielded with sporting *matter*, a relentless pursuit of athletic and competitive perfection. And so,

Kobe qua the Black Mamba activated its true power – it allowed him to be great, just and only, where greatness subsumes his very sense of self as corporeal and sporting chattel.

This philosophical jaunt into the unlaced and always creased milieu of sneakers and Blackness begin, as do most things concerning negritude, with an etymological framing of death. This chapter offers an extended mediation on death as being a determinative state of Black life that frames existence in its never-ending state of divisibility. That is, Blackness is always understood through contexts of amputation and fracture. Furthermore, this interpretation of death implements Bryant’s alter ego as case study to explore psychic fracture and the psychosocial politics of Black madness, which I define as the mind living in, with, and through death and obliteration. Working through intersections of disability studies and Afro-pessimism, I argue the Black Mamba (de)forms the mind, which performs a psychic fissure where Black madness is a triangulated framework linking Black unruliness and revolutionary creativity, Black disability, and a phenomenal existence in antiblackness. The self-imposed asylum of the Mamba Mentality, then, is one where Bryant drowns himself in his own resourcefulness, the ways in which his biological function as athlete – that which makes him immensely valuable and just as immensely fungible – becomes a grounding mechanism. To this end, an interesting irony emerges. Black disability studies and disability studies, writ large, unapologetically challenge the often-unchecked and always Othering medico-scientific piety for which bodies are read. It asks about the possibilities of disability, “recognizing it more usefully as a social and political category of difference... [and challenging] the restrictive normative notion of ‘the limit.’”^{cccclvi} As Nirmala Erevelles explains, “Disabled bodies...have proven to be more recalcitrant, reminding the medical and rehabilitation establishment of the limits of their authority in restoring the body to its ‘normal’ state.”^{cccclvii} In sports, however, our assumptions of bodily ability are well beyond these limits. It would be wrong to say that the bodies of elite athletes are normal; by definition, they appear as our closest approximations of superhumans. And it is Blackness, framed exclusively through our intimate and unapproachable conceptions of a pathological disability and hyper ability, that matters both ends of bodily abnormality, “transforming [bodies] into commodities that are exchanged in the market for profit.”^{cccclviii} Thus, and also an important subordinate claim of this entire project, the tightrope of normality only affords space and place for whiteness. The black body exists always as an unwelcome trespasser on these grounds but always an enticing ore ready for extraction and, inevitably, exploitation. In this way, Bryant’s mental split and his resulting athletic brilliance leans into his own commodification, becoming the void by which Blackness is defined. As an afterlife of sorts, the Black Mamba and the Mamba Mentality reinforce a hauntological understanding of Blackness that materialize the formation of Black existence alongside death. Said better, death and its converging definitional conditions, lack of life and nonliving, nexus a singular conception of Black life qua matter.

dead.

The white gaze, the only valid one, is already dissecting me. I am *fixed*. Once their microtomes are sharpened, the Whites cut sections of my reality. I have been betrayed. I sense, I see in this white gaze that it’s the arrival not of a new man, but of a new type of man. A Negro, in fact!

—Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*



Figure 3.5 Kobe Bryant Game Winner during 2003-04 NBA Season

For Bryant, those days and months immediately after Eagle, CO must have been an unimaginable crucible. How does the world make sense when life is under carceral threat? Or, and this may be is the real impetus behind the Black Mamba's (de)formation, how does the threat of incarceration being a life-ending diagnosis remake any possible life in the world? Somewhere in the nebulous realm connecting these two questions Kobe becomes converted to the Lacanian Antigone: "[He] who participates in life...from the perspective of having already lost it."^{ccclix} I would watch Bryant in awe during that 2003-2004 NBA season. Flying from the courthouse in Aspen, CO to wherever the Lakers were playing, he would arrive minutes before tipoff, sometimes even at halftime. Kobe, always in dark, nondescript suit, would arrive to the stadium with a gaggle of white men in tow. His legal team, I presumed. He had always been lanky. But now, the chunk of wool suits and narrow collared oxford shirts billowed off his sinewy frame as if he were being chewed from the inside-out, and honestly, looking back, maybe he was. Then, to either raucous jeers or applause, he would jog from the arena's tunnel in his Laker warmups, unsnapped at the ankle, swishing with each step. Etched upon his stone-like countenance was not any distinguishing emotional lack. Instead, it all appeared calcified upon his sunken cheeks. The damning courtroom testimonies, the curses from insulting fans and unfavorable editorials, each second of air travel and the carnivorous flashes from salivating paparazzi – all of it, every last moment – hung over him like an executioner's blade. So much so, that years later, after the world had forgotten his troubles, that bony intransigence had permanently stiffened his once electric smile. On the court, though, his play was breathtaking. What is still striking about those games is the contrast of positionality. In one moment, he could be as the gods, dominant and unforgiving, but in another, as pathetic and feeble as the lowliest of God's creatures. Even more striking, though, is my own and the general public's ravenous consumption of this scene. Without the looming immediacy of death's end, to those wielding the exterior privilege of looking, that which has not killed us yet is confused for life; when actually, death is merely, as it always ever was, shadows at midnight – a laughable absurdity defining chronic existence. More than any pinnacle of sport, we were witnessing the age-old custom of displaying madness.^{cccl}

Our venture into madness requires a brief digression. There is a tendency to align any conception of madness, and reason, for that matter, with mental health. Madness, with this in mind, indicates unhealth, while reason marks a healthy mind. This would be a mistake. As Foucault writes, "Madness [is] pure spectacle...[and] madmen [are] monsters – that is, etymologically, beings or things to be shown... [Madness became] a special sign: not that of sickness, but that of glorified scandal."^{cccli} In this passage, the philosopher articulates how our shared understanding of madness

begins, not with any specific ailment of the mind, but in the ways, especially during the Middle Ages and Renaissance, madness became a totalizing antagonism of reason. More specifically, though, he explains how decrying madness publicly or, as he puts it, “displaying the insane,” knots together notions of secrecy and publicness. And so, keeping madness within the confining architecture of prisons and asylums, where the contours between reason and unreason is fear, systematizes and indeed orchestrates insanity as institutional spectacle. The idea that the reasonable and civilized can point to that scary place on the hill, where the walls, gates, and padded rooms draws a line in the sand against the insane, terms, as essential thesis, imprisonment and an almost eternal awareness of the Other as supposed therapeutic intervention. Madness must be kept away from the public, under lock and key but in a place that is easily identifiable and readily accessible. Autism is not madness, neither is PTSD, Depression, Anxiety, Schizophrenia, nor any other mental health illness. Madness is what happens to those folks, the ways civilization has attuned itself to marking and remarking upon this presentation of difference. “Madness [is] a thing to look at: no longer a monster inside oneself, but an animal with strange mechanisms, a bestiality from which man had long been suppressed.”^{ccclii} It exists as terminal condition, an excoriating pathogen stripping away reason until all that is left is *it*. I am not a therapist, nor do I wish to play one in print. Diagnosing Bryant is not my goal. I am incapable and uninterested. Moreover, leaning on tropes of therapy and the therapist asserts diagnostic intent where there is none. Instead, conjuring the Black Mamba *qua* madness overlays “madness [as] content, form, symbol, idiom” onto the Black as “the ill human [who has] no family, no love, no human relations, and no communion...the [*person*] *without bonds*” who is always bound^{cccliii} In other words, linking Foucault’s description of madness’ bestial character – “man without thought...a stone of a brute” – to the Negro’s inherent and presumed genetic bestial *stock* – the “strong impulsive passions [with] neither patience, reticence, nor dignity” – contextualizes madness not necessarily through any vacuity of mind or will but in how the maddening state of being chattel devours action, inaction, and reaction to grease the wheel of capitalist productivity and profit.^{cccliv}

This turn towards the bestial cuts to the bone of why it becomes necessary to envision Kobe and the Black Mamba through the lens of madness. Foucault constellates the bestial through Man’s basest of impulses, and with Kobe, his assault charges, his single-minded on court aggression, and the obviously racially tinged phallocentricism and fetishism of the Black Mamba, there emerges rich possibilities for theoretical overlap. I’m thinking, here, of Kobena Mercer in *Welcome to the Jungle* where he writes, “The big Black prick is a ‘bad object’...The primal fantasy of the big Black penis projects the fear of a threat not only to white womanhood, but to civilization himself.”^{ccclv} That night in Colorado proved Bryant, in the minds of some, as a menace to white women, and civilization, as expected, responded with proverbial pitchforks to combat Bryant as spectacular menace. So then and in kind, Kobe answered not with any attempt to salvage his humanity, but by becoming the beast – by becoming *a dick*. This is the same man who at 21 once told *Newsweek* he didn’t believe in happiness, so, for him, aloofness has always proved a reliable tool in navigating an unforgiving world.^{ccclvi} “I read up on the animal,” recalls Bryant, “Wow, this is pretty awesome. This is a perfect description of how I would want my game to be.”^{ccclvii} According to its Wikipedia page, “the black mamba is capable of striking at considerable range and may deliver a series of bites in rapid succession... Despite its reputation as a formidable and overly aggressive species, the black mamba attacks humans only if it is threatened or cornered.” We can’t be sure what description of the animal Bryant read, however, from this, it isn’t hard to imagine its appeal to someone who’s livelihood, reputation, and freedom was under assault. Kobe is also open about why, in his mind, the name served as appropriate *rebrand* for the troubled athlete: “Now everybody’s telling me I can’t do it. The

name just evokes such a negative emotion. I said, ‘If I create this alter ego, so now when I play this is what’s coming out of your mouth, it separates the personal stuff, right?’ You’re not watching David Banner—you’re watching the Hulk.”^{ccclviii} In the words of journalist Ben McGrath, “Bryant was *born* a brand, named after the Kobe beef at a Japanese steak house in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania.”

There is dueling animality at play through within the bifurcation of Kobe Bryant and the Black Mamba. First, there is Kobe who was named after live *stock*, and then there is the Black Mamba, a moniker evoking and uncontrollable and dangerous wildness. To blend these, I’d like to shift to another animal McGrath uses to describe Bryant, “the uncoachable mule.”^{ccclix} “[Kobe] cursed at Lakers staff, ridiculed teammates by name, effectively refused to pass the ball. In the top 10 list for most shots taken in an NBA game, six of the spots belong to Bryant, who didn’t just break the record of most missed shots in NBA history: He has over 1,000 more misses than second-place John Havlicek.”^{ccclx} During a press conference after he broke the record for missed shots, as it often does for the mercurial star, recalcitrance beget comedy. With a wry laugh and shrug Bryant said of the achievement, “Well, I’m a *shooting* guard that’s played 19 years.”^{ccclxi} Maybe it’s sheer determination and single-mindedness of Bryant, or maybe it’s just dumb luck, but even Kobe’s flaws became another anecdote of his greatness. In 2008, with the arrival of Pau Gasol, another extraordinary center, to the Los Angeles Lakers, a new era of championship dominance began, and “thus was born a new statistical category, the “Kobe assist,” meant to credit missed shots that seemed more than randomly to beget success.”^{ccclxii} This anecdote on Kobe’s minus statistics has two purposes. First, it verifies Bryant’s characteristic obstinacy, his propensity for inefficient and selfish play, but second, this tale establishes his greatness as fated conclusion, that which is only unavoidable when considering the largess of his talent and his force of will. As a pack animal, the mule is less intransigent than a donkey (ass). Even now, with our obsession with high technology, mules are still essential for transporting goods across rugged terrains globally. To call Kobe a mule, emphasizes his inhuman role and importance to the Los Angeles Lakers. He literally carried those teams through difficult moments to greatness, which is the most indelible trait of his championship narrative. But it also establishes him, even in stubbornness, as a reliable and productive cog of labor within the machine of sports.

Hannah Arendt, in *The Human Condition*, explains that labor is the activity which corresponds to the biological process. Never-ending character and a vacuity of the mind akin to beasts identifies its “rhythmic unification” of bodies and as animal laborans.^{ccclxiii} Here, we must, again, mention Nike’s statement, “We don’t make shoes.” The manufacture of sneakers is beneath the toil of a billion-dollar corporation. Instead, that honor belongs to all those South Asian sweatshop workers. Labor, to Arendt, creates nothing of permanence. The efforts of laborers “who are subject to and constantly occupied with the devouring processes of life” must be perpetually renewed to sustain their effect.^{ccclxiv} Because necessity so commands labor and it is characterized by unfreedom and manifested purposefulness as tools, the human being as laborer is the equivalent of the slave. Arendt writes, “Labor...not work requires for best results a rhythmically ordered performance and, in so far as many laborers gang together, needs a rhythmic coordination of all individual movements.”^{ccclxv} To be the Black Mamba is to be as the mule. With certainty, both define humanness through the eternal toil of labor and the yoking bondage of chattel. In speaking about the 2013-14 NBA season, Kobe echoed Arendt and cemented his own position as *animal laborans*:

Last year was the best basketball I've played in my entire career. I've never worked so hard in my life to prepare for a game, in film study, quarterbacking on the floor, putting everybody in the right position, and then having to take care of my body. It was literally no life, because my body was hurting so much. I had to ice-bath, stretch, massage, elevate my legs, stretch, and then go out and play. But the results were irrefutable. It doesn't stop. That's what I'm saying. It becomes life, you know? To be at that level, that's what you have to do.^{ccclxvi}

Kobe as the Mamba and the mule brings the athlete full circle with his enslaved ancestors (characterized in Arendt's animal laborans) and most importantly with madness. Undoubtedly, considering the brand as a campaign of capital is important. But also, examining the brand's biometric history of filtering stolen flesh and bodies through capitalist accounting until they, on the other end, become legitimate chattel positions the searing effect of heated iron as singular blackening agent. Said better, in this way, then, race is not a matter of melanin or genetics but of char. Furthermore, and considering its maddening effects, the brand dissolves any possibility of volition. Building the asylum "at the scale of skin," constructs the "social and economic maneuvers" of the racial state along a (pseudo)scientific pedigree of clinical precision and mass production where willpower is always already invisible and impotent, and bodies are simultaneously divisive and divisible.^{ccclxvii} The brand is neither about bodies nor corporate campaigns as singular, distinguishable entities; instead, brands mark and remark upon identity for the purpose of consumer spectacle and point of sale gratification. In *Dark Matters*, Simone Browne stages modernity as an antagonistic realm of opacity where matters of the Black subject become actual *matter*. Her "dark matters" describes the ways in which the Black subject is rigidly visible among a "limited grid of representational possibilities."^{ccclxviii} Further, the condition of Blackness framed through the brand saturates the modern world in such a way that "historical, present, and historically present" surveillance practices map a world of racial boundaries, checkpoints and transit zones where the Black subject is negatively rendered.^{ccclxix} Brown describes opacity as a pugilist beating down the body: "This is control by quantification... The embodied psychic effects of surveillance...include nervous tensions, insomnia, fatigue, accidents, lightheadedness, and less control over reflexes. Nightmares too: a train that departs and leaves one behind, or a gate closing, or a door that won't open."^{ccclxx} If we consider opacity and lighting as practical technical metaphors for our infrastructurally contingent world, darkness appears as an aperture-ized by-product of visibility whereby obscurity and clarity *matter* the uneven politics of ontology. For the Black body, the "event-less demise of concealment, falling, and non-movement" entangle the social death of Blackness with objective subjectivity of madness *and* makes sense Kobe's ultimately branded carve-out of asylum amid a world, where at every turn, the salivating fangs of brutality and obliteration lurk.^{ccclxxi} End of digression.

During that 2003-2004 season, Kobe's body paid dearly in attempting to balance these two extremes. Mark Heisler, longtime sports columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*, details the Sisyphean toil heaped upon Bryant's body, "There was one game where Kobe had just flown back from Aspen, and he had this incredible game. He was so exhausted. They were giving him fluids at halftime."^{ccclxxii} I imagine this intravenous cocktail of electrolytes, vitamins, and minerals not as just another innocuous treatment of a chronically fatigued body. No, that's wrong – the ordinariness of it all is the point. Even the most reliable mules need sustenance and repair. Rather, I envision the sheer banality of this treatment as the numerical and scientific pressure materializing an enduring and knowable Black objecthood and "disguising the untold (Black human being)."^{ccclxxiii} Taking its medicalized specificity seriously, I consider this injection of "fluids" as being a part of a scientific maintenance of biological function, a biopowerful instrument within a machine to deaden

suffering.^{ccclxxiv} Revealing as Eric Cazdyn describes, a daily reproduction of labor power through the imaging and “imagining” power of medical technology.^{ccclxxv} In this, an abstraction of presence emerges where the Black body is relieved from physical exhaustion – namely, repair only intended for labor – while still abandoned in a groundless psychic vacuum of obliteration that was once some semblance of selfhood.

I lost a lot of weight and on top of that I had knee surgery and a shoulder injury. It was crazy that I was able to play at that level, anywhere near that level. You can't compare the stress (of the trial) to anything else. One is life, real life, the other is a game. Can't compare them. Basketball, for me, was my refuge, my sanctuary.^{ccclxxvi}

We must take Bryant seriously, here. For him, the toil of work, manifesting through sweat-drenched skin, searing muscles, taut lungs, and, most importantly, athletic excellence, became ground – that which oriented him in and to the world. Put simply, to matter, Bryant embraced his inert fullness as *matter*. If for Bryant, “real life” desecrated his body, leaving only a husk, playing basketball organizes an ecclesial understanding of labor whereby corporeal strain enlivens a convincing myth of selfhood. Said better, Bryant’s “sanctuary” asylum structures a fuguelike nirvana, an obsequence to how his fungibility provides the sweet fiction of safety. The bricks of asylum which incarcerated Bryant’s consciousness behind a fortification of body and skin, a recession, if you will, into his primordial state of “animal-machine man.”^{ccclxxvii} So, then, how can we interpret the buckle and inevitable fracture of Kobe amid the constancy of combat and alienation – his fight for freedom in a Colorado courtroom, for athletic supremacy and competitive victory on the basketball court, and for his family – in such a way that imagines the Black Mamba as a material inscription of death? Fanon offers two polemic interpretations of alienation. First, and dealing with the psyche, he describes alienation as being “intellectual in nature [and] develops because [the Black man] takes European culture as a means of detaching himself from his own race.”^{ccclxxviii} Second, Fanon illustrates the paradigm and positionality of being alienated: “it develops because [the Black man] is victim to a system based on the exploitation of one race by another... a civilization that considers itself superior.”^{ccclxxix} The latter describes the stench of death that lingers on the Black existence, and the former, a pruning of consciousness in hopes of reducing melanin’s stain. Taken together, then, and in the wake of Bryant losing his world, instead of thinking of the Black Mamba as mere branding, framing the alias as mental deformation, an epithet and epitaph, incites madness and death as being definitively yoked to (his) Black existence. The Black Mamba as transcendent convergence of Blackness and madness produces a material illusion by which the “pure spectacle” of madness is specifically exteriorized qua the monstrous logics of Black flesh. Or, as Foucault so fervently stated, “Madness borrows its face from the mask of the beast.”^{ccclxxx}

For humanity, being figures a mathematical equality for which on one side are the constitutive forces of ontology – the exceptional variety of Man/being when considering the limits of his fleshed container – and on the other, is the self, a metaphysical and indivisible calculation of I/one.^{ccclxxxi} Mathematics renders, with certainty and precision, Black life as always being a fractional proposition, that which is never whole, perpetually divisible, and forever manifesting lack. In “Mathematics Black Life,” Katherine McKittrick writes, “If the source of Blackness is death and violence, the citation of Blackness – the scholarly stories we tell – calls for the repetition of death and violence. The practice of taking away life... is cast inside the mathematics of unlivingness (data/scientifically proven/certified violation/asterisk) where the black comes to be (a bit).^{ccclxxxii} Her work explores the Black as being completely calculable thus always already knowable, and going

further, offering an important complication to Blackness being completely countable, the author argues that the work of the scholar relies on a numeracy of drowned objectivity where the Black body exists always under the surface of accounting and data. Put differently, data is a tomb full of bodies, so many bodies. This quantifiable regulation of Blackness functions as a result of, argues Browne, the “massifying practices” and technologies of the slave ship and the plantation, which predate the Bentham’s panopticon and “makes the black body legible as property [and] put to work in the production the slave as vendable object to be bought, sold, and traded.”^{ccclxxxiii} Here, I implement “mathematics of unlivingness” to center psychic fracture, the byproduct of constant counting – a numerical genealogy connecting the whip’s crack to points scored to shoes sold – to ask about the consequences of pondering the Black Mamba, through sentient and actual death, as the material archiving and display of Black suffering.

Consider together our interminable pursuit of two-fifths; the alienation of double consciousness; the monstrous and terrifying spectacle of one drop; and – I contend – the fractal and jagged hewing of Bryant’s psyche, a (de)forming to the Black Mamba. As an aside, though, I have often wondered about our fourth fifth: that elusive twenty percent neither fully constituting humanity yet just as completely beyond Blackness. Here and now, though, my once innocuous musings stage a question of great import to conceptualizing the Black’s quotient existence. Thinking alongside Heidegger, how does each fifth take up space and then, how do these individual dividends complicate the implicit binary of interior and exterior? Put another way, our distinction as being precisely three-fifths of Man consecrates Blackness as existing sans divisible limit. From a single HeLa cell to the lone drop of blood to the surfeit of broken bones and severed limbs to the uncountable lacerated backs and violated wombs, through a bondage articulating slave ships, shackles, redlining, drug addiction, prison cells, and everything in between, accounting for each fist raised, knee taken, and march marched, and noting every noose, fired bullet, baton, and blood-stained badge, our allotted fifths only make a difference in *how much* but not in what (essence).^{ccclxxxiv} Binaries of interior and exterior, for us, dissolve given that our interior is really a fallacy. As always already divisible, we are only flesh and only Black. And now, going back, each of the aforementioned conditions of divisibility, as gatherings and instances of psychic assault, numerate sanity, for the black mind, as uncharted and inaccessible cul-de-sac. Interestingly enough, only one of these can be rendered. The imaginative labor of three-fifths heralds a sickening and circular “zone of nonbeing” whereby the Black body is always material.^{ccclxxxv} That 40 percent to completion is perpetually disembodied and always out of reach. Closer to double consciousness, Kobe’s suffering is displayed for all to see and touch and feel and, most pronouncedly, wear. Why imagine when we can step in his shoes, literally? The Black Mamba, as modern scourged Black, “[becomes] commonplace,” a predictability that reckons with an accounting of Black bodies and an “unspeakable, unwritten... and uncountable” Black presence.^{ccclxxxvi} As such, looking and *wearing* registers the second order violence of tomb raiding.

Thinking of Kobe’s alter ego through the conceit of a madness marking the existential psychic lysis of Black life – the ways in which our minds are ill-suited to Reason – instead of mere individualized response to stress has two useful consequences. First and situating madness as being generational and genealogical, the Black Mamba conjures the psychic groundlessness of Black existence, our pinging back and forth through a minefield of white ideation, brutality, and abuse. In this sense, the fractured mind happens as Fred Moten describes, “in the break,” the knotting of narrative and history.^{ccclxxxvii} Here, death is hauntology, revealing itself as the insatiable slosh and gurgle of zombies – a volumetric mental vacuity charting the past only as ghost stories. Of the

zombie, Zora Neale Hurston, writes, “They are the bodies without souls. The living dead. Once they were dead, and after that they were called back to life again.”^{ccclxxxviii} Here, the author isn’t referring to any imaginary. Taken from her 1938 travelogue, *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*, her words render the Zombie, or Zonbi as it is referred in the Haitian religion of Voodoo, as a triangulation of Black cultural mysticism and religion, the plantation’s psychic and spiritual assault on the Negro, and a thing that “refuses western ontology.”^{ccclxxxix} In working through the symbolic content of the zombie, my use of the imaginative is intentional. “The imaginary is that realm defined by the content that makes up our lives – the people, the plots, and the particular objects... [It] is based upon the intrinsic identities and values granted to everyone and everything in our lives... [and] also the realm of continuity, of a linear narrative that coheres and develops over time.”^{ccccxc} Most importantly, though, the Zombie functions as a constellation charting Black bondage, the ways in which colonial and plantation life siphoned away the volition and soul of millions. “The zombie represents, responds to, and mystifies fear of slavery, collusion with it, and rebellion against it. [It] was born (so to speak) in...the colonial “space of death” and is inextricable from the “culture of terror” of the plantation.”^{ccccxi} In this sense, the post-zombie present of the zombie for the Negro, what Hurston describes as the transformation from “intelligent being to an unthinking, unknowing beast,” coordinates madness as pathogen and spectacle that happens with and as a result of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. And so, the synchronous placement of death and life upon the Black body – how for the Black, being alive does not necessitate any right to life – the haunted notion of undeath, Blackness as “the spook” and *super predator*, which purses to be clutched and induces its own murder, intervenes on distinctions of life/living and death/dying where the excess of difference imagines, for Blackness, death to be “unbearable and unburiable.”^{ccccxii} If the zombie imagines some horrifying and relentless cavity of flesh where violence – an axe to the skull, let’s say – achieves both creation and execution, the heuristic of the undead materializes this imaginarieness as the Negro epidermis. “The undead...is the excess that is inherent to life and death itself... First comes the difference, then comes life and death and, more important, the separation to them.”^{ccccxiii} Excessiveness imagines “the undecipherable markings” on the Black body, the rupturing lacerations of a whip’s crack and gunshot’s bang, as a distillation of an always divisible understanding of Blackness.^{ccccxiv} Therefore, the undead and its flesh have become so tangled in notions of value and matter no time or distance will bring life to the being within. For us and Kobe too, death, as it always has, appears at the sharp end of an ultimate and ever-repeating murder.

Death cannot and must not be circumscribed to the instantaneous and infinitesimal acreage of *finis* (the end). The mathematics of unlivingness situates Black existence as being mournfully and pathetically positioned somewhere between “nothingness and infinity.”^{ccccxv} Second and most urgently, derangement as originating framework for the Black mind invokes Reason as definitive mind state of Humanity and madness as Unreason’s “empirical form.” In other words, madness materializes the bottom of human truth, which situates it not as some incident of disease but an essential component of understanding human ontology.^{ccccxvi} In his pathbreaking *How to Go Mad Without Losing Your Mind*, La Marr Jurelle Bruce offers a productive definition of derangement.

To derange is to throw off, to cast askew, ‘to disturb the order or arrangement of’ an entity. The Middle Passage literally deranged and threw millions of Africans askew across continents, oceans, centuries, and worlds. I use derange also to signal how the Atlantic slave trade, and the antiblack modernity it inaugurated, framed black people as always already wild, subrational, pathological, mentally unsound, mad.^{ccccxvii}

The author uses the concept of madness to explore the often-unruly creative output of Black artistry. His work quilts together four, sometimes divergent, understandings of madness: the mad life or, as I think of it, a phenomenology of madness, the medicalized and psychiatric category of mental disability, madness as a psychosocial deviation from established norms, and rage. As he explains, “madness animates— and sometimes agitates— black radical artmaking, self-making, and worldmaking. Moreover, madness becomes content, form, symbol, idiom, aesthetic, existential posture, philosophy, strategy, and energy in an enduring black radical tradition.”^{ccccxviii} I read his work as being concerned with a largely optimistic vision of madness centering it as generational impetus for radical creativity – the psychic kindling for revolutionary and insurgent power. Likewise, Bruce induces a cultural reading of madness and Blackness existing as one of unfixity, lack, and disability, and more specifically, this quaking concept of self specifies the Black subject position as needing the coagulant of white oppression and oversight for stability. Here, my use of Bruce’s intervention questions how a methodology of going mad imagines the aftermath of psychic unmaking and deformation. What are the excavatable psychic remains once one has gone mad, and how can we understand the afterlife of these leftovers?

To center the work of Bruce without taking seriously the curdling of mental disability and madness, would be a mistake. Some may consider connecting Kobe’s madness and the Black Mamba’s rise with disability as merely a productive metaphor. However, reading my efforts in this way elides, and I would argue intentionally so, the existential construction of Blackness as material amputation – the ways in which Blackness as the living dead is perpetually disabled and disaggregated from popular notions of life/living – where the production of matter is a skin-deep amalgamation of conscious non-life. Being clear, I do not wish to argue Blackness is a disability; instead, considering Blackness *qua* disability studies articulates Blackness as being a material embodiment of madness and that we understand madness, this derangement of normalcy, firstly, through Black abjection. Therí Alyce Pickens’ *Black Madness::Mad Blackness* unravels Blackness and madness as being dually constituted. In doing so, her work explores the racial fallacies within disability studies, especially considering how the discipline often implements white disability and ability as “dictat[ing] the terms of history’s narration.”^{ccccxcix} Likewise and formulating new parameters for how one considers the relational conundrum of Blackness and madness, the scholar utilizes the speculative work of Octavia Butler and others to rouse the potential for a new radical politics challenging white supremacist and ableist paradigms of subjectivity. Her work scaffolds disability and Blackness as parallel tentpoles of material embodiment. The two converge along “the plasticity of Blackness and madness in tandem.”^{cd} That is, the disabled subject is materialized through an animative sense of flexible reduction – the corporeal lack of ability. While, similarly, the Black subject is constructed through a malleable understanding of body whereby Black corporeality is enlivened through a brutal plasticity: how the whims of white pleasure and ontology bend (literally) the Black body to the breaking point. Said better, any plasticity of Blackness demonstrates our existence as hyper-fungible objects whose material value is eternal, perpetually generative, and intensely volumetric.

Both authors assert “that within the United States’ cultural zeitgeist, there is no Blackness without madness, nor madness without Blackness.”^{cdi} And going further, if these subject positions, the black and the disabled, are existentially amputated, then repair must singularly construct ontology *qua* whiteness, maleness, and heterosexuality. Yet and in agreeance with Bruce, Pickens’ work is largely optimistic. She argues, “Blackness and disability have the potential to destabilize the rhetoric of normalcy that holds them as abject.”^{cdii} Also, and according to Bruce, this optimism

interrogates how Black madness as psychic and creative sanctuary “signifies black expressive culture that imagines, manifests, and practices otherwise ways of doing and being— all while confounding dominant logics, subverting normative aesthetics, and eroding oppressive structures of power and feeling.”^{cdiii} I do not see my own, albeit brief consideration, of Black madness as criticizing Bruce and Pickens’ work. Instead, my work hopes to loosen the grip of their optimism to not follow the Humanists’ tendency to “talk *away* from slavery and its afterlife.”^{cdiv} Again, I am not characterizing Bruce and Pickens as talking away from slavery; rather, I believe the optimism characterizing their valuable contributions occult what I believe is the interior and exterior destructive power of madness. What happens, I ask, if we vehemently lean into madness as a deformation that *matters* Blackness as void of totalizing nothingness, of death? Also, bearing in mind the Black Mamba, specifically, how can we understand Bryant’s glass-breaking, an act indicating psychic emergency, as being another entry into the robust archive of Black madness alongside #MambaMentality and the moniker as corporatized commodity of immense value and self-help heuristic? That is, the common assumption of madness and disability writ large conjures accidental wreckage, an opened Pandora’s Box, yet maybe the more generative proposition is considering Kobe’s break and Black madness altogether as being precisely the proper outcome, the result of things working just as they should...for white supremacy and late stage capitalism. Furthermore, the result of this correctness of operation, the infrastructural machinations allowing his second act, are the fragments of Kobe’s mind to generate profit and prop for a neoliberal and white understanding of selfhood.

“In thinking of race and disability as material,” writes Pickens, “one must consider that contexts of oppression and war create disability, often with detrimental effects on those already disenfranchised by institutional racism... helps to define race as a *matter* of life and death.”^{cdv} Death, with its eternal yoking to the Black body and its necrotic, sanguineous lashing of flesh, colors the racialized borderline of being and existence. To understand Black existence is to consider the afterlife not as heaven and hell but a stasis from then to now and beyond where the drowned and buried are everywhere and nowhere. “The slave ship...incites crises of calculation about the number of Africans who made it to the other side—by which I mean the Americas and/or/as the afterlife — and about the depth of the wound that the Middle Passage inflicts on modernity.”^{cdvi} In other words, the violent alchemy from African to Black summons a sobering, definitive truth: The Black’s (Slave) necromanced existence as living corpse. Madness, as skeleton key, unlocks the crypt through the nightmarish void of the psychic impossibility. In other words, if interiority (the psychic) has always been considered “the site of self-determination” and “the grounds for scientific knowledge,” how does the essential exteriorization of Blackness, an absencing of emotions, spirit, and relationality, conjure madness as unavoidable outcome of Black life?^{cdvii} In *Ontological Terror*, Calvin Warren centers the antebellum free black, an oft-used figure asserting Black resilience in the face of overwhelming oppression, to intervene in Afro-pessimist discourses and Heideggerian metaphysics. “To be...is to become, to emerge and move within Being-as-event. But what happens when such becoming does not occur...This, then, is the devastation of the metaphysical holocaust: black ~~being~~ never becomes, or stands forth, but exists in concealment, falling, and inconsistency,” explains Warren.^{cdviii} The author’s claim stages the singular function of Blackness is to embody a metaphysical nothingness. Moreover, as definitive foil for white ontology, this nothingness exists as a definitive threat and terrifying polemic for white being. Within this work, Warren takes up Black madness, defining it “as an unresolvable condition of consciousness that “if one accepts that one is already dead, one is deemed insane... [and] if one assumes that one is a human being, with the ontological freedom this designation entails, one is always deemed insane.”^{cdix} Warren’s theorization of madness presents Blackness as a seismic registry of tectonic severance, an acute acknowledgement of

shattered limbs and mental detritus – unearthing the distinguishing materialism inherent to Black existence. The grueling and intervening answer to an equally exhausted inquiry: What’s the *matter* with Black folks?

I close, now, with another opening. To begin his 2018 book *The Mamba Mentality: How I Play*, Kobe writes, “When it came to basketball, I had no fear.”^{cdx} The book is more interesting in form than content. It exists as part memoir, part self-help book, part written commercial for the capitalist mind state of always working and always conquering. Who is the intended audience? Sports historians? Lakers fans? People who like to look at glossy pictures? It will live on coffee tables, Zoom backgrounds of those people who advertise themselves as readers and critical thinkers, and in the mouths of overpaid CEO’s and titans of industry spouting contrived nonsense. The emotional irony of the statement has resonated with me throughout the writing of this chapter. Kobe expresses an almost perfect manifestation of Foucault’s active (“anger, joy, lust”) and inert (“fear, depression, ennui”) passions.^{cdxi} The statement’s succinct matter-of-factness sketches the totalizing inevitability of his passion. The Black Mamba just is. Furthermore, to his readers and those who watched him play, Kobe frames his passion through emotional lack. “I had no fear,” states Kobe, not as any novel or important proclamation but as a plain-stated, evidentiary truth. Obviously, Bryant is talking about a fear of negative results, “of missing, looking bad, or being embarrassed.”^{cdxii} Looking back to 2003-2004, those court date games reeked of fear – not fear of losing but of losing *it all*. He played with such relentlessness and fervor. He played as if his life was on the line – and to that point, he was right. In this sense, being mad, both as anger at himself and the world and as the inability to reason, offered a singular and perverse protection. He indulged in, as Foucault states – and this is where I’ll end – an “animal ferocity [that] preserved [Bryant] from the dangers of disease; it afforded him an invulnerability, similar to that which nature had provided for animals.”^{cdxiii}

stock.

The Black man is a toy in the hands of the white man. So in order to break the vicious cycle, he explodes.

—Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*



Figure 3.6 Images of the Kobe 6 “Mambacita Sweet 16”

Today, the Black Mamba’s origin story has all but vanished. When sitting with the facts of Kobe’s death, though, an especially cruel irony emerges: the event of his demise was only made possible through the fruits of his self-imposed asylum. Saying capitalism killed Kobe stares beyond

the burning rubble of that helicopter crash at the ghastly truth wafting alongside smoke and ash. It wasn't greed that killed Kobe, not greed, but profit and excess as the Midas touch. All that's left of Kobe is the brand, a corporately curated, (purple and) gold coffin. Historical accuracy has given way to effigy. As such, Kobe's death stages modernity as a realm of antagonistic opacity where matters of the Black subject become actual *matter*. Opacity, ironically, sheds light on an orientation to space where redaction makes the world dark. Most readily, redaction is the process of "rendering information in the dark," the "nonnameable matter" underneath "opaque black blocks."^{cdxiv} It emphasizes an understanding of visibility in which *being in plain sight* unfolds a three-dimensional plane brimming with cover, asylums, and exits. But also, as Simone Browne explains, opacity, in and through its dance of shadows, comes to define Blackness – "the color black, the limitlessness and the limitations imposed on blackness, the dark, antimatter, that which is not optically available."^{cdxv} Reading the "Black" in Black Mamba as a proclamation of race, I fear, is too easy; just as considering it as the mere color of a snake is unsatisfying. What if – and this is a key interrogative of this section – what if the "Black" in Bryant's alter ego declares his own opacity: a redaction of any true accounting of his person forever binding him to the machinations of capital and fluctuations of profit *vis a vis* the black ink of a contract's signature. Kobe's demise indicates the Black Mamba as productive corpse in relation to an oscillating understanding of profit potential and price data where "short term futures are based on street sentiment."^{cdxvi} My use of "indicate," here, emphasizes its definition as a heuristic by which a stock's future value is predicted. As a counterpoint, to this essay's previous section, I turn to the body, the thing left after death. Kobe's body, forever alone and empty, now exists as Fanon predicted of himself and us all, "woven...out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories."^{cdxvii} Just before his own death, Fanon told Jean Paul-Sartre, "A colonized person must constantly be aware of his image, jealously protect his position."^{cdxviii} His words evince a frenzied insomnia, a man fighting a losing battle with the darkness of death and the opacity of colonial rendering. I mention Fanon's death here not to eulogize the thinker's profound impact but to start staging modernity as a realm of antagonistic opacity where matters of the Black subject become actual *matter*, trapping Fanon's life in a sarcophagus of opaque redaction.

This anecdote provokes a philosophical understanding of Blackness as being material and extending beyond the grave. Bryant's lifeless body has found new vitality. His corpse, as topsoil, rich and dark, or as rebar, strong and steadfast, services and structures the vast and varied material ecology of redaction – that is, while Kobe Bryant is gone for good, the Black Mamba blooms in its place, existing in perpetuity. My use of existence is intentional and should be distinguished from being. That is, in line with a Heideggerian interpretation of being where emergence or becoming is an event. Existence "gets caught in an event-less demise" of "concealment, falling, and non-movement."^{cdxix} As opposed to being, then, existence subsumes bodies in politics of objective function, which is always at the behest of being. Further, through existence, Blackness becomes defined in form, or better put, the form of Blackness, the black body, becomes a singularity of function whereby skin color, in effect, materializes an anchor, drowning any humanist possibilities for Black life. Kobe's soul has returned to the ancestors, but his body – now that – belongs to the world. His corpse, rigid and rotting, designates an absolute emptiness, where a body's final breath is not an end, but another stage in a constant, almost Sisyphean reconstitution. Indeed, Kobe was a giant. Implemented, here, as Mbembe does: "The Black man is above all a body – gigantic and fantastic, member, organs, color...an extraordinary accumulation of sensations."^{cdxx} Kobe's legacy knots imagination, those woven stories of Fanon, "this massive coating of nonsense, lies and fantasies...whose function has been to stand as substitute for [his] being, [his] life, and [his] work" to flesh.^{cdxxi} To die as a giant is to live on eternally as fiction. Fiction, in this sense, doesn't term unreality. Instead, I stress the Negro's fabrication – how its made-up-ness places him/her/them

always on the outside of reality, in the shadows of human ontology where being, reason, and life, cohere around the social death of Blackness, as Graham Harman writes, “all of the objects we experience are merely fictions.”^{cdxxii} To be a giant is to be as the *kolossos*, not just a marker of death but a roasted double of life. For Kobe, “the persistence of death in life,” discussed above, happens again and again “through the play of doubling and repetition.”^{cdxxiii} By this, I am not implying there is more than one Kobe Bryant. Instead, in the absence of that particular soul, we are left with an almost endless array of soles.

Nothing was the same after January 26, 2020. The unexpectedness of Kobe’s demise, its jolt to the sense, ripped a hole in the fabric of space time and in us all. But what if instead of considering this void as a singularity, we pondered its multiplicity? Asked better, how does the agony of realizing and accepting Kobe is gone and standing in the soles of Kobes as mournful act interrogate the pleasurable accumulation and dispossession of Blackness? And finally, how does loving sneakers, both the hunt and the commodity, set forth a cartography of pleasure and profit predicated on the obliterated existence of the Negro? After negation, only *stock* remains, just as after life, there is only Black. In peculiar unity, the unmistakability of both Blackness and sneakers, their explicit “being-this-one” (*Jediesheit*) coheres around their submission to space and time (*Zeitraum*) – the ways in which sneakers live held in time (dead *stocked*) and Black bodies are born dead in the hold.^{cdxxiv} *Stock*, then, realizes how Blackness in sentient death, as matter, enlivens an intervening interpretation of materiality, commodity, and objectivity that provokes antihumanist understanding of vitality and phenomenal existence. As foil and sibling to the previous section, here, I argue matter’s nonlife conjures and animates the specific nature of its vitality. The very fact of its deadness, that is, the ways it can be cracked, rattled, and tangled, come to define its heterogenous motility. As Bennett correctly claims, “there is no point of pure stillness, no indivisible atom that is not itself a quiver with vital force.”^{cdxxv} Linking the Black (after)life, with its immanent pathology, to the vital nonlife of matter does not construct metaphor. Rather, through its invisibility and multiplicity, the Black body inks the lines of distinction between matter and Man, offering an essential critique to the discourse on matter and materiality.

Unspooling all this first requires an etymological interrogation of the word stock. First, stock denotes the genetic milieu from which our traits manifest. It is a soup of possibility that links then to now and us to (an ancestral) them. But for the Negro, stock functions as biological transcription where “age-old questions...of the tenuous but nevertheless inseparable links between politics and life, politics and the power to kill, power and the thousands of ways in which to kill or enable people to live, or at least survive” play out and are laid out as carvings on living flesh.^{cdxxvi} More than anything else, though, stock presents Blackness as biology always being at the mercy of and potentiated by an insatiable desire for accumulation and profit. Put another way, since “African workers had been transmuted by the perverted canons of mercantile capitalism into property,” to the capitalist, even the smallest (Black) cell – a genetic marker of servitude and commodification – finds vitality as an always available and potentially limitless fungible token. As such, any assumed innocence of aphorisms like “He/She/They come from good stock,” must be enunciated in the voice, grammar, and timbre of Jimmy “The Greek” Snyder, disgraced CBS sports commentator:

The black is a better athlete to begin with, because he's been bred to be that way. Because of his high thighs and big thighs that go up into his back. They can jump higher and run faster because of their bigger thighs. And he's bred to be the better athlete because this goes back all the way to the Civil War, when, during the slave trading, the big, the owner, the slave

owner would breed his big black to his big woman so that he could have a big black kid, see. That's where it all started!^{cdxxvii}

While despicable, Snyder's words do establish slavery as the atomic unit of the modern world and its flows of capital. Dorothy Roberts in *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, quotes Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner as saying, "Too well I know the vitality of slavery with its infinite capacity of propagation."^{cdxxviii} Thomas Jefferson also mused about this vitality of genitalia, "I consider a woman who brings a child every two years as more profitable than the best man on the farm."^{cdxxix} Jefferson's comments are particularly interesting given his documented sexual proclivity for Black women. For Jefferson and countless other slavers, slavery's infinite capacity for propagation paired nicely with rape as veneration. That is, the Black woman as sex slave/toy materialized an "endless excitement...drawing human bodies to apparently dead things."^{cdxxx} Also, in interrogating the thingified (*Das Vorhandene*) material vitality of Blackness, we must never omit how the Black woman's womb stand in raveled truths of plantocratic logics of ownership, pleasure, and pleasurable ownership.

Reading Sumner and Jefferson's words through Bennett's proposed ethics of vital materialism constructs a web of vitality where the Black women's womb functions as infinitely productive and imagines our present of 3D printers and bespoke fabrication. Vital materialism, writes Bennett, "sets up a kind of safety net for those humans who are now...routinely made to suffer because they do not confirm to a particular (Euro-American...[read: white]) model of personhood...[that] can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin"^{cdxxxi} For Bennett, vital materiality offers a way of distributing humanity to those unfortunate soul who would find themselves at the sharp end of dehumanization. However, that same sense of vitality, for the slaver – which predates Bennett by a few centuries – defines humanity through the genealogical and genetic negation, brutalization, and amputation of the Black. And for the slave, the displacement of name and land happens through assembly lines built out of wombs and penises and used for the fabrication of bodies, neither men nor women, just dead *stock* enlivened in a quantifiable Lazarus pit of counting and accounting. "Vital materiality captures an 'alien' quality... of flesh."^{cdxxxii} Bennett, here, discusses how human flesh is an ecological proposition of bacteria, skin cells, and debris. She seems to establish humanity as the site where the eternal and invisible biological processes of life. Moreover, this ascribed alienness of the flesh, if Bennett had her way, does little to challenge how the confinement of corporeal embodiment snatches the privilege of humanity from bodies and conjures alienness as an unknowable psychic interiority. Instead, I see the flesh as a structuring antecedent wherein certain bodies are registered to an all-knowing and always fixed ledger of wounding. In this sense, scars, lacerations, and bullet holes schematize an assumed and naturalized classification of not life but death as life. Being, then, for all those bodies made Black, is impossible when the conceptual protectorate of humanity always assumes alienness not in the context of trespass or the subject of science fiction but as summoning the silhouette as a shadowy realm of nothingness (Africa) for which corporeal capital (the Black) is always at hand.

I use Sumner and Jefferson *qua* Roberts to establish how the plantation as both laboratory and factory founds "the New World enterprise" of capitalism.^{cdxxxiii} Likewise, this etymology of stock classifies Black men as being "prime stock" and "stockmen...used like animals to sire chattel for their masters," a specification that naturalizes, among other things, the proposition of capital as pathology or stock as both genetics and genesis.^{cdxxxiv} And for Black women, all those raided wombs appoint neonatology as R&D and obstetrics as manufacturing. Going further, a slave's out-of-*stock*-

ness claims gestation as forecasting the presumed limitless access to things governing our modern, Amazon-tinged consumptive practice. Here, waiting, either for a thing's arrival or *restock*, is mere nuisance. "Controlling childbearing," as Roberts explains, "reproduced slavery both literally and metaphysically. [It]... *restocked* the enslaved workforce," which segues nicely into our second definition of stock.^{cdxxxv} The term describes the plurality of accumulation and supply. Whether on shelves, in portfolios, or on slave ships, stock can always be stored and, most importantly, stacked. This stacked plurality, the ways in which bodies, objects, and bodies as objects are gathered for potential profit, interrogate how "the development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued racial directions... as a material force" – what Cedric Robinson calls "racial capitalism."^{cdxxxvi} Inherent to this definition is the infinitive – "to stock" – which describes the act of furnishing or inventory. For our purposes, inventory supposes the Middle Passage as a "massifying practice," that dissolves personhood through a precise multiplication of self/ves – the opposite of the indivisible I/one.^{cdxxxvii} Transaction and trade exist as original scopic regime for the Black. That is, credits and debit, profit and loss saw, as initiating vision, the providential opportunity (*annuit coeptis*) of Blackness within the African. I use "opportunity" as being "from the Latin *ob-*, meaning 'toward,' and *portu(m)*, meaning 'port.'^{cdxxxviii} Just underneath this denotation of stock is the more sinister claim of death not being bound necessarily to loss but forecasting the actuarial and transnational capitalist modernity of today. More clearly, death does not and will never negate profit; instead, death subsidizes it. "Killability, that throwing overboard" writes Christina Sharpe, "brutally converted an uninsurable loss (general mortality) into general average loss, a sacrifice of parts of a cargo for the benefit of the whole."^{cdxxxix} It is with matter-of-factness I claim the slave as stackable inventory. "Lost cargo," as inconspicuous mark on a ledger – in the case of the *Zong* – redacts mass killing as financial protection and admits – with frustrating resignation – the Negro's perpetual stocked condition and conditioning.^{cdxl} I say again – transaction and trade exist as original scopic regime for the Black: "American slavery as a *subsystem* of world capitalism...and its imprints continue to be *systemic*."^{cdxli} Moreover, the plantation-based logics of human *stock* operates as nothing less than state-sanctioned loss prevention, mattering the Black body as potent apparatus of its own surveillance. By this I mean everything from height, weight, gender, and bodily impairment, for "start-ups in slave catching" and selling, inventory and distinguish the Black body as commodity.^{cdxlii} The scars suffered from the slavers' heated iron and cracking whips served as RFID chips where the wails of pained bodies became frequencies of identification. Transcending mere markers of old wounds, they exist as barcodes made legible through a regime of tracking and surveillance.

Finally, stock characterizes all those lifeless, vacuous, and *dumb* objects, an especially damning proposition considering our over-technologized reality of robotics, algorithms, and AI. Though our current reality summons fantasies and nightmares of automation and a post-labor utopia, Neda Antanasoski and Kalindi Vora argue in their book, *Surrogate Humanity: Race, Robots, and the Politics of Technological Futures*, these fictions assuredly "depend upon slavery and the idea of a worker who cannot rebel and are contiguous with existing labor exploitation along colonial/racial lines."^{cdxliii} The scholars claim the cosmopolitan status quo of highly developed technologies in which we live imagines narratives of economic freedom and peril based on robots and AI being a surrogate for human labor. In other words, the magic of technology, evoked with a singular focus on innovation and advancement – those nifty little ways technology always seems to do the things we don't think need doing – diffuses the very traditional human "investments in racial unfreedom" onto and across machines built to tirelessly work.^{cdxliv} Unequivocally, the authors assert "technology is a racial category," and I take their thesis a step further, adding the history of the Negro is one of technological and economic innovations of labor, shipping, and inventory.^{cdxlv} For our purposes, though, Antanasoski and Vora's surrogate humanity conceptualizes how the slave's agential

transparency of unfreedom and emptiness charts the colloquial and material origins of technology as “bodies meant for use and toil [that are] without a soul and easily exploitable.”^{cdxlvii} Even the word “robot” finds its etymological roots in the Czech word for slave.^{cdxlviii}

With sneakers, specifically, our desire to find or see a more elusive and possibly more significant meaning beyond their technological presence clears out any chance for objectivity to the point of transparency. Conversations of culture and fashion, because of stock’s inherent emptiness, look through and not at a thing. As Bill Brown asserts, “Things can only be ‘represented by emptiness, precisely because it cannot be represented by anything else.’”^{cdxlix} My goal is to glimpse the thing itself or, more precisely and in line with Foucault, treat the sneaker, in this case, not as a document, “a sign for something else, an element that ought to be transparent.” However, doing this must align a thing’s representative emptiness/transparency with Black abjection/opacity, which I offer as a heuristic and dialectic for instigating the afterlife lived in, as, and through negation.^{cdxli} If Brown is correct in his assertion of a thing’s representative emptiness, then, I argue there is objective power in holding space for a thing’s transparency *a la* film *stock*. What if, instead of meaning, we attempted to fill a thing with its own thinginess, to feel step into its cavernousness? For most, things are lenses by which one can anchor themselves in the world; it is the interpretation and decoding of facts – the attention we pay – that fills a thing with meaning. And yet, “a *thing* can hardly function as a window”^{cdli} The work of differentiating transparency and windows is a shifty endeavor, indeed. The window frames (*haha) what Scott Bukatman names a “hyperbole of the visible,” the excess of sensation gleaned from “often overwhelming scale, and a mimesis of the natural... [where] spectacle [is] a simulacrum of reality.”^{cdlii} But also, the window raises notions of human embodiment. Seeing or experiencing what is new and different – that is seeing as the voyeur as opposed to the citizen – came to define historical progress. Movement in space equated to forward movement through history. Bodies were mapped onto the interface or rather became the interface through which vision occurred. Seeing the world behind a window became the language of embodied experience – the eyes became windows.^{cdliii} The power of the windows, then, and also the power of panoramas, is phenomenological – in removing the haptic, “the visual would become a hyperbolically self-sufficient source of knowledge and information for the general public as well as the scientist and, second, a significant set of entertainments would recall the body into a pleasurable ersatz existence.”^{cdliiii} As being not quite within and on the precipice of without, I would like to, if for just a moment, straddle the ephemeral in-betweenness, that windows structure. Transparency, for me at least, governs the stability of perceptible sameness within an object. Perception of that which is transparent is an act (used loosely) of temporal multitudes, a collision of pasts, presents, and imaginaries – a (re)collection.

I return, now, to that anecdote of me *just looking* in the sneaker store. My intention is to center the ways in which stock exists in the background and as a background. “The background would be understood as that which must take place in order for something to arrive,” describes Sara Ahmed. “We can also think of the background as having a temporal dimension... This meaning of ‘background’ would be about ‘what is behind,’ where ‘what is behind’ refers to what is in the past or what happened before.”^{cdliv} Staring teary-eyed at that fungible memorial of Kobes unintentionally brought the background to the fore. That moment, for the employees who labored, the customer who purchased, and me, offered stock not as lifeless objects but as objects vitalized with the mournful and profitable power of death. To Ahmed’s question of “What is behind,” I offer January 26th as behind. The Black Mamba as behind. Death as behind. The prior section stakes Black social death and psychic fracture as being “behind” Kobe and Kobes. What follows, then, outlines a disentanglement (unlacing) of commodity where our vantage from the knot’s fuzzy and unruly core

brings forth not as individuated strands but intricate and always connected “pasts and futures, past-futures and future-pasts” of *stocked* conditioning.^{cdlv} Inherent to this proposition is the impossible idea of time travel. Emphatically, history is not a time machine nor is time linear, and as such, the arduous work of descent – “going back in time...and inside the machine” – exists as constellations in the night sky: imagined lines framing images that were never there but upon seeing, are always there.^{cdlvi} *Stock*, then, promotes an intentionally imaginative counter-history of commodity whereby the medium specific narrative of sneakers declares a textual understanding of meaning, yes, but also a parallel and equally important strand of processual operations; market fluctuations; and materials, which most assuredly include the Black body in its number.



Figure 3.7 Miles Lomas Instagram Post



Figure 3.8 Vanessa Bryant Instagram Post

To do this, I offer this story of a single pair of shoes' controversial life. On June 3, 2021, Miles Lomas, British sneaker collector, posted a picture of a black and white pair of Kobe VI Protros on Instagram with the caption, "Infinity Gauntlet complete."^{cdlvii}

protro [/proh-troh/]: (noun); a model shoe within Nike's signature line of Kobe Bryant basketball shoe; a combinative term coined by Bryant referring to performance at a *professional* level and *retro* style

Khris Middleton, NBA guard for the Milwaukee Bucks, was also seen wearing the shoes during a game. This specific pair of sample shoes was known as the MAMBACITA (Mamba Forever) Kobe 6.

sample [/sam-puhl/]: (noun); an iteration of a particular shoe that has yet not been released to the public, possibly an early shoe that is going to release in the future or a unique shoe that is never going to be released to the public, extremely rare, often procured through tenuous means, and usually the prize of any sneaker collection

The MAMBACITA Kobe 6's is a posthumous design, and, in large part, exists thanks to Vanessa Bryant's, Kobe Bryant's widow and Gianna Bryant's mother, efforts to memorialize the world's loss alongside her own in the form and function of a basketball shoe. The shoe honors player and daughter with personalized design elements: the black and white honor GiGi's basketball team uniform; the number two, GiGi's number, is stitched on the side in gold; the heel counter features "Kobe" and "GiGi" on opposite shoes; and, maybe most notably, the Bryant estate owned Mamba "M" logo. Lomas, when interviewed about how the shoes came into his possession, stated:

I didn't win the Footpatrol raffle. Somebody won the Footpatrol raffle, and I saw people posting about it in UK buying and selling groups. I paid [around \$600 USD, a 233% markup from its retail price of \$180] three weeks ago [for] my pair... Obviously, when Gigi's name is on it, and the fact that Vanessa owns all the trademarks for the logo on the back, *I thought something wasn't right. I thought, 'I better buy a pair.'*^{cdlviii}

In her own Instagram post, in response to Lomas' claimed treasure and, more generally, the shoe's existence outside of Nike's supervision, Bryant described the shoe as being "NOT approved for sale." Going further, the widow writes:

I did not re-sign the Nike contract and decided not to sell these shoes. [*The MAMBACITA shoes were not approved to be made in the first place*]. Nike has NOT sent any of these pairs to me and my girls. I do not know how someone else has their hands on shoes I designed in honor of my daughter, Gigi and we don't. I hope these shoes did not get sold.^{cdlix}

Vanessa Bryant let Kobe Bryant's contract expire with the shoe company on April 13, 2021.^{cdlx} "The shoe's coding label includes an '11/11/20 - 01/30/21' production run timeline at a Nike factory in Vietnam."^{cdlxi} These competing claims of manufacture, one from Vanessa Bryant and the other from the shoe's coding label, and Bryant's expired contract portends a controversial ontology whereby these sneakers are dead stock.

dead stock [/ded-stok/]: (noun); obsolete or out-of-fashion inventory that negatively effects a business's bottom line.

Disavowed by Vanessa Bryant in her Instagram post and, as executor of the Bryant estate, her refusal of a contract extension, these shoes, now, materialize a profit impossibility for Nike. After Vanessa Bryant's Instagram post, secondary retail marketplaces like Stock X, ebay, GOAT, and Flight Club have removed the lot from their websites. It is unclear whether this decision was a response to public outcry or an act of general decency. However, despite being out-of-stock on these websites, the shoes are still available for purchase...somewhere – that is, if the price is right (before their removal on Stock X, the shoes were listed at \$7,000, which would mean Lomas' \$600 investment would have increased 1067%) and the connections are strong.^{cdlxii} An important detail of the MAMBACITA story is that Footpatrol mistakenly sold, setting off a chain reaction of secondhand transactions ending with Lomas.

The confusion around the potential release of the shoes stems from a variety of calendar quirks surrounding the footwear manufacturer's timeline, detailed contract clauses heading into the expiration window and a crucial shipping error both to and from a UK-based official Nike retailer. The shoes were in fact not officially released as Nike does not plan to do so until a new agreement is reached with Vanessa and the Kobe Bryant Estate.^{cdlxiii}

Once the retailer realized their error, they sent out this message to their customers:

We regret to inform you that due to unforeseen circumstances, an error was made on your order for the Nike Kobe VI Protro, causing an incorrect item to be shipped to you.

If you wish to return the item, please feel free to do so free of charge via the returns label found in your parcel.

Please accept our apologies, Thanks

TEAM FP.^{cdlxiv}

Nike and Footpatrol's bungling of logistics contravene the thinking of Bennett. No constancy of consumption underwrites their value. Instead, a petrified understanding of storage imbues value through mummification. Though ownership of these sneakers may transfer through a robust and lucrative alternative marketplace, these shoes will lead a singular existence entombed in their original shoebox and packaging, hieroglyphs of material pageantry. They are now and forever deadstock.

deadstock [/ded-stok/]: (noun, abbrev-DS); discontinued line of unused, vintage product, most associated with sneakers, that are no longer available on the market but still have their original packaging and tags; brand new, never worn; not to be confused with but related to “dead stock.”

I offer this story neither to castigate Miles Lomas' ill-gotten gains nor to support Vanessa Bryant. Instead, as a theoretical jumping off point, this pair of shoes, to my mind, render personal devastation and intimacy through objectification. My use of intimacy converges two distinct meanings. First, intimacy represents the power of emotional contact and closeness – the ways we touch and are touched by people and things. Grief, then, is both a filling and a feeling. It fills the void left in the wake. Also, as the heart's phantom limb, through grief, we feel closeness “in spite of an apparent absence of contact with another.”^{cdlxv} Grant Bollmer offers this provocative claim:

“Intimacy is unbearable.”^{cdlxvi} The author describes how intimacy often overwhelms, how we squirm and moan and cum under its weight. In this sense, intimacy is anchor, constantly pulling us under while keeping our feet on the ground. With intimacy, the cruelty is the point. Here, I’m following the thinking and writing of the late Lauren Berlant:

What’s cruel about these attachments... is that the subjects who have x in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object/scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the content of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides... what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world.^{cdlxvii}

No matter how fleeting or irrational, the fear of losing intimacy stems from the latent nightmare once it’s gone, all hope will follow in its footsteps. Intimacy, though, is also *unburiable*, haunting everything and anything, being everywhere and nowhere. The song on the radio whispering stories of forgotten lovers. One summer night, long ago, ruined Anita Baker’s “Angel” for me. A loved one’s favorite sweatshirt. The smell of cookies. Rain. Ghost stories, one and all.

Second, intimacy describes the proximal location of being next to skin. In this sense, the term often describes women’s negligée and, as such, serves as a proxy for sexual encounters. Picture the cliched bedroom scene with underwear strewn across the floor or the pin-up model posing in lingerie. The first, is an indication of sex, and the second, a presumed sexual availability and desire. But in both, *intimates* are a proxy for sex. I use intimacy as a way to conceptualize the Kobe 6 MAMBACITA (Mamba Forever) as *unburiable proxy* where, to Vanessa Bryant, vulcanized rubber stands in for the incalculable loss of a husband and daughter, and to salivating sneakerheads like Miles Lomas, the opportunity to stand in the athletic legacy of the Black Mamba, for a price. Intimacy locates subjectivity within the affective attachments of the good life – a life made powerful only through surplus amounts of money where anything and everything is for sell, including flesh. Intimacy intoxicates our imaginations and desire of an ordinary life; it pops the American Dream as opioid. Berlant describes the good life as the “conditions of attrition or the wearing out of the subject.”^{cdlxviii} I’d like to, for the moment, inverse this sentiment to ask how the predicate of pleasure in the good life wears out of Blackness. Going further, then, if Black flesh indeed diminishes as a commodity with every use and civilization extracts Black flesh to sustain this supposed good life, the never-ending and perpetually renewable character of Blackness, which, now, is assumed innate, innovates the practice of stocking where suffering achieves sustainability. The MAMBACITA shoes, most likely, will never be worn. Instead, they will exist in the personal museum/showroom/salesfloor of Lomas and other fortunate collectors. Their stasis enforces a truth of commodity that “consumption promises satisfaction in substitution and then denies it because all objects are rest stops amid the process of remaining unsatisfied that counts for being alive under capitalism.”^{cdlxix} Furthermore, these shoes approximate not just the public’s desire to possess a perfectly knowable body. Rather, Mamba Forever, as a pair of shoes and eulogy, materializes eternal capture for the corpses of Kobe and Gianna Bryant within a hyper globalized, material culture. And yet, as casket and being *deadstock*, these shoes demonstrate the already deadness of Black flesh, which has always been a safe deposit box for personal pleasure, institutional memory, and ghoulish nightmares.

Standing in is the cultural and material work of standardization.^{cdlxx} If the last section theorized how the Black Mamba is an act of psychic fracture and symptom of social death, this section develops the Black Mamba and all its material iterations as stand ins for Kobe Bryant, the

man – even in death, especially in death. Better put, we could never have Kobe, he made that impossible, but we could, however, access the Mamba. In fact, the Mamba’s essential purpose is servicing the public’s incessant desire of access. This publicness of the Black Mamba finds, in part, its origins in ideations of traditional film celebrity. Richard Dyer in his seminal work *Stars* writes, “Stars are images in media texts, and as such are products...to be seen in terms of their function in the economy... including, crucially, their role in the manipulation of [the] market, the audience.”^{cdlxxi} The author’s work considers the celebrity of the film star within the industry of Hollywood, and, as an intervention into film studies, the consequences of considering stars as being essential, maybe even more so than the filmic texts they exist within, to Hollywood as a market. Despite the resonance of his work with my own, there are limits to his theorization of the film star and my own excavation of the Black Mamba. For Dyer, “[Stars] appear to be meaningful but are in fact empty of meaning. Thus, a star is well-known for her/his well-knownness, and not for any talent or specific quality.”^{cdlxxii} This is not the case for athletic stars. Instead, countable and witnessed achievement roots their celebrity; Athletic greatness is a matter of verifiable and indisputable record. Validating athletic achievement, in most cases, only requires the watching of games and/or highlights. And even in those cases that predate filmic video evidence, at the very least, an interested party could read the box scores. In fact, the sports statistic is essential technology for translating athletic greatness to the masses. Said better, one could argue the sports industry has always been a showcase of data as opposed to mere performance. Consider, for instance, Olympic track and field, do those races matter, is the distinction of World’s Fastest even possible without a clock? The only way for the public to truly apprehend comprehend the spectacle of sports is through media generation and the datafied knowledge it elicits. As athletes continue to become stronger and faster, to perform more dynamic movements with ease and grace, our eyes cannot capture the moment-to-moment phenomenon of sports; it needs precision technical/visual rendering and scientific/mathematical technologies to compose a definitive, standardized, and programmable reference point.

The on-court ferociousness of the Black Mamba, now and forever, is a “*thing* that must be calculated...even as it demands to be thought, as if in a vacuum.”^{cdlxxiii} Dyer was right to call stars products, however, the content of the sports star is singularly corporeal, and for the Black athlete and Kobe Bryant, specifically, the excesses of flesh – how, through the long, gestational death of suffering, the Black body is already assumed empty – flattens any possibility of multi-dimensionality. Jimmy “The Greek” Snyder spoke of the Negro’s physical immanence as an act of stocking genetic traits catapulting the Black body to the tail end of the evolutionary bell curve. But also, underneath the *stock* physicality inherent to blackness lies a history of stackable bodies, something Snyder readily admits. Their athletic greatness, while singular, typifies all assumptions about Black bodies, great and ordinary, as being fantastic creatures ripe for harvest. That is, in every Black body, at any time, could lie a Black Mamba. Therefore, the Black Mamba, as brand – merely another evaluating data point – corporatizes and commodifies how Kobe is not a man at all, but a being, as Mbembe describes, containing “a certain degree of... animal possibility [and] a foreign body in our world.”^{cdlxxiv} In Kobe, as fleshed predisposition, as in us all, the Mamba was always lurking. For, “he [was] inhabited... by the animal.”^{cdlxxv} The ways in which the Black body is indeed and always an alien perpetually confounding and threatening the ratio of Man (I/one) and the social body of civilization foils Bennett’s earlier implementation of alienness. To be as the aliens is to be in the stars and of the celestial, always a looming and imagined threat to that which is on the ground. Hiding amid the darkness, between the drops of starlight and above us all, the Black expresses the creeping sensation of night in the skin: horror as hue, death in flesh. However, inherent to this opacity is legibility and verticality. I interpret legibility as being intensely vertical, as in having proximity to the ledge (first to be tossed, first to be hung). And so, the Negro as imprisoned in a silhouette of ash and shadow, on

the ledge of life and death, orients legibility (the read-, scan-, and *stock*ability of man-made things and a man *made* thing) as the Black's factory settings of extractable foreignness.

Dylan Mulvin's *Proxies: The Cultural Work of Standing In* argues that proxies exist within a doubled fantasy where objects and bodies can "become without becoming."^{cdlxxvi} This almost becoming or not quite becoming, depending on your perspective, asks an essential question regarding the proxy's function: "to whom or to what do we delegate the power of representing the world?"^{cdlxxvii} In this way, proxies are eternally bound to the pleasures of possession. As of today, 51 pairs of the Kobe 6 Mamba Forever have been sold on Stock X, "a live marketplace," where even empathy and sympathy, for Black life, is a fungible experience. Pleasure, a largely white construct, and possession, the material property relations of the Black body as chattel, embalm the body of Kobe Bean Bryant in leather and laces. Saidya Hartman writes, "the desire to don, occupy, or possess Blackness or the Black Body as a sentimental resource and/or locus of excess enjoyment is both founded upon and enabled by the material relations of chattel slavery."^{cdlxxviii} Letting go of Kobe, in death, marks the limits of white possession, but for whiteness, possession is indeed a superpower. Lomas said of his transaction, "*I thought, 'I better buy a pair.'*" Ownership, in fact and absolutely, is a boundless compulsion. And as such, the Black cadaver, as a "body of memory" in which the past is invoked as an intentional discontinuity, reimagines the ending potential of death as being a portal to more exhaustive nonhumanity far beyond the ability of the slave. Becoming human stock requires only death. Death, here, is less killing the man but killing the very prospect of manhood. Bodies are standardized when granted death, and, inevitably, taken for granted, as such forgetfulness as "the suspension of disbelief" must compartmentalize truth within a universally legible and accessible regime of storytelling, meaning making, and objectification.^{cdlxxix} In each pair of Kobes, we need not behold their true spectacle as severed limbs; instead, they, literally, take his body for granted, not as main line truth, but as an expensive offering from Nike. Put another way, these Kobes take for granted that empire has always and forever "enshrined defilement upon defeated populations" to stand on and in – especially in – death.



Figure 3.9 Kobe 10 "Pain" (2015)

The Mamba once said in what has become an oft-clichéd Mamba-ism, "Pain doesn't tell you when you ought to stop. Pain is the little voice in your head that tries to hold you back because it knows if you continue you will change. Don't let it stop you from being who you can be."^{cdlxxx} For him, pain is powerful motivator, but it is also a proxy. And yet, so too is the distinction of human.

The human of Humanism is neither an ideal nor an objective statistical average or middle ground. It rather spells out a systematized standard of recognizability – of Sameness – by which all others can be assessed, regulated and allotted to a designated social location. The human is a normative convention, which does not make it inherently negative, just highly regulatory and hence instrumental to practices of exclusion and discrimination. The human norm stands for normality, normalcy and normativity. It functions by transposing a specific mode of being human into a generalized standard, which acquires transcendent values as the human: from male to masculine and onto human as the universalized format of humanity. This standard is posited as categorically and qualitatively distinct from the sexualized, racialized, naturalized others and also in opposition to the technological artefact. The human is a historical construct that became a social convention about ‘human nature.’^{cdlxxxii}

Humanity has always been about relationality, about establishing a horizon line for which all people can come to understand themselves and their place in the world. In this sense, humanity performs the work of allowing individuality, yes, but also and more specifically, it allows constantly fluctuating permutations of allowable difference. To that end, considering humanity a proxy also requires the acknowledgment of its intelligent permeability of inclusion and exclusion. Think, here, of Da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man: in the polymath’s sketch, with its proportionate idealism of naturality and Reason, Man as mathematical perfection emerges where He is rendered less as an individual as opposed to being indivisible. Said better, the quintessence of humanity – the innate *is*-ness defining the human subject – reproduces power and life as a representation of embodied content beyond anatomy. The body and its biological limits, then, are thresholds where the fundamental and necessary enterprise of humanity is to transcend. Seductive hums of freedom, democracy, and dignity, all galvanize and coalesce this once fractious caucus of tribes into a singularly nameable heuristic of identity, sociality, and cultural consciousness. In other words, it is through humanity alone people sense their fellow man as inherently equal, good, and worthy. Moreover, suffering becomes transformed into a sensual ethics of progress. Rosi Braidotti writes, “Progressive thinkers are just as human as others, only considerably more mortal.”^{cdlxxxiii} The human ability to feel the vulnerability of others through a universalized affectivity of suffering makes relatable the unsettling truth we all, one day, could be victims. Obviously, this isn’t without its limits: the suffering of women, queer and trans folks, people from the Global South and East, poor people, and countless other groups in between seem to, very often, confound the human ability to empathize. Despite this, the distinction of human is unparalleled in its ability to unify. As such, the suffering described in Kobe’s quote on pain is undoubtedly human. It offers up his own suffering as a motivational proxy of encouragement. His pain well could be polyphonic cascade of castigating voices scolding him during and after his Colorado court case. But most likely, in this context pain is – well – pain. In 2014, the *Orange County Register* created an infographic chronicling the injuries that kept him off the court up to that point in his career. “Kobe has missed 112 games due to injury,” which is roughly a season and a half of NBA basketball, reports the *Register*.^{cdlxxxiiii} However, instead of diminishing his legacy, the article and infographic renders him as the proverbial ironman and eulogizes his ability to just stay on the court – as of today he is fourth all time in durability, logging 57,278 minutes played.^{cdlxxxv}

Kobe’s quote and the infographic, albeit differently, standardize and universalize his pain. The quote describes an aphoristic workman’s ethos of body: no pain, no gain. The infographic assumes an inveterate character to pain – that his body is special because of its ability to hold up. Here, the irony is Kobe is not human. Humans are white, and humans are men. Kobe is Black. Humanity, intentionally and carefully, was constructed to exclude him and his forebearers, at every turn, while including (almost) everyone else. Instead of an ironman, he is, as Mbembe argues, the

Black “man-of-metal...key to the constitution of modern capitalism.”^{cdlxxxv} The metallic nature of Kobe’s flesh imagines corporeal transformation happening to satiate capitalist growth. His “flesh turned metal” is the rebar scaffolding humanity. As Wilderson claims, “The race of Humanism could not have produced itself without the simultaneous production of the walking destruction which became known as the Black.”^{cdlxxxvi} Kobe’s Blackness, down to the last drop of blood, welds his flesh to a cartography of generational transactions and inheritance. In this sense, pain inks the ledger where objectification and ownership preclude any chance of humanity, of relationality, of feeling. Pain, for the Black body, overfills its bottomless void. Excess disavows the collective affectivity of human suffering. The slow drip of waves crashing onto slave ships harden the body through calcification, making his pain impenetrable. Endurance, for Kobe and us all, is standard feature of disposable bodies. “Pain needs media,” writes Mulvin, it needs to be “materialized and tethered to a shared understanding of embodied experience.”^{cdlxxxvii} In the summer of 2015, Nike released the Kobe 10 Pain, paying homage to Kobe’s pain and suffering, particularly him missing most of the 2013-2014 season due to a fractured knee. Instead of thinking through these shoes as a reification of the Mamba’s enduring legacy of pain tolerance, I ask, what if they fabricate the age-old eugenicist trope of the Black having thicker skin – “that Black bodies are naturally built [(a la Jimmy “The Greek” Snyder)] to withstand structural and literal abuse.”^{cdlxxxviii} Kobe cannot speak to his own suffering in death, and his words, in life, promote an understanding of pain always obsequent to the machinations of capitalists. These shoes allow its wearers or collectors to stand in how not Black suffering offer no witnesses or testimony but how it offers no sensation. “The fantastical capacity ascribed to Black bodies to withstand pain is dehumanizing twice over: they categorize a racialized body as superhuman (abnormal) while materially narrowing the options for remedying the actual harm that is suffered.”^{cdlxxxix} Earlier, I stated possession is a superpower of whiteness; this manifests as the ability to own that which is inexpressible – pain. For the MAMBACITA’s, we can own pain as intimacy: Kobe’s last moments clutching his daughter as they crashed to their deaths and the screams of his grieving widow. With the Kobe Pain’s, we can own his suffering. All parts of the Black body, even sensation, are up for grabs to the highest bidder. If the marketplace of professional sports standardizes a racial corporeality of hyper-able bodies, sneakers, then, as proxies of racial fantasies, of the *kolossos*, materialize the intimate, valuable, and emotionally resonant hold Black dehumanization has on how we understand capital. In other words, Kobe has become, in death, and maybe he always was, the “man-merchandise.”^{cdxc}

afterlife.

[Death] is the most luxurious form of life, that is, of effusion and exuberance: a power of proliferation... Death is... the very principle of excess – an *anti-economy*. Hence the metaphor of luxury and *the luxurious character of death*.

—Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*



Figure 3.10 PJ Tucker's Virgil Abloh Tribute Air Jordan 5s

Though thousands of the MAMBACITAs have already been produced, these shoes are now on hold, dead to the possibility of profit, and “in the hold,” as Christina Sharpe describes, where even in the afterlife “compulsions of capital [manifest the] always-possible deaths” affixed to the Black existence.^{cdxci} With this in mind, the Kobe 6 Mamba Forever is suspended in the limbo between production and profit, as dead stock, sitting somewhere in a warehouse either in Oregon, at Nike Headquarters, or Vietnam, have been reset to their original factory settings of *Deadstock*.² They are also “unauthorized.”^{cdxcii} For those who capitalized on the snafu, including the customer who sold their shoes to Miles Lomas, unauthorization emerges as pure and perpetually growing profit. Profit, in this case, rests on a perfectly balanced lever of death: at one end is Kobe’s death, and at the other, the dead Nike deal. For Bryant, death activates a singular value multiplier, which also places his remains – the material wreckage he left behind – under legal contention. Before Kobe’s demise, reports suggest the star had become frustrated with Nike’s lackluster contract extension offered to him in retirement. More specifically, that it was “not in line with expectations of an ongoing ‘lifetime’ structure” similar to those held by Michael Jordan and LeBron James, the only two athletes to have sneaker deals structured as such.^{cdxciii} Lifetime contract structures along with a dual and dueling interpretation of death set forth a polarity where the terms of value for both Kobe Bryant and the MAMBACITA are solely defined through logics of bondage. His ultimate and unfilled desire for a lifetime deal with Nike, which like Jordan and James, would have easily been worth north of a billion dollars contextualizes a reality of immense profit being directly correlated to timed corporate exclusivity not measured in years or decades but life cycles. For the MAMBACITAs, however, deadstock distinguishes value through box proximity. That is, to be

² To the elation of Kobe Bryant fans, sneaker collectors, and, most notably, resellers, Vanessa Bryant renewed the Bryant estate’s relationship with Nike to make apparel in March 2022, and just over a month later, on April 29th in Los Angeles and on May 1st, Gianna Bryant’s birthday, via Nike’s SNKRS App the Kobe “Mambacita Sweet 16” released to the public. The proceeds of the shoe went to the Mamba and Mambacita Sports Foundation. At a retail price of \$180, on StockX, the shoe can go for anywhere from \$456 to \$2500.

deadstock, the shoes need to remain, now and forever, bound in branding. These binds of value, however, the lifetime shoe contract and the shoebox, present an interesting irony, one at the heart of this project, where we can interpret the convergence of Kobe's desire for a lifetime sneaker deal (profit), the MAMBACITA sneakers (stock), and Black Mamba (matter) with and through the heuristic of being deadstock. And so, thinking through "Mamba Forever," both as honorarium of an eternally enduring legacy *and* material object suspended within the eye of corporate and estate gamesmanship provokes a reading of Nike's eulogy as one of melancholy, yes, but also one of material positivism by which Nike shoes, more than anything else, are a constitutive animative force embalming Bryant's corpse.

Undoubtedly, Kobe had hopes and dreams outside of sneakers. He had the curiosity of an artist. He was a rapper, said without a hint of snark. He was also a writer and filmmaker who became the first African American to win an Academy Award for Best Animated Short film. Among his peers, Kobe was revered as an always available mentor. Most importantly, he was a dutiful youth basketball coach and proud #GirlDad. In fact, the hashtag's origins trace back to ESPN broadcaster Elle Duncan's mournful SportsCenter segment in the wake of Kobe's passing. She tells the story of her first and only meeting with Bryant, a conversation about the joyous highs and rewarding pains of parenting. Duncan asked Bryant about having more children. Kobe's response marshaled a clear-eyed sense of hope: "I would have five more girls if I could. I'm a girl dad."^{cdxciv} Dreams equally mark the certainty and possibility of life. As such, the Black Mamba's peculiar existence as corporeal deadstock did not and could not afford their luxury. Or better put, if an articulation of ~~his~~ its dreams is indeed possible, assuredly, the limits of possibility neatly enclose Black Mamba as corporeal generator of productive and profitable matter. Black Mamba, as moniker and identity, rattle the chains of natal excess defining the Black body.

Kobe died on a Sunday, and almost two years later, so did Virgil Abloh. When Bryant died, I wept, but for Virgil, I got fresh. To say my attachment to the late Louis Vuitton designer is only material assumes insult. On the contrary, for the Off-White designer, to my mind, the material singularly allegorizes his personhood. Whether through album covers, and he designed a great many; streetwear; luxury fashion; or sneakers, Virgil Abloh's life mattered in the ways his signature sharpie and quotation marks made stuff *matter*. For me, I see luxury in and as the supremacist imagination of the Black male body's history as property, pulverized meat, and popular entertainment."^{cdxcv} Abloh, in the high-end fashion world was seen as infiltrator, and, in this essay, I ask how Black existence being material infiltrates our understanding of objects and things. We were unaware of his cancer diagnosis and unaware of his suffering. And in his death, a pitiful valediction to stuff is all we can muster. "Death," though, in true Ablohian fashion, must be reconsidered. On November 29, 2021, PJ Tucker, sneaker legend and NBA player, wore a pair of Off-White Jordan 5s in his honor. Further honoring the designer, Tucker etched a message in silver sharpie on the shoes: "Thanks for a lifetime of inspiration. (L) Virgil will always be here. (R)" The primary interrogative of this chapter, this entire work, questions the how in Tucker's epitaph. The player's sharpie etched sneakers as memorial problematizes Black mortality while it honors a life thought gone to soon. Finally, and thinking through the post-mortem similarities between Bryant and Abloh, what are the material contexts of their presumed eternity, and why does their eternal afterlife always start in and as stuff?

hangtime melancholia.

The dunk brings together the seemingly disparate notions of stylish flight and tectonic logic (the slam). As a literal *jump* shot, the most banal offensive play in basketball, it exaggerates the jump until it becomes flight and the shot attempt until it seems guaranteed. The ideations of flight imparted onto the dunk cannot be understated. It most prominently exists as a product of suspension understood through the physics-defying notion of hangtime. With each dunker and dunk, time and space crease, and in its fold, players become legends and men become gods. Admittedly, gravity does appear as ball-and-chain, but at some point, between takeoff and landing, our minds forget, and for a second, maybe less, Newton's shackles are loosed. The dunk interrogates the potent fantasy of human potential. The dunk gave Michael *Air* and made LeBron *King*. For the sport of basketball, fancies of flight present a grammar for interpreting and narrating the sport's greatest performers and most unforgettable performances.

The mythic legend of Michael "Air" Jordan is what Michael Eric Dyson refers to as a "perform[ance] of self that is rife with the language of physical expressiveness: head moving, arms extending, hands waving, tongue wagging, and legs spreading... [and] the subversion of perceived limits...which centers around the space/time continuum."^{cdxcvi} "Hangtime," Dyson argues, "is the uncanny ability to remain suspended in midair...while executing a stunning array of basketball moves."^{cdxcvii} Michael's "Air" is the magic of assertive physical genius that "projected an aura of uniqueness around his craft."^{cdxcviii} Placing hangtime in religious terms, sports journalist Tony Kornheisser writes, "From a scientific standpoint...there can be no such thing as hangtime. But from a basketball standpoint...is there any doubt there is? Haven't we seen the three men we admire most, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost of Hang—Elgin Baylor, Julius Erving and Michael Jordan."^{cdxcix} Lingering underneath their prose, though, is a push to define hangtime as an ostensible production of Black bodies, an *enfleshed* psychedelic where seeing is no longer believing but believing, seeing. That jaw-slackening, unbelievability of hangtime, then, has little to do with the bending of physics or any aerial acrobatics. Hangtime catechizes the Black body's ability to defy physical reality. But what if the intense spectacle of Black physicality only marks an origin point for our visual register of hangtime? What if, as I believe, the seductive fantasy hangtime is a techno-visual process that happens to Black bodies where a photographic understanding of sight subsumes an ocular one? Then, we should read hangtime as being a technical rendering that makes apparent the subtle manipulation of film, a photographic eye/I subsumed in a (anti)Black imaginary, and the precise placement of cameras. Working together, but from different ends, photography revels in and produces the stillness of hangtime, literally hanging time, while videography with its manipulation of tape and slowing of time dangles the fantasy of flight before our very eyes. Within a dunker's trajectory appears a dense and carnal assemblage of man and visual media —of God-given talent sketched with photographic and surveillance technologies.³

The efforts to capture and render the dunk demands a consideration of hangtime as "ghosts and specters" in the machine of photography, some combination of technical production and a

³ Here, I am alluding to Jonathan Crary's *Techniques of the Observer* as he describes the transition in viewing from the camera obscura to photographic and filmic technologies.

centuries-old visual orientation to the vertical suspension of Black bodies.^d In other words, watching Black bodies *hang* is a foundational American visual spectacle. My language, here, is intentionally macabre and brings together what Roland Barthes calls the photograph's ability to "mortify" the body and Saidiya Hartman's notion of "the elusiveness of Black suffering...attributed to a racist optics in which Black flesh is itself identified as the source of opacity."^{di} Hangtime, then, should be considered as a *black* box that entomb its inner workings within the radiating aura of the Black athlete's body. Put another way, though we bear witness to Black bodies, the uneven vantage of an assumed white spectatorship and alternative histories of Black vertical suspension remain obscured in darkness. With this work, my goal is exposure, to reverse engineer the technical production of hangtime and provide a long view of processes and materialities of production that foreground the positionality of bodies (who were almost always black) and the men (often white) who documented the dunk's spectacle.

While not considering sneakers directly, seeks to unravel hangtime, the greatest fiction of sneakers and basketball. Whether its Nike's Air or Reebok's Pump, sneaker industry and culture has obsessed over the Black basketball player's ability to hang. This chapter contemplates hangtime as an unreported, melancholic endpoint of a particular photographic regime hyper focused on the levitating Black body. By this, I mean that dunk photographs exist *in the wake* of lynching photographs. Specifically, this work functions as a collage, an intentional heaping of images and narratives, asserting the consequences and possibilities of considering dunk and lynching photographs together. Likewise, this collage presents an opportunity to think through how dunk and lynching photography are not only objects of circulatory meanings but technical practices and material components integral to these rituals of Black vertical suspension. Shawn Michelle Smith describes how the photograph performs a dynamic like melancholia: "the photograph folds the past into the time of its viewing; it retains what is no longer present. This is the aspect of the photograph's temporality that so startled Barthes, its trenchant hold on a moment that is always already past, its embrace of a subject that is absent."^{dii} However, in her seminal treatise *In the Wake*, Christina Sharpe challenges the intractable sense of mourning attributed to melancholy with her theorization of wake work:

I have...suggested we think of the metaphor of the wake in the entirety of its meanings (the keeping watch with the dead, the path of a ship, a consequence of something, in the line of flight and/or sight, awakening and consciousness) and we join the wake with work in order that we might make the wake and *wake work* our analytic, we might continue to imagine new ways to live in the wake of slavery, in slavery's afterlives, to survive (and more) the afterlife of property. In short, I mean wake work to be a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives.^{diii}

Interrogating hangtime alongside Black social death, the Black ontological (or ante-ontological) position as property, and Black brutality organizes a visual dominion of photographic production where the spectacular pastime of hang is affixed to the American tradition of *hanging* Black bodies. Further, my use of "wake work" localizes an analytic of witnessing (not seeing) where to witness invokes its etymological roots of an attestation to fact from personal knowledge. This intentionally contrasts with wokeness, which despite its roots in authentic Black protest and righteous anger has become an almost meaningless calling card of neoliberal progressivism and right-wing insult. Wake work requires sitting with death as a fervent insistence of Black life and troubling the way we "come to terms with (which usually means to move past) ongoing and quotidian atrocity."^{div} Smith and Sharpe both frame my interpretation of melancholy and offer it up not as mourning for

sanctimony's sake but as a methodology pushing photography's status as "pure contingency," a visual object that "yields up 'details' which constitutes the raw material of ethnological knowledge."^{dv} In this context, the spirit of melancholia adheres to the function of photography in their shared ability to dissolve the primacy of linear histories for being in the moment with moments that are out of time, allowing access to "infra-knowledge [through a] collection of partial objects."^{dvi}

Next, my efforts center an indisputable truth of white spectatorship inherent to hangtime. Obviously not meaning that only whites can see hangtime, rather, by white spectatorship, I am referring to even the most empathetic spectator's role in "exploiting the vulnerability of the captive body as a vessel for the uses, thoughts, and feelings of others."^{dvii} Spectatorship is a transactional activity that emphasizes, in this case, the Black body's inherent fungibility. Furthermore, as Hartman explains, "the relation between [white] pleasure and the possession of the [Black] body, in both figurative and literal sense, can be explained in part by the fungibility of the slave—that is joy is made possible by virtue of the replaceability and interchangeability endemic to the commodity—and by the extensive capacities of property."^{dviii} Thus, dominion over Black bodies and the resulting enjoyment stages the white subject position. With lynching photographs, this becomes obvious. In her chapter, "The Evidence of Lynching Photographs," Smith writes that these images literally "illuminate the aftermath of a grotesque carnival."^{dx}

Making the photograph became part of the ritual, helping to objectify and dehumanize the victims and...increasing the hideous pleasure. Photographs were souvenirs of lynching, keepsakes that could be shown as proof that one was there. They expanded the dominion of lynching to those absent, extending the culturally diverse function of lynching beyond the purview of any particular mob so that both the threat of lynching and its flagrant proclamation of white supremacy could be seen and consumed by an ever more dispersed crowd...The photograph functions as an extension of...*Man's* commanding gesture, his demand to look. The image is made for the murderers, to represent their point of view.^{dx}

The author's description of the role of photography in lynchings speaks to how Allan Sekula posits the constituting sociality of photography. He argues that the photograph becomes an object where the palliative status of high culture becomes accessible to the working class: they can take pictures of themselves to foster social cohesion, experience a parade of moral exemplars, and mark criminal (or Othered) bodies to a wider citizenry of vigilante detectives. So, considering lynching photographs, a panopticon that begins with "cheaply affordable aesthetic pleasures and moral lessons [and] ends...with the photographic extension of that exemplary [and white supremacist] utilitarian social machine" is formed.^{dxii} For the sociality surrounding dunk photographs, we need look no further than how the vertical suspension of hangtime avails the Black athletic body to a seeming endless bevy of capitalist machinations. While (male) professional basketball players are paid well for their efforts, this does not dismiss the uneven market forces that contextualize their athletic performance. Moreover, most college basketball players will receive little to no financial benefit for their physical gifts, the distribution of wealth is even more stark. Through hangtime, Black bodies are availed to a capitalist regime where scavenging bodies for profit become best practice. To be clear, I am not making a 1:1 comparison of the violence and death demonstrated in lynching photographs and the uneven ownership stakes of Black athletic production. Instead, I am positioning hangtime as a kind of biopolitical animacy, "a specific kind of affective and material construct...shaped by race and sexuality, mapping various biopolitical realizations of animacy in the contemporary culture of the United States."^{dxiii} Also, I am neither attributing the murderous and brutal intent of lynching photographers and the thousands who attended these ghoulish events to the photojournalists and

fans who enjoy hangtime. Said better, I do not envision this work as a moralizing cudgel; my interests lie in the ways hanging Black bodies foment certain racialized logics and machinations of corporeal essentialism, capture and documentation, spectacle, and amusement. White enjoyment, in this way, particularizes “the parameters of racial relations” and discloses “the sentiments and expectations” of bondage.^{dxiii} If the noose is the material apparatus hoisting Black bodies in death to their proper vantage for maximized white enjoyment and spectatorship, almost an antithesis or a productive foil to our understanding of the platform, can we interpret the photojournalist’s camera as a shackle where at the end is a degraded reality of Black abjection where possession of property and fascination at “the antics of outrageous darkies” serve as an epistemological ground for imagination?^{dxiv} The vertical suspension of lynching puts to purpose social death as the rightful position of Black bodies within white supremacy. Additionally, we must remember death was not the point of lynchings, these images showcased the “mutilated and dangling” of Black men *and* the proud, laughing, self-righteous crowds who attend and participated in the lynchings. On the other hand, the vertical suspension of hangtime conjures slave branding as being its biometric antecedent where this photo-technical marking of sporting Black bodies is aligned “at the scale of skin” with the slave brand that categorizes Black bodies within regimes of ‘scientific racism,’ the taxonomic and anthropological study through the dissection of race-stained bodies, and “commodity racism, where “mass-produced consumer spectacles” express “the narrative of imperial progress.”^{dxv} The vertical suspension of hangtime *documents* a grotesque plasticity singularly inherent to the Black body—our ability to do more work, take more punishment, and even defy the very laws of physics—all for the enjoyment of white spectatorship and, inevitably, for profit and capitalization. In this sense, the brand of hangtime “is a means of body measurement that is put to use to allow the body, or parts and pieces and performances of the human body to function as identification.”^{dxvi} So when Kornheisser references the holy trinity when describing the dunking exploits of basketball’s greats, I read it as an admission to the spellbinding power of Black death, one intensely painful when considering vertical suspension: *to rise, Black bodies must die.*

This paper is divided into two sections. The first presents the dunking ability of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Wilt Chamberlain as being understood through the racialized and sexualized fear of Black men, literal (and corporeal) terrors in the sky.⁴ Furthermore, this section argues this racialized understanding of Black physical presence tasked sports photographers with documenting credulous and fantastic assumptions of these aerial invaders through an antagonistic logic of capture, which materialized with high tech cameras and experimental camera placements. In this sense, hangtime functions as a scientific-seeming corporeal marker of the immense threat of Black physicality. Second, if the photographic impetus for documenting hangtime in the 1960s was understood through a phallic logic of aerial invasion, the following section considers more modern iterations of hangtime where dunkers are no longer thought to be aerial invaders. Now, they are more like celestial or angelic bodies represented through visual allusions to religious iconography. This section considers the white photographic imaginary and photographic eye/I. Here, I take up the intense technical and storytelling work of photographers who render hangtime through the deathly symbolism of angelic ascent. Moreover, this section performs the interrogative of

⁴ This essay will honor Kareem Abdul-Jabbar’s name change. The only time I will reference Lew Alcindor is when referencing the work and quotations of others.

synchronizing images and artwork of bodies elevated in death. In sum, my goal is to articulate hangtime as a metaphor and visual regime of vertical suspension where Black bodies are triply hung: (1) meaning a “unary” photographic fiction rendered in intense stillness, *the literal hanging of time*, that emphatically transforms reality, (2) the ways in which *the hanging of Black bodies* as foundational American spectacle frame the photographic imaginary of dunkers being celestial bodies, literal angels of death, (3) and the consideration suspension as *the bold* – those interstitial realms between arrival and departure where the absencing of Black life foregrounds an accounting of bodies as capital.

hangtime negrophobia.

The slave is...the ground that...defines liberty, citizenship, and the enclosures of the social body.

—Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*

I am contemplating the rendering of moments into objects and the ways the photograph and its production, from the photographic eye/I (the staging of shots) to dark rooms, approximate terror. We must think through the duality of terror affixed to the Black body: that our bodies are a source of terror (read: terrifying) and canvas the “hieroglyphics” of said terror.^{dxvii} To do this work, contextualizing “getting the picture right” with brutality ruptures the assumed innocuousness of photographic staging. Moreover, the firsthand account of James Cameron, lynching survivor, narrates his trauma in photographic terms:

Abruptly, impossibly, silence fell over that raging mob, as if they had been struck dumb. No one moved or spoke a word. I stood there in the midst of thousands of people, and as I looked at the mob around me, I thought I was in a room, a large room where a photographer had strips of film negatives hanging from the walls to dry... A brief eternity passed as I stood there as if hypnotized. Then the roomful of negatives disappeared, and I found myself looking into the faces of people who had been flat images only a moment ago.^{dxviii}

Cameron’s language is important beyond metaphor. His anecdote manifests a truth of Black vertical suspension: the photographs were the point. Lynchings were not about killing. In most cases, bodies were hanged postmortem. Lynchings were about getting the picture right and lynching photographs were a *momento mori* without the spill of human wreckage.^{dxix} Dangling Black corpses became the drapery in white supremacy’s design. In this way, the photographic eye/I plundered Black bodies for corporeal fetishes – both body parts and images. “Plunder,” in this sense, speaks directly to Hortense Spillers’ description of the captive body being severed from its “motive will.”^{dxix} Dunk photographs are also preoccupied with the eye/I’s insatiable demand to look. In this sense, looking manifests as a scoping regime for witnessing. Contrary to my discussion of “witnessing” through the “wake work” of Christina Sharpe, Sekula describes the witnessing potential of photography as a “silence that silences,” “constituting the... ‘zero degree’ of socially instrumental realism.”^{dxxi} “Photography came to establish and delimit the terrain of the other, to define both the *generalized look*—the typology—and the contingent instance of deviance and social pathology.”^{dxixii} Dunk photographs “are designed quite literally to facilitate *the arrest* of” Black bodies.^{dxixiii} Sekula discusses the photograph’s role in establishing the criminal body, so his use of arrest designates how the legal system captures people. My use of “arrest” conjures Barthes’ idea of photographic mortification, the ways photography arrest or suspend bodies in stillness and the resulting consequences.

Lynching is a response to the “danger of the hypersexed Black male” and to the terrifying thought of that the proximity of Black men to white women “became an assault, not on her person

but on her senses, causing irresistible feelings of panic, frenzy, and fear.”^{dxxiv} These atrocities are about protecting white women from rape; however, this protection is premised on the belief white women are a “pure vessel for reproduction...the indispensable means by which...[whiteness] is in every sense produced.”^{dxv} While not being preoccupied with protecting white women, hangtime is definitively about rape. Richard Dyer’s interpretation of the term is especially productive: he writes, “[Black] on white rape is represented as bestiality storming the citadel of civilization.”^{dxvi} The BBD (Big Black Dunk) penetrated basketball; the consequences of which were seen as a violation of the game in the face of *the Black’s* immense physical gifts. In other words, hangtime became a visual biometric of sexually deviant terror, and the dunk photograph became its archive. Journalists used print and photography to essentialize the horror they were witnessing onto the Black body. So then, what follows is a (re)telling of Wilt Chamberlain and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar’s dunking histories as coordinating a starting line for the technical production of hangtime as both a visual archive and biometric marker of the Black body.

In 1957, the title of a *Salt Lake Tribune* article speculated about basketball phenom, Wilt Chamberlain’s scoring ability in gross, sexual terms: “Point Orgies May Hurt Hoop Sports.”^{dxvii} The *Salt Lake Tribune* article establishes the prevailing thought that excessive scoring from the dunk, especially those performed by Black players, was a perverse menace to the game of basketball. This article labels the physicality of the dunk within a vector of race, corporeality, and the obscene. To say—while remaining in conversation with “Point Orgies”—that dunks are like dicks might be a cheeky turn-of-phrase, but seriously considering how the dunk functions as metonym for the spectacular BBD (Big Black Dick) penetrates (pun intended) the (white) fixation on rendering the terrifying Black body into fetish. In *Welcome to the Jungle*, Kobena Mercer critiques Robert Mapplethorpe’s notorious “Man in Polyester Suit” photograph:

The scale of the photograph foregrounds the size of the Black dick which signifies a threat, not the treat of racial difference as such, but the fear that the Other is more sexually potent than his white master. As a phobic object, the big Black prick is a “bad object,” a fixed point in the paranoid fantasies of the negrophobe... The primal fantasy of the big Black penis projects the fear of a threat not only to white womanhood, but to civilization itself, as the anxiety of... eugenic pollution and racial degeneration is acted out through white male rituals of racial aggression... The myth of penis size [is] a “primal fantasy” in the mythology of white supremacy in the sense that it is shared and collective in nature.^{dxviii}

“Point Orgies,” does two things: first, it places the Black dunking power of Wilt Chamberlain in sexual terms, and second, it maps a straight line from the dunk to white fantasies of Black male sexual deviance, which begins and ends with the mythologized big Black dick. Mercer argues, among other things, negrophobe, paranoid fantasies of Black male sexuality, which has predicated racial aggression throughout American history, extend beyond the dreaded interracial sexual encounter.^{dxix} That the Black dick (or in this case, dunk) is big enough to extend beyond sex to threaten the very fabric of civilization is an essential biological “fact” of Black maleness. For hangtime and dunk photography, a latent eroticism “regulates...the process of erotic/aesthetic objectification in which the Black man’s flesh becomes burdened with the task of symbolizing...transgressive fantasies and desires.”^{dx} Also, and maybe more importantly, the Black penis, as part of the Black body, is a product of “eminent domain”—where physicality and corporeality must be read through a history of white ownership.^{dxxi} To capture, then, whether through the camera’s aperture or the bigot’s noose, must be understood as the white masculine fantasy of an omnipotent eye/I.^{dxxii} The spectacle of Black players dunking challenged the “limits of human definition and comprehension” where

human was defined as being white and male.^{dxxxiii} In “Attacking the Rim” Davis Houck states, “the *point* of dunking...was not to score two points but to put one’s body and basketball skills on display.... Dunking is about...productive bodies.”^{dxxxiv} Thus, it is this display that is inseparable from sanctioned Black physicality and the politicization and enculturation of its performance. It reminded white players, coaches, and spectators that the physical gifts of this new *breed* of basketball player was an existential peril to white (athletic) supremacy. Also, when considering how the dunk was recorded and rendered through photography, this challenge to humanity required the implementation and development of sophisticated technologies and technical practices.

The aerial invasion of Black dunkers dominated competitive play, and those behind the camera approached the rendering of Black dunks through a logic of capture. The dunker’s body was under siege. Photographers “were on the front lines of human drama” and hunted to preserve the irresistible, destructive sensuality of Black athleticism for their primarily white audiences.^{dxxxv} This was no easy task. Cameras and lenses had to become more advanced. Second, while the search for experimental vantage points distanced photographers from their devices, remote control technology and wires allowed them to control multiple cameras at one time. Unmistakably, the goal of these daring artists was to “transcend actual” fact, not record it.^{dxxxvi} In the 1960s and 70s, there was no one better than John G. Zimmerman.^{dxxxvii} The photographer, who began at *Ebony* in the mid-1950s, had long been fascinated with camera technology, which would serve him well as a sports photographer for *Sports Illustrated*.^{dxxxviii} Zimmerman’s preferred cameras were the high-speed offerings developed by Charles Hulcher, former NASA Employee.^{dxxxix} “Originally prototyped as a technology to study rocket launches in slow motion,” the Charles Hulcher Company developed cameras that reached up to 100fps (frames per second).^{dxl} Militaries were some of their biggest clients, and Hulcher manufactured a special camera for the American Navy that fit onto submarine periscopes.^{dxli} “They also made more than 100 high-speed cameras for the Royal Canadian Air Force, which used them for aerial surveillance.”^{dxlii} Their origins as military surveillance devices scaffold the production of the Black dunker’s menacing aeriality and dramatize the quest for “total situational awareness.”^{dxliii} In line with their military applications, these cameras were used in the practice of a racialized espionage where photographers captured the athletic secrets of Black physicality. And in the capable hands of Zimmerman, these cameras were used to capture multi-exposure photographs that generated an image beyond the capabilities of the human eye but not beyond the photographic eye/I.^{dxliv}



Figure 4.1 Wilt Chamberlain, photographed by John G. Zimmerman

For Zimmerman and his Hulcher camera, the dunker became a revelatory muse, and his 1961 picture of Wilt Chamberlain seems to stand at the precipice of static image and dynamic motion. The camera is placed above the rim of the basket, a practice that Neil Leifer would implement six years later in his picture of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar at UCLA. Contemporary of Zimmerman and famed basketball photographer, Walter Ioss, Jr. said of the picture, “It was the first time a photojournalist had placed a camera above the rim of a basket. It was like looking at something from another planet. It had never been done before. No one had seen the game from there.”^{dxlvi} Today, the backboard is an ordinary perch point for cameras, but in 1961, Zimmerman was a mad scientist in his hunt for the perfect shot. From the camera hung wires that connected to a rig of electronic lights and a remote control, which he could trigger from a seat behind the basket.^{dxlvi} At the center of this image is a sweat-drenched Chamberlain. With his mouth agape, as if just finishing a primal yell of exertion, we see down Chamberlain’s throat almost into his very soul. The ball is out of the frame—it has already gone through the net. His right hand hangs down through the hoop. On top of his right hand, is a faint reflection of the black and white stripes of a referee’s uniform, a consequence of the camera’s, then, peculiar vantage. We can just barely make out the veins on this hand. His left hand is barely touching the rim. A faint and frenetic blur radiates from his fingertips, as if time has ruptured somehow and the force of the dunk is pushing his digits to a moment between moments. In this shot, Chamberlain appears to burst through the confines of the two-dimensional game of basketball, leaving everyone else in a flat-footed stupor.

With Zimmerman’s image, Sekula’s analysis of aerial wartime photography is especially helpful. He describes the human presence in this genre of image being “derived from the conflict between scale and desire.”^{dxlvii} Next, Sekula spends some time describing the role of the war photographer in framing the humanity therewithin these images and their production from a higher vantage:

War photographers tend to localize the human experience...in the person of the photographer, who is usually [white and] male. The photographer becomes the sole subject... the risk taker...the heroic embodiment...of moral outrage. Within this myth, the photographer... transcends complicity and politics; his sympathies are universal.^{dxlviii}

From this, we can read Zimmerman’s vertical vantage as being a unitary “viewpoint contributing to an illusion of power.”^{dxlix} Lisa Parks adds, “Verticality is not something that simply occurs ‘out there.’ It is continuous with terrestrial legacies of state power.”^{dli} The conflict of scale and desire is experienced through the technical feat of verticality (scale) and the “impotence of the pornographic spectator” in the face of a threatening physical power he will never possess (desire).^{dlii} Likewise, scale, in this sense, is a strategic concern of the photographic eye/I. By this I mean, these images are devoid of any “higher meaning in their common usage” but what is left is the image as “intelligence operation... treated as an ensemble of univalent or indexical signs...that could only carry one meaning.”^{dliii} Confirming this sentiment, Mercer explains, “the fetishistic logic of mimetic representation...can thus be characterized in terms of a masculine [and colonial] fantasy of mastery and control over the ‘objects’ depicted and represented in the visual field, the fantasy of an omnipotent eye/I who sees but is never seen.”^{dliiii} Zimmerman’s imaging of Wilt Chamberlain marked his Black dunking body. Photographic capture, here, matters Blackness, transitioning living person to deadened fetish. Next, the extreme technical lengths of Zimmerman to *get the picture right* make known the out-of-placeness and displacement of Black bodies. Put simply, the photographer’s capture of Chamberlain’s physical presence was put to use “to make the already hypervisible racial subject legible” where legibility produces Chamberlain’s body as vendable object.^{dliiv}

Almost a decade later, another Black dunking phenom would again challenge the status quo of collegiate basketball. To say that Kareem Abdul-Jabbar was a revelation would be an understatement: at the time, there were just not enough superlatives to describe the phenomenal talent of the young UCLA center. On December 3, 1966, playing his first game with UCLA's varsity team, Abdul-Jabbar scored 56 points, which for a UCLA player was a single game record.^{dlv} (UCLA Athletics, 2012). When asked to describe Abdul-Jabbar's performance, hall of fame coach John Wooden responded with one word: "Awesome."^{dlvi} "At times," reported Rex Lardner, in his article, "Can Basketball Survive Alcindor," Wooden said, "He frightens me."^{dlvii} While the coach's response seems ordinary enough, we must put his description of the center's game in historical context. In 1966, UCLA was the two-time defending NCAA national champion. Wooden was widely considered the best coach in the college game, but this was just the beginning of UCLA's dominance over their competition. With Abdul-Jabbar, Wooden would go on to win three consecutive national championships. After Abdul-Jabbar left school, he recruited Bill Walton, another all-time great center and would go on to win back-to-back championships. In short, while Kareem was a singular talent, he was not an anomaly. So why then, would Wooden describe Abdul-Jabbar's game in such evocative language? Why would a man who obviously had experience in coaching, scouting, and developing players of immense talent be afraid of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar? Some may take his comments as mere metaphor, but for a man who was valued for his forthrightness and straightforwardness, a metaphoric reading of his words may be incorrect.^{dlviii} Instead, I take Wooden literally. Abdul-Jabbar's immense physicality and athletic prowess, his dunking ability, scared Wooden and threatened the status quo of the game.

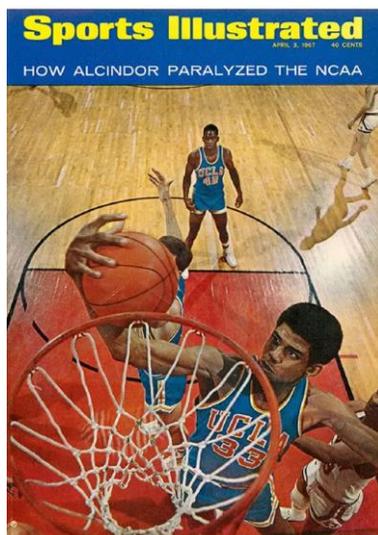


Figure 4.2 *Sports Illustrated* Cover (April 3, 1967), photograph by Neil Leifer

A few months after Lardner's reporting and following UCLA's 1966-67 championship run where Abdul-Jabbar was dominant, sportswriter Frank Deford wrote "Terror in the Air" for *Sports Illustrated*.^{dlix} As the magazine's featured article, it was accompanied with a cover photograph from Neil Leifer. The photograph features the tagline: "How Alcindor Paralyzed the NCAA."^{dlx} The shot captures Abdul-Jabbar preparing a vicious dunk on the Dayton Flyers in the 1967 NCAA Championship Game. For this shot, Neil Leifer implemented the techniques of John Zimmerman. "Terror in the Air," its accompanying photograph, and "Can Basketball Survive Lew Alcindor" frame the center's dunking dominance as an aerial invasion, a thing more akin to Ridley Scott's

Aliens than mere basketball move, but just underneath this framing, Ladner, Deford, and Leifer offer a fundamental line of inquiry: Do Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's immense physical gifts violate the overall fairness of the game? In 1967, the NCAA banned the dunk, a rule change that lasted until 1976. The dunk was reported to be an unfair advantage. It was a basketball move that minimized the importance of skill, and in amplifying the sheer physicality of *certain* players, violated the fairness of the game. If the game were played above the rim, for those who languished below, the prevailing thought was no amount of skill or mental acuity could compensate. Writing about the NCAA's banishment of the dunk, Gena Caponi-Tabery explains, "People called it the "Lew Alcindor Rule"...Of its banning, Jabbar (Alcindor) wrote, "the dunk is one of Basketball's great crowd pleasers, and there was no good reason to give it up except that this and other niggers were running away with the sport."^{dlxi}

Lardner's reporting and "Point Orgies" serve as a productive beginning for our analysis of hangtime, particularly the ways they demonstrate the role of journalism, both photographic and written, in document the contours of what we presume to know. That is, journalism exists to document and teach, or better said, to perform knowledge through display. At its most elemental level, for better or worse, we are thoroughly convinced of the news' facticity, an assumption that depends on what Sekula describes as "the seamless and transparent character of the medium."^{dlxii} Barthes also echoes this sentiment when he describes the ways that a photograph "annihilates itself as a medium to be no longer a sign but a thing itself."^{dlxiii} Furthermore, Sekula details two "powers" of photographic truth, magic and science: on one hand (magic), the photograph has "the power to penetrate appearances and...transcend the visible; to reveal...the secrets of human character," and on the other, the photograph wields "the power of proof...[and] represents the real world."^{dlxiv} I am using Barthes and Sekula to detail how photography, and specifically photojournalism, dissolves the gap between objectivity and reality. Within the photograph lies an assumed perfect analog of reality where "analogical plenitude is so great that the description of a photograph [outside of its denotative meaning] is literally impossible."^{dlxv} Our discussion of photographic transparency now ventures into the form and structure of media. However, in doing this work, we must foreground how media exists beyond representation and utility. Put another way, a philosophical gathering of hangtime, Black bodies, and photography must reckon with the ways media constitute our understanding of the Western man.

In "Towards a Black Media Philosophy," Armond Towns brings together Marshal McLuhan's argument, "Western man...did not understand that media form was an "extension" of himself," with Frantz Fanon's belief, "European masses were...asleep to an equally important extension of themselves: the Negro" to structure an understanding of media philosophy steeped in the premise the abjection and disappearance of Black bodies is necessary to the epistemological project of Western man and the founding of civilization.^{dlxvi} The result of Towns' intervention is that the Negro is an extension of Western man's self-conception: "Black bodies exists to serve a function by and for others, rather than for itself."^{dlxvii} Essential to my conception of hangtime as being folded into white supremacy's ghastly imaginary of Black vertical suspension is Towns' quotation of Ruha Benjamin: "the most dangerous place for Black people is in white people's imagination," that realm inventive of Black bodies."^{dlxviii} As stated earlier, hangtime is an imaginative rendering of the Black body's fantastic plasticity – another data point in the seemingly endless accounting of all the ways the Black body differentiates itself from the civilized human. To this end, filtering the vertical suspension of hangtime and lynching through Towns' Black media philosophy produces a photo-visual landscape where, in the context of lynching, suspended elevation functions to represent the essentialness of white bondage upon the Black body. In sobering detail, Dora Apel

describes the intense white fascination toward lynchings and how, in their aftermath, they worked to assert a vertical organization of white supremacist power where Blacks were always underfoot:

Thousands of people were attracted and fascinated by the ritualized murder of the spectacle of lynching. Sometimes lynchings were publicized in advance by local newspapers, supported by railroads that ran special excursion trains to lynching sites...and by schools that let out for the day... “Lynch Parties” concluded with frenzied souvenir gathering and display of the body and dismembered parts. And finally, photographs were taken, either by spectators with personal Kodaks or by professional photographers who turned their product into souvenir cards.^{dlxix}

Apel later writes, “lynching photographs represented not suffering and death...but white power.”^{dlxx} The ability to ensnare, hoist, dangle, mutilate, and burn bodies, and then, to capture, render, and disseminate images of lynching formalize “the economy of pleasure and the politics of enjoyment... in regard to the literal and figurative occupation and possession of the body.”^{dlxxi} The Black body through the visual medium of photography is arrested in the social death of Blackness, which becomes an *analog for reality*. The white power of lynching, measured in almost 5,000 murdered souls, was far from just rhetorical or political: it was a spatiotemporal terraforming of the *civilized* world—through the photographic ‘science of...detestable bodies,’ this world was made white.^{dlxxii}

Within the white imaginary of hangtime, photographic suspension works like crosshairs, branding the Black body as having “an intense proximity to nature,” and while nature, for the media scholar, typically refers to air, fire, and water, Black bodies rupture this understanding, defining nature as “the elements that lie at the taken-for-granted base of our habits and habitat.”^{dlxxiii} Branding, in this sense, denotes the “inscription of race onto the skin” where racialized assumptions of nature dissect the Black body from the civilized world, leaving the racial stigmas of “cannibalism, backwardness, and fetishism.”^{dlxxiv} With heated iron, branding marks the dehumanization of Black people, an epidermal logistics of privation, separation, and negation. With photography, though, the “white racial frame” fractures the Black body from the privileges of Western Man, creating a new subject position: the Negro.^{dlxxv} It is a sorting mechanic of humanness where whiteness functions as a prototypical dialectic of recognition and verification.^{dlxxvi} In Addition, “Western nature has been mobilized toward maintaining (colonial) narratives of man’s dominance/technological control over animal/natural constructs.”^{dlxxvii} For hangtime, dominance/technological control manifests in military-grade, high-end cameras and imaginative camera placements that sought to, at one end, to (re)capture the wild and fantastic impossibility of Black athletic achievement and, at the other, to forever otherize the Black body as not just being wholly outside of civilized discourse but a threat to its existence.

The titular assumptions headlining “Can Basketball Survive Alcindor,” “Point Orgies,” and “Terror in the Air” further the profane, racialized content of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Wilt Chamberlain’s Black dunking bodies. But beyond these lie the singular and authoritative assumption of journalistic truth. The profanity of the Black dunking bodies of Chamberlain and Abdul-Jabbar become adhered to notions of truth through the journalistic, “on-site presence” of the eyewitness.^{dlxxviii} Barbie Zelizer unpacks how the eyewitness has transcended mere synonym of journalism to become a sign for the larger, shared conventions of the entire journalistic community.^{dlxxix} The scholar describes the eyewitness as having three shared dimensions: “the eyewitness as report, the eyewitness as role, and the eyewitness as technology.”^{dlxxx} Each of these work to establish journalistic authority in questionable circumstances where more credible determinants of truth are not available.^{dlxxxi} Photography is seen as a reliable recording technology of

the eyewitness that “captures one’s vision.”^{dlxxxii} Having been there, then, is a combination of temporal presence, of course, but also the “preciousness that is the outcome of high craftsmanship”—a combination of the poet and the workman.^{dlxxxiii} Through stillness, the hanging of time, the photographer targets and the photograph captures “the imperceptible increment of time...and in this way it seems to stop time, or to wrest a moment out of the flow of time. [He] makes visible a constellation of forces and things that came together in front of a camera’s lens, for a fraction of a second, drawing a moment into view in a way that it was never experienced.”^{dlxxxiv}

Photographers and spectators alike reveled in the athletic brilliance of dunkers like Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Wilt Chamberlain. The dunk was an almost pornographic spectacle of body where Black physicality seemingly violated the game’s modern notion of decency and fairness. Everyone was afraid of these new aerial invaders. The NCAA’s ban on the dunk was not just a ban on offensive output. Rather, banning the dunk should be considered an indictment against the assertive Black physical presence of Abdul-Jabbar, Chamberlain, and other Black ballplayers of the period. This indictment contextualizes—I think—the entire history of university-based athletics and their original implementation as being pedagogical: they were designed to teach values assumed necessary for a white, male bourgeoisie. So then, Black dunking dominance defied the strict and white gentility of the game. And so, if the basketball world could not stifle the dunk’s seductive allure, it would have to be domesticated through the visual operations of experimental camera placements and military grade technologies. In this sense, the visual rendering of Black bodies through photography blurred the lines between objective fact and artistic imagination.

hangtime phantasmagoria.

The sky is a tomb... Many cultures see the heavens as the abode of the dead.

—John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds*

If in the 1950s and 60s, the spectacle of Black physical presence in basketball challenged and threatened white audiences, during the 1980s, the prevalence of Black players caused white audiences to turn their backs. The league was thought to be drug infested, exemplified by the tragic death of Len Bias, and only featured one-on-one play, a relic of the “point orgies” criticism of the 1950s.^{dlxxxv} In the NBA’s 1976 merger with the ABA, the most highly valued assets were not teams but players: Elgin Baylor, Moses Malone, and Julius Erving as well as their high-flying exploits.^{dlxxxvi} The assumed pathologies of the Black male body had completely corrupted the physical and moral standards of the game, especially in the NBA. Likewise, the dunk, as basketball move and spectatorial asset, should be considered an extension of these pathologies, it also became an almost standardized characteristic of this transitional time for the sport. To overcome this, basketball needed a change in order to remain relevant as a profitable sports product. Or more precisely, basketball didn’t need to change, but the ways the sport represented hangtime, which had come to define its very essence and become its most potent visual spectacle, did.

As the game grew, spectators became more accustomed to the dunking spectacle of players like Elgin “Hangtime” Baylor, Clyde “The Glide” Drexler, Darrel “Dr. Dunkenstein” Griffith, and Darryl “Chocolate Thunder” Dawkins. However, the arrival of Michael “Air” Jordan marked a point of rupture where his “Air” illustrated the very pinnacle of athletic achievement and possibility. Playing (or dunking) like Mike became synonymized with winning like Mike, securing his place at the zenith of global culture for the better part of two decades and securing basketball’s global popularity. The resulting tag, “Be Like Mike,” as Dyson claims, “educates us about the convergence of...desire, interest, consumption, and culture.”^{dlxxxvii} Above all else, Jordan’s “Air” structured a transition in

how the photographic eye/I captured and rendered the dunk and Black bodies. Michael Jordan was not just seen as the best dunker in a field of legendary dunkers. He was Beowulf or Hercules, a mythic legend and deified paragon of athletic mobility who hallmarked an athletic ascendancy where excellence was in lock step with heaven and the celestial. “I think he’s God disguised as Michael Jordan,” Larry Bird said of Jordan in 1986, “He is the most awesome player in the NBA.”^{dlxxxviii} Sports cameramen and journalists from the 1980s to today echo Bird’s jubilation in their rendering of dunkers. The visual logic of fear and capture had shifted; now, these bodies and their performance must be displayed and rendered with extreme care and reverence. The impetus for a militarized, vertical-vantage that structured dunk photography of the 1960s had given way to an omni-directional imaginary where an artful photographic eye/I saw the dunker as God-like in the 1980s, 90s, and today. “Many basketball photographs are constructed—consciously or unconsciously—like religious paintings. Only in basketball do we witness that ascension that connotes transcendence.”^{dlxxxix} Because of this rhetorical transition, the translation of hangtime shifted to present not a spectacle of terrifying bodies but a visual poetics where the “above” in above the rim connotes the celestial spectacle of mystical or religious iconography upon which a visual canon emerged. More than anything else, hereinafter attempts a gathering of Michael Jordan and his celestial rendering with the phantasmagoric spectacle of death. “Air,” I argue, no longer provokes an understanding of death in line with lynching’s dangling of lifeless Black bodies but one where the celestial or heavenly ensorcells death in theatrical grammars of the artful, a baroque rendering of apparitions where the photographic eye/I performs the photographic rendering of hangtime as séance.

On February 6, 1988, Dominique Wilkins competed against Michael Jordan in one of the greatest dunking spectacles ever seen. During the NBA’s All-Star Game Weekend’s Slam Dunk Contest, every eye, it would seem, descended on the old Chicago Stadium, affectionately dubbed the “Madhouse on Madison,” to watch these two titans conquer gravity and physics. Both men were at the beginning of their storied careers and rounding into their respective peaks. If the author of “Point Orgies” could have seen these two, one must wonder what depraved acts of sexual deviance could accurately characterize the scoring efforts of basketball’s finest virtuosos. A relic of the ABA, the NBA’s recreation was an experiment in marketing that started in Denver in 1984.^{dxc} Dominique Wilkins won in 1985, Jordan won in 1987, and neither competed in 1986. Due to injury, this was the two’s first meeting, meaning this matchup was considered an inevitable destiny.^{dxcii} Of the buildup, Wilkins said, “We knew we were going to face each other in the finals. We knew it... It was like it was ordained.”^{dxciii} It had everything a spectator could ask for: immense talent, great characters, competitive intrigue, high drama, and yes, fantastic dunks. Ron Harper, NBA great and almost participant in the contest, described the intensity of the spectacle: “Back then, the dunk contest was bigger than the... game. It meant a lot to Michael. In the locker room he was telling everybody, ‘Let’s give these people a show.’”^{dxciii} As a point of digression, Harper’s recollection describes a basketball reality where the dunk—no, hangtime—was bigger than the sport itself. And as expected, the competition came down to the final dunk, and it was Jordan who would have that honor.

Adam Silver, current NBA Commissioner, was in the building; though, this time as a paying fan. “I remember him going to the opposite end of the court and clearing away the photographers or whoever was in his way,” recalls Silver of the moments right before Jordan’s final dunk, “There was something that felt almost dangerous about it, like people were in his way and he was clearing them out. I remember the sense of anticipation was incredible.”^{dxciiv} Jordan later told reporters, “I saw the man who got it all started: Dr. J. He motioned for me to go back to the free throw line. That was the best advice I heard all day.”^{dxciiv} What happened next will live on forever in basketball lore:

Jordan flew. It is interesting though because this is one of those sporting moments that because of the technological limitations, the video in its current form on the internet appears almost winded, as if the very act of witnessing this spectacle clogs the arteries. To modern viewers, it looks heavy and bloated, suffering from a kind of proto buffering. The only way to experience the fullness of that moment is through photography. There are two images of this dunk that have stood the test of time. The first is a sideline photo from Bill Smith, Chicago Bulls team photographer, and the second was taken from the under the basket by Walter Iooss, Jr., *Sports Illustrated* photojournalist.

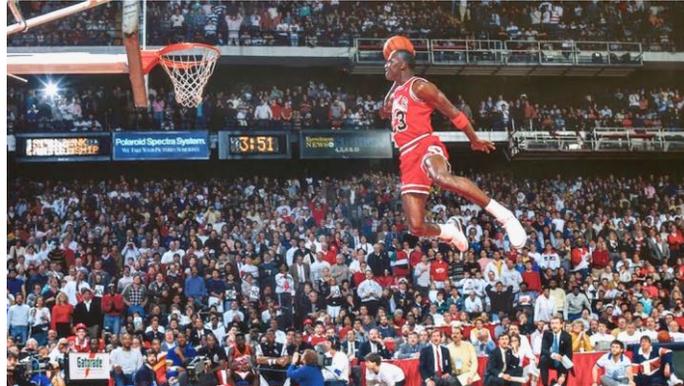


Figure 4.3 “Untitled” (Picture of Michael Jordan), photograph by Bill Smith

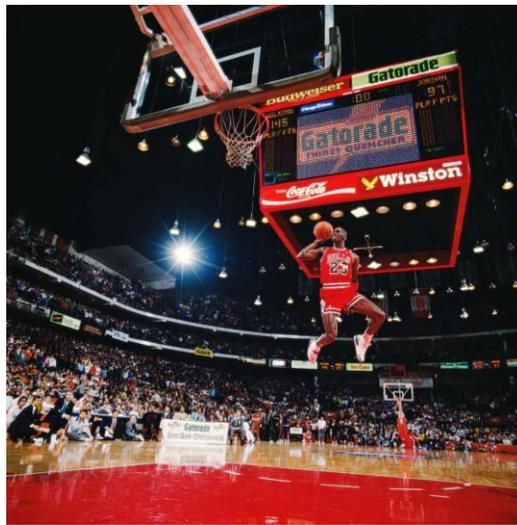


Figure 4.4 “Michael Jordan mid-leap at the Slam Dunk contest in Chicago,” photographed by Walter Iooss, Jr.

Despite having their own unary and singular presence, for our purposes, these two photos must be considered in tandem. In them, the omni-directional fiction “is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me.”^{dxcvi} In using “fiction,” my point is not to challenge the authenticity of these images. We see them, here. We know it happened. Instead, calling attention to hangtime as a fiction forwards an ocular reality where the fact of visual perception is not governed by that which is in front of any singular set of eyes. The point of these pictures, in other words, is to transcend actual fact. Harper says of that moment, “He hit that f----- foul line, and everything seemed to slow down. He was going in slow motion.”^{dxcvii} Tommy Hawkins, judge of the dunk contest and former NBA star, describes the sheer gravity of what he was witnessing in multi-sensory terms: “I heard the “Hallelujah” chorus.”^{dxcviii} I quote Harper and Hawkins here not to belabor the point about the spectacle of this dunk but to demonstrate just how

much recollections of this moment is organized as a collective spectacle of history nourished by the photograph fetish object. Brian McIntyre, senior NBA communications advisor, reports, “Walter Iooss was staring at his camera, and this was predigital, so it’s not like he was looking at an image. It was more like, Oh, baby, you did it for me again.”^{dcix} “Baby,” here, at least from my perspective, describes Iooss’ reaction to his camera, an ocular prosthetic of the photographic eye/I, not Jordan’s greatness. It is the camera *and* the technical prowess of the photographer, “[how] the photographer looks from the contortions of technique,” together, that produces the necessary visual schema structuring hangtime’s existence.^{dc} Hangtime’s fiction, then, is a fetish of sight through the photographic eye/I, a mode of visual perception where the result (the photograph) orders the fact of seeing. In other words, the photograph and its ability to suspend the moment, capturing an omnidirectional spectacle, produces a self-fulfilling prophecy of visual truth.

In both images, before the scale of Jordan’s elevation, the sea of white faces is striking. Remember, these images were taken before the NBA was the global media empire it is today. Professional basketball, as visual product, was in flux, teetering on the edge of extinction. During the 1960s, 70s and 80s, the NBA adopted the “less is more” approach to broadcast television, most of the televised basketball games (and there were not many) were some combination of the Philadelphia 76ers, Boston Celtics, and Los Angeles Lakers.^{dci} All other footage was either televised through highlights or not televised at all. So, for that NBA Dunk Competition in 1988, being there and photography were the foremost way of consuming the spectacle. Whether these photographs glimpse an answer, I am unsure, but the presence of those mostly indistinguishable faces supposes a peculiar canon of white spectatorship. Further, in Smith’s image, on the marquee in white lettering, there is an advertisement for the Polaroid Spectra System, which reads: “We take your pictures seriously.” Just another friendly reminder of the photographer’s genius as an artful expression of the witness, valued for evidentiary reporting, and the seer, being invested in “spiritual significance.”^{dci} Jordan’s flight happens and hangtime is constructed within this discursive milieu of oppositional polemics: “art photography vs. documentary photography... photographer as expression vs. photography as reportage... theories of imagination vs. theories of empirical truth...[and] affective value vs. informative value.”^{dci} Now, as for Jordan’s body, the way the light reflects off his glistening musculature, seems to marble his flesh. Smith’s image allegorizes flight through the conquering of distance. Jordan’s head is at the rim, and it seems he is still climbing. When will he fall? In a moment? Or another lifetime? The clench of his bottom lip indicates a focused physical genius where mind and body are doing the heavy but instantaneous work of computing flight trajectories geometries of force. Iooss’ picture, though, from his seated vantage seems a fever dream of physicality, almost as if every muscle in Jordan’s body is flapping an invisible set of deified wings. This image, from its perspective, sketches a parable of ascension where the stadium lights are akin to stars and Jordan is transcending the earthly plain. In both images, presented is the uncanny theatre and drama of the Black athletic spectacular.



Figure 4.5 “Blue Dunk,” photographed by Walter Iooss, Jr.

While his image has stood the test of time, for the most part Bill Smith has faded into obscurity. On the other hand, Walter Iooss, Jr. became a famous photojournalist and artist, photographing Michael Jordan for the rest of his career. His 1987 photograph, *Blue Dunk*, taken a year before the dunk contest, sought to construct a photograph that targeted the imaginary space above the dunker, the realm of clouds and stars that not even the greatest highflyers could reach. To realize this vantage imaginary, Iooss used a cherry picker.^{dciv} Next, “he painted a parking lot [a voluminous shade of cobalt] blue” to color this mystical, heaven-like realm of dunkers.^{dcv} Gail Buckland writes, “the photograph has an eccentric perspective. Rather than feeling that we are looking down on Jordan’s ascent, we have an equal sense that Jordan and his shadow have been painted on a ceiling – a Sistine Chapel for the saints of sports.”^{dcvi} In the upper portion of the image, slightly left of center is the basketball hoop and a sliver of the backboard that juts out into the rightmost corner on a diagonal. At first glance, you are unsure if you are looking at the goal from right-side-up or upside down. The net, hanging perfectly still through the barrel of the hoop, provides the only directional cue. Below the rim, to the right, is Jordan, left hand outstretched, reaching for the basket and right hand, palming the basketball, cocked back, ready to slam. He is wearing his red Chicago Bulls uniform, and his left arm bears a matching red armband. His shoes and socks are a pristine white, and his legs are bent in such a way that we can see the soles of his sneakers. On the left half of the image, we see Jordan’s shadow, mirroring the dunker’s flight, as if attached by God’s own marionette wires. The red, white, and blue do not evoke American patriotism—that seems too young. Instead, the colors conjure European royalty.^{dcvii} The shot’s edge to edge construction feels endless, and Jordan is frozen in the imaginary of hangtime.

These three images materialize hangtime’s omni-directional fiction and a transition in hangtime’s visual canon where the veneer of terror cracks and, coming from the abyss, is an articulation of beauty and public myth. How, then, do we make sense of Jordan’s “Air” not just in the context of a benign interpretation of hangtime but centering the spectacle of Black vertical suspension as American photographic pastime? Further still, when confronting the noose as the foremost symbol of Black asphyxiation, how can we understand the affordance of “Air” to Jordan’s Black body? And finally, what happens to the specter of death in the wake of the shift in the photographic register of Black vertical suspension from a soft-eugenics where hangtime establishes a biometric archive of Black pathology to jubilant celestial spectacle? Obviously, my queries are beyond the specific study of atmospheric gasses. Rather, thinking of “Air” in the anecdotal sense, as merely the stuff in the sky, is a generative proposal. The sky as a generic container and “Air” as a component therewithin allows, as John Durham Peters argues, space for “the sky was the best place to find a culture’s values.”^{dcviii} When discussing the sky in *The Marvelous Clouds*, Peters uses ‘sky’

almost interchangeably with “heaven,” arguing that astronomy and meteorology are the two great sciences of the sky.^{dcix} Astronomy is “the oldest of all sciences” and “a science of reversibility: a movie of planetary rotations played in reverse” frames the happenings of heaven as the regular movements of celestial bodies, and meteorology is “the epitome of an exact science” tracking and forecasting the happenings of weather and climate.^{dcx} The small but important difference between sky and heaven, then, is that heaven represents the cosmological seeking of an original transcendence and ascension. It is the home of ancestors, saints, and spirits but also the site of planets and stars. In contrast, the sky is an “extraterrestrial commons” housing the sublimity of heaven but also, for example, skyscrapers, balloons, and drones to name a few.^{dcxi} For me, this difference is most easily apprehended in terms of volume: heaven is filled with the very hopes, dreams, and imaginations of humanity itself while the sky is empty, a vacuity understood in line with a canvass—not measured in a definitive lack but in the almost infinite potential of possibility.

Christina Sharpe also offers an interrogation of the sky through her theorization of meteorology: “the weather is the totality of our environments; the weather is the total climate; and that climate is antiblack... And even if the country...tries to forget...it is the atmosphere: slave law transformed into lynch law into Jim and Jane Crow.”^{dcxii} Sharpe’s use of the meteorological, what Peters characterizes as being preoccupied with the “unpredictable events of the atmosphere,” likens anti-Blackness to “rain, hail, thunder, and lightning.”^{dcxiii} The unpredictability of the weather, or that of anti-Blackness, becomes legible through its insistence—the myriad ways Black bodies become oriented to and transformed by the humid “atmospheric density” of death and brutality.^{dcxiv} In this way, Dunk photographs are serial images, meaning by their very existence, they engender an iconic and specific continuum of racialized visual spectacle. Seeing these photographs, whether of Wilt Chamberlain in the 1950s, Michael Jordan in the 1980s and 90s, or LeBron James now, simultaneously rupture and confirm linear temporal logics. That these photographic moments can be plucked from obscurity without consideration to time *and* that, as a cohesive visual archive, they narrate a pathology of Black physicality, define seriality in the infinite and supernatural plasticity of Black bodies not just the content within the photographic frame.

Hangtime is another transformation, one where the inscription of mysticism and death is tattooed onto flesh of the body and is suspended (pun intended) within the heart of “the weather’s” atmosphere. To this end, Lisa Parks’ etymology of atmosphere is relevant:

The etymology of...atmosphere comes from the modern Latin atmosphaera, which was derived from the Great atmos (vapour) and sphere (ball or sphere). By the seventeenth century the term was used to refer to “the mass of aeriform fluid surrounding the earth; the whole body of terrestrial air.” Its more figurative definition as a ‘surrounding mental or moral element, environment...prevailing psychological climate; pervading tone or mood; characteristic mental or moral environment... surfaced during the eighteenth century. To describe something as atmospheric is to refer to it as “existing, taking place, or acting in the air.”^{dcxv}

The mental and moral environment constituting Sharpe’s weather and Parks’ interpretation of the atmosphere must include gangplanks and nooses; the ways the “trans*Atlantic” produces the abject Black figure; how the slave ship as profitable enterprise requires an acceptance of “the crude human calculus...that to survive, it was sometimes necessary to kill;” and suspension, what Sharpe describes as the ways in which “the belly of the ship births Blackness (as no/relation)” *and* how the noose and the photograph, together, orchestrate the hideous pleasure of staging the white world as it was

meant to be and be seen.^{dexvi} Isamu Noguchi's 1934 sculpture, *Death (Lynched Figure)*, charts an unassailable through line from the noose to hangtime and back again. I wonder if Jordan or Iooss knew (or know) how closely their work resembles an obscure artwork of steel, rope, and wood that asserts the "macabre possibilities of dark bodies twisted in the knotty agonies of death."^{dexvii} The aura of Jordan's gravity-defying contortions are ghost stories: the haunting corporeal prose recounting the death of George Hughes and the work of Noguchi.



Figure 4.6 Image of "Death (Lynched Figure)," sculpted by Isamu Noguchi

"The "aura" of [an image] can be sensed by forgetting it and having it return in a dream," writes Catherine Russel in her characterization of Walter Benjamin's understanding of the modern, critical experience of art, "the unconscious turns impressions into extracts that are recognizable in dreams."^{dexviii} The phantasmagoric lives in haze of apparitions, spirits, and dreams, in the ways "the experience of art is continuous with everyday life...especially when "the present" is understood historically."^{dexix} Benjamin, in his analysis of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, which translates to angelic space, wrote, "this is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed."^{dexx} For this conversation, Benjamin is useful because he allows us to foreground the angelic, depicted through the baroque mentality of "grand scale," technologically laden expression *and* as an expression of death, a herald of the dead come-to-life and destructive reckoning.^{dexxi} Angela Ndalians explains that what she calls the neo-baroque aesthetic is a "parallel dynamism" where the "visual, auditory, and textual" converge to produce "spectacles often reliant on computer technology."^{dexxii} In modern times, when one refers to the baroque, their reference "carries...connotations of something's being...in excess of the norm... the theatricality, lushness, and spectacle of the mise-en-scene and editing."^{dexxiii} Further, if the negrophobic rendering of Wilt Chamberlain and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar present an affirmation of the human subject through its presentation of dangling Black bodies, then these images of Jordan "destroy the assurances of an all-too-male humanist subject" with its angelic, neo-baroque aesthetics that "represent the extreme psychic and historical risk in [the Angel's] ambivalent polarities: human/inhuman, ephemeral/eternal, Angel/Satan, female/male, real/unreal."^{dexxiv}

hangtime futures.

More than anything else, “Hangtime Melancholia” attempts to unfurl the wake of a dunker’s trajectory, asking what dark matters reside in the shadows of trajectory. Here, “dark matters” speaks to the work of Simone Brown who “takes up Blackness as metaphor and as lived materiality” where, in line with Fanon and others, surveillance is neither passive nor innocuous.^{dexxv} Moreover, “the ontological conditions of Blackness” demands “taking...slavery as antecedent to contemporary surveillance technologies and practices.”^{dexxvi} Like Rianka Singh this chapter considers how mediation’s of elevation and verticality disfavor abject bodies and that “be[ing] elevated is experienced differentially and is differently available. When particular people are elevated...they are also often subject to often violent forms of evaluation, objectification and vulnerability, not to mention violence.”^{dexxvii} For some, it may be hard to conceptualize the suffering or vulnerability of multimillionaire professional basketball players, but we just need to look at recent reports from the NBA of players having objects thrown at them, cursed and called racial slurs, and even spat on.^{dexxviii} Further, 2004’s infamous “Malice at the Palace” demonstrates the stark consequences when players defend themselves from fan violence. I mention this not to claim victimhood for professional basketball players but to underlie the uneven economic conditions where Black talent is essential to industry and corporatized profit while Black bodies exist at the mercy of a fanbase atop a vertical understanding of scopic logics spectacle.

I often think about the 1996 film *Space Jam*. Rightly or wrongly, it is the sports film of my life. It synchronized my childish rendering of the world via Bugs Bunny and Mickey Mouse alongside the spectacular physical feats of sporting bodies. Quite literally, the gravity defying Black spectacle of “Air” Jordan became one with the minstrel roots of the American cartoon. I mention it here not to rehash the cinematic tastes of a child, but to consider the ways in which *Space Jam* exists as a theoretical frame for the future of hang. If the last section interrogated the sky as container where culture becomes legible, space is that (maybe) insurmountable horizon that brings together the imagined futures of empire and technology, and the flying objects therewithin fall into two distinct categories: identified and unidentified.^{dexxix} The default setting of space, for all intents and purposes, approximates the unknown through threat-fueled logics of surveillance and reconnaissance. The Black dunking body, in this sense, has always been alien, referring to poorly understood and highly stigmatized threats to civilization as opposed to the imaginings of science fiction writers. Hangtime, then, is a robust media system of visual engagement where “the trick is to ‘see’ the [alien] and make the newly seen knowable.”^{dexxxx} The future of hangtime is our surveillance present, meaning the visual schema of the NBA is one of visual ubiquity and an optico-epistemological certainty mediated through the ways advanced technologies like robotic cameras, drones, and cutting-edge lenses have apprehended the Black body. Here, I am not implying any diminishment to the spectacle; instead, its omni-presence affords an opportunity for an anthropometric framework of meta-surveillance where data and analytics; combines and scouting departments; travel teams; branded training camps; coaches; and elite, individualized trainers can scan for the next great dunker with an uncanny level of mathematical certainty. LeBron James first pinged this system as a 5’5” tall fourth grader in Akron, OH.^{dexxxxi} If nothing else, this chapter argues for hangtime not as some supernatural trait of Black bodies, but a rigorous and highly intelligent effort to map and then, mine the Black body for the production of highly profitable industries—a tale as old as time.

on boxes and burials – a conclusion.

Fitting of a treatise on sneakers, this work ends with a shoe box: ordinary in form, extraordinary for what it holds. This cardboard box is gray and brown with a white border dividing it almost in half. Written on the border, is the Nike slogan, “Just Do It!” The box contained the Atmos x LeBron 18 “Sakura” sneakers, which are mentioned in “matter’s,” conclusion and are among the crown jewels of my sneaker collection – a fact only important in that this box served as an original container to get this product from some nameless, far away factory to my apartment. As a term, deadstock glorifies the shoebox’s seemingly impenetrable and sepulcher-ish darkness. Yes, one could just lift the lid and bring a fresh pair to the light, but why when darkness could generate immense profit. It describes a value multiplier where newness (read: just released) is more of an arbitrary incident on the calendar and *newness* (read: never been worn) must be preserved at all costs. It’s not that newness doesn’t matter – it emphatically does. My “Sakura’s” were purchased new at retail. Now, please do not confuse this with more familiar retail occurrences (i.e., entering a store, whether online or in-person, and then, tendering money to receive an object). No, for these shoes, first I had to download a special Nike app, SNKRS. Then, on April 23, 2021, at 10am EST, I entered a lottery. Fifteen minutes later, I received an alert on my phone and email that my credit card had been charged. “Congratulations...,” read the message. For the most coveted releases, which every year seem to increase in number, not availability, you don’t buy; rather, your payment secures the privilege of winners. Most don’t win, and I haven’t one a draw since. I paid \$170, and today, if I wanted a pair, I’d have to pay around \$430 to secure a size 13. Like Schrödinger’s Cat, then, deadstock, for even the most casual collectors, unfolds a confounding thought experiment where, instead of housing the potential for life and death, the shoebox houses the potent, living capitalist fiction of winners (NIKE commemorates your “wins” with their now infamous “GOT ‘EM” screen bestowed once their system confirms a purchase) and the dusty, sedentary presence of old trophies. But also, upon a pair’s arrival to its awaiting owner, deadstock brings together the dueling notions of sneakers being cultural and material fantasies as well as banal objects only important for their potential value on a near rabid resale marketplace. For every pair of deadstock sneakers in my closet – if you were wondering, right now there’s about eight across various brands – is a choice: wear and enjoy a product you were supposedly lucky to win or let them sit “on ice,” as the kids say, and wait for an invisible algorithm of time and demand to calculate and, hopefully, accrue value through some sort of necromantic wizardry.

I wear my sneakers. That is a controversial statement. IYKYK.⁵ This means, for me at least, I throw away my boxes. It wasn’t always like this. I had an entire room bursting with shoeboxes of all variety of colors and designs. Sneaker companies, for those top tier releases, work really hard to make even their boxes feel like an event. But eventually, as I maladroitly shifted and maneuvered between towers of cardboard, they just became empty urns for profit I could never collect. Also if you were wondering, my collection if completely DS would be worth, give or take, about \$12,000 – a fact only interesting at parties since, as I said, I wear my shoes. So, one Saturday afternoon, I spent a

⁵ And if you don’t, old man sneaker himself, Russ Bengston, wrote a great article on the perils of undeadstocking for *Complex*. Russ Bengston, “10 Sneakers You Should Never Undeasstock,” *Complex*, June 7, 2013. Accessed June 22, 2022, <https://www.complex.com/sneakers/2013/06/10-sneakers-you-should-never-undeasstock/>

few hours throwing at least 30 shoeboxes in the recycling. Ironically, I replaced the boxes with...more boxes – those bougie, transparent plastic containers with the front-loading door. I mean – c'mon – every sneaker needs a box. And so, as much as deadstock is about things in boxes, it is also preoccupied with boxes as well. It took me about three months before the mystique of those LeBrons wore off and I was able to undeadstock them.

undeadstock [/uhn-ded-stok/]: (noun and verb), abbrev. UDS; The first moment a person wears their deadstock shoes. With each wear, sneakers obviously pick up dirt and could be eventually damaged. No matter how meticulously one maintains or clean their shoes, they can never return to their DS condition.

However, and contrary to its namesake, *Deadstock* fervently seeks the light of day. As intervention, it argues the sneaker industry has relied on the obscuring shadows of the shoebox to (1) make sneakers appear as trifle whose value stems from irreverent tribalism as opposed to being earned and (2) redact the racial conditions upon which the industry and culture were built. In the way my own collection's value raise the eyebrows of partygoers in surprise, the idea something as low (literally!) as sneakers could be an asset, usually, is more worthy of disbelieving scoffs than serious consideration. Darkness, here, is akin to the dank opacity of that weird guy who lives in his mom's basement. On the other hand, that Black bodies, through an alchemy of bone and blood, form the invisible rebar of modernity that, as extractable and exploitable resource, constructs the world. Darkness, now, is the stygian realm of diamond mines. But is this really surprising? The term sneaker, at its most basic, denotes the clandestine as the surreptitious movement between shadows. It describes a form of self-mobility whereby sleight-of-hand and creativity create an embodied sense of non-presence. For the sneak, invisibility is intentional. If movement and bodies are politicized under regimes of authorization and surveillance, to sneak, then, embraces, with back pressed firmly against the wall, an alternative journey by which coming and going mark not just transgression but transformation. In this sense, bodies are equipment for puncturing space through tradecraft, manipulation, and concealment. In success, the body becomes othered, just *another* thing in the background. In failure, the body becomes Othered, burdened with hypervisibility that defines difference as threat. To sneak, often, artifacts a positionality of watching the watchers and refusing social control: at its most high-minded, consider whistleblowers who exfiltrate sensitive material from companies or governments or protestors disappearing into crowds to evade authorities. But at its most base, we are left to conjure peeping toms and thieves. Regardless of intention, sneaking acclimatizes us to the depth of systemized opacity. Meaning, by design, sneakers are supposed to exist just out of reach of our mainstream attention or care. As such, more than anything else, *Deadstock* argues that more gets pushed to the fringes of our awareness when, as we have done for at least 30 years, culture ogles what's on foot.

Instead of unboxing some fresh heat complete with a complementary set of laces, this dissertation unveils, over three chapters, the unexpected ways Black bodies exist as central and integral component – again like Schrödinger's Cat – through the converging paradoxes of life, death and the Black body's curious and perpetual stasis in living death. For a moment, dear reader, I have asked you to do what, frankly, sneaker culture and the industry wish you wouldn't: look beyond, before, and, after the glitzy distraction of elegantly designed colorways, immaculately constructed silhouettes, the pulsing celebrity of designers, eyepopping exploits of athletic excellence, and the assumed abundance and decadence of Black cool. In its place, I offer this work as metaphorical and philosophical launchpad to consider some important and under theorized what ifs concerning sneakers. First, *what if*, as consumers, spectators, and, namely, scholars, we name the unequivocal

material fact of sneakers – Jordans, LeBrons, Kobes, Curryys, Yeezys, etc. – as being that they are moldings of Black men’s feet? Second, *what if* we admit that sneakers as a foundational object of streetwear and the mainstreaming of sports culture reveals a long-established fixation and fascination with the white imaginings of Black bodies and, thusly, the sneaker, in fact, is a carceral technology in which Black bodies are captured (like a photograph)? Finally, *what if* we can draw a direct line from sneakers as a modern object, industry, and marketplace obsession to the Black slave as matter, the prospect of owning Black bodies, and how this ubiquitous carcerality foments modernity and civilization as racialized imaginations made true? Said better, while culture is important, we must always remember culture bludgeons, meaning it happens on bodies in the darkness of bruises. But here, another question emerges: how can we examine this pooling of blood just under the skin when said flesh is Black? As such, the danger of culture’s naturalization, in the case of sneakers, how they seem to have always been everywhere, undermines any possibility for critique through a popularizing de-historization where without the arduous work of archiving and analysis, produces the mistake that the bruises of culture are anatomically adhered to Black body through some kind of biological manifestation or genetic pathology.

Yuniya Kawamura, in her 2016 book *Sneakers: Fashion, Gender, and Subculture*, writes, “Although race as a variable has not completely disappeared among the sneaker enthusiasts, I do not focus on *the race factor* of the sneaker subculture in the book which has been diversified and is now spreading to all culture, classes, ages, races, and ethnic groups.”^{dexxxii} Kawamura’s work is important, full stop. It is the first academic monograph to focus on sneakers and sneaker culture, and as a researcher, I am indebted to her contribution. However, it was this quote that propelled this project to completion. Her observations of the sneaker community, which she calls a subculture, are premised on the novel fact sneakers somehow garner intense interests from a seemingly diverse group of stakeholders. “I had looked at sneakers only as athletic shoes,” she exclaims, “When I found out about the existence of a community of sneaker enthusiasts, I was so mesmerized... that I wanted to know more.”^{dexxxiii} It must be said that I mention her surprise not as a point of ridicule. I just wrote how sneakers – well – sneak up on you. Instead, her surprise exposes the immense consequence of the sneaker industry’s totalizing redaction. Said better, that a fashion scholar could, in 2016, express her surprise at the immense popularity of sneakers when people who care about fashion covet everything from handbags to jewelry to runway couture and Air Jordans may be the most popular single fashion item since their inception in the 1980s realizes how Black vernacular authenticity – the myriad and varied ways and moments where Blackness is assumed naturally low status and invisible – reads as blank canvases upon which mainstream culture happens. Kawamura’s “race factor” unfurls the assumed necessary and exponential outcome that everyday Black folks’ contributions to culture must scaffold a capitalist mainstream expressed, algebraically, to the white power.

In 1992, Stuart Hall wrote “Popular culture always has its base in the experiences, the pleasures, the memoirs, the traditions of the people. It has connections with local hopes and local aspirations, local tragedies and local scenarios that are the everyday practices and everyday experiences of ordinary folks.”^{dexxxiv} For the scholar, corporeality, particularly the assumed vulgarness of bodies, defines its relationship to the social order and the Human body. Going further, the globalized, churning flows of capital, industry, and technology processes these bodies of culture. As such, that which the marginalized once controlled “passes hands” to the civilized, mainstream – sometimes, also as indicated in the word “sneaker,” “without a murmur.”^{dexxxv} Kawamura’s usage of “race factor” snatches away the agential role Blackness has played in establishing sneakers as an object worthy of culture. Put differently, Kawamura’s book pays attention to sneaker culture so far

after the civilized capitalists got its hooks into it that Black folks seem to be mere dots in a sea of white folks wearing fly kicks. Interestingly enough, though, she admits that shoes, historically, site the boundary between distinctions of civilized and savage, writing “when slaves and lower classes were barefoot, shoes were worn by those in power and authority.”^{dexxxvi} Her own invocation of the slave who exists as a “social nonperson,” existing on and in the plantation’s ground – “a genealogical, [geographical, and geological] isolate” – seems to be a superficial premise.^{dexxxvii} However, for me – and this is *Deadstock*’s singular point – this invocation explicitly confirm, as she writes, that “sneakers are *deep*” and “filled with multiple as well as complex layers.”^{dexxxviii} Where this work distinguishes itself is in its unflinching understanding of depth as a systematized burial of Black bodies. That is, the world, backdrop for all those many on foot pictures polluting Instagram and Twitter, particularly those urban centers sneaker culture so unabashedly appropriate, before anything else inhumes Black bodies as pastime. As crypt, the world as burial ground “reveals that in the Americas, it is impossible to delink the built environment, the urban, and blackness.”^{dexxxix} In this sense, Blackness through the necrotic chewing of slavery and other anti-Black regimes upon the flesh fashions the unseen and accepted naturalness of the cityscape. And so, *streetwear*, that “immaterial” fashion trend for which sneakers is foundational object, through what seems an innocuous colloquialism, expresses a morbid truth: people, in obsessive and fetishizing droves, find pleasure in wearing the streets, a persisting entanglement of matter and flesh.^{dexl}

“She would make me cool” raps Lupe Fiasco on “The Coolest,” “...And I would never feel pain and never be without pleasure, ever again.”^{dexli} Lupe raps as the song’s protagonist Michael Young History (pronounced: My cool young history), and “she” is The Streets, a female personification representing, to Fiasco, the alluring action and “call of the streets.”^{dexlii} The rapper describes cool as a numbing agent, a way to feel the pleasure of not feeling the streets’ sweltering incandescence. I quote Lupe, here, not because he’s just a dope rapper, but as a way to contemplate how Black cool is a material self-fashioning of Black bodies to withstand the heat and pressure of the world’s oppression. Jussi Parikka in *A Geology of Media* writes, “coolness is...a media management issue that ties the earth to the escape velocity of data. Data need air,” so too do Black bodies. Parikka describes the necessity of chilling servers amid the overwhelming crunch of usage. In other words, cool extends life. Next, bell hooks explains,

cool was defined by the ways in which black men confronted the hardships of life without allowing their spirits to be ravaged. They took the pain of [the streets] and used it alchemically to turn the pain into gold. That burning process required high heat. Black male cool was defined by the ability to withstand the heat and remain centered.^{dexliii}

To dispel Kawamura’s position on the immateriality of fashion, I triangulate Fiasco, Parikka, and hooks, arguing the pressure cooker of living amid a civilization where, by design, Black death endures as predicate freezes the fallacy of progressive time. That is, just as things inevitably change, they also stay the same. *Deadstock*’s emphasis on depth does two things. First, through exhumation as excavation, this work sheers free all those bodies, now, confined in the catacombs of the culture and industry of sneakers, and second, seeking the burrowed respite of breezes and shadows, encourages a reclamation of sneakers from the empty calories of dressing to the material and “anatomical schema” of dress.^{dexliv} Said better, the freshness of sneakers summons an innervating sensation where the body was once analgesic – that gusty Zen of pirouetting along the guillotine’s edge, gasped breaths amid a suffocated life, the elegant tempering of “wild upsurges of animal vitality with...metaphoric calm.”^{dexlv} McLuhan says “clothing as an extension of skin helps to store and to channel energy.”^{dexlvi} In response, *Deadstock* argues sneakers as Blackened epidermal prosthesis

intensifies the vulgar delirium of inhabiting one's skin. It's just that this curious inhabitation of skin, in this case, thrills with the "highly visual and lopsided...confrontation with [*the Other's*] tactile flesh" as harrowing drop.^{dexlviii} As such, sneakers materialize a kidnapped abstraction of Black cool and its sensual function as mechanism of heat control, a release valve for scalding toxicity of redlining, disinvestment, over policing, crack, gang violence, and scores of the world's other targeted ills. Moreover, in them, we (Kawamura's "diversified" sneaker culture, which I am reluctantly a part...I guess) stand on the precipice of civilization and savagery where the "apolitical" "underground subculture" of sneakers manifest in the singularly white privilege of looking without fear and touching without consequence.^{dexlviii}

upcoming releases.

As it stands, I think of this work as being unfinished, which is the writer's ultimate burden. Despite this itching neurosis, my plan for this work is to transition it from dissertation to academic monograph. To do this, I'd like to expand this work with three additional chapters.

1. "Of Sneakerheads & Hypebeasts" envisions the sneakerhead through a kaleidoscope of urban decay and race where, on other end, is a palatable, fashionable version of the crack head. As polar endpoints, both titles premise a reality of racialized addiction and the best and worst of ghetto aesthetics and life. As such, I claim sneaker culture relies on inherently nativist and assumptions of Black consumption, style, and being. This chapter also focuses on the history of sneaker killings and how it envisions sneaker buying as a racialized pathology. Also, as secondary claim, this chapter will argue the Hypebeast imagines the more bestial aspects of Black existence through a gentrification of constant and seemingly mindless chatter. In other words, this emptiness of reason and obsession with presumed meaningless style trends is donned as cultural skin, an excuse for mostly white sneaker lovers to use "the lingo" and "walk a mile" in the proverbial Black body. If chapter two of this dissertation was, to some degree, about psychic amputation, this is about cultural amputation – how Black culture, materially, is always consumed in degrees of limbs – heads and hooves.
2. "BRED, White, Blue" centers color and the visually decadent present of sneaker colorways. Furthermore, this tentative chapter focuses on Nike's particular arrangement of Black and Red (BRED), popularized across several iterations of the Air Jordan sneaker line, and the rise of the Nike Dunks, which used the colors of prominent colleges to bolster sales. This chapter argues that sneakers contravened the once uniformity of American style in order to nationalize the product with American consumers. That is, sneakers feel uniquely American while, at least in color, rarely using red, white, and blue.
3. "real fake & fake real" dives into the nebulous and immensely profitable world of counterfeit sneakers. This chapter will argue that naming the difference between real and fake has less to do with which company owns what copyright and/or patent but a racialized understanding of labor. Paying particular attention to three large swathes of sneakers, the influx of high end fakes from China, Custom Sneakers and bespoke Player Editions, and sub-brand releases (those shoes from mainstream brands like Nike, Adidas, and Reebok that look like flagship releases but, for various reasons, are not e.g., "Air Jordan 1 KO.")

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