

The Racial Life of Things

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
African American Studies

and the Designated Emphasis
in
Women, Gender and Sexuality

in the
Graduate Division
of the

University of California, Berkeley

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Fall 2017

Abstract

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The Racial Life of Things is a cultural biography of the racialization of the sneaker. This project identifies the emergence of Michael Jordan, his 1984 partnership with Nike, and the eventual ban of his first signature shoe by the National Basketball Association as inaugurating a critical shift in the polysemous nature and cultural position of sneakers within the United States (and globally). Drawing upon the work of performance studies and thing theory, this work offers the concept of “the racial life of things” to examine how and why sneakers, arguably, more than any other consumer object, have become deeply and inextricably linked to blackness and masculinity. Moreover, this project contends that sneakers work both, in tandem with, and in the absence of, corporeal bodies, to do the work of making gender and race “real.” Using discourse analysis, semiotics, fashion and performance theory, *The Racial Life of Things* traverses a diverse set of cultural artifacts—corporate endorsements and advertisements, popular news media images and discourse, and consumer narratives— and proffers that everyday cultural objects like sneakers can work to reveal the opacities and slippages between subjecthood and objecthood and offer productive modes for understanding race and gender, specifically black masculinities, more broadly.

Introduction

“It's A Black Thing: Towards a Theory of Racial Objects”

Things are en vogue. Indeed, as historian Frank Trentmann asserts, “after the turn towards discourse and signs in the later twentieth century, there is a new fascination with the material stuff of life.”¹ This turn towards materiality, however, has been met with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Black Studies, for example, has had a persistent ambivalence towards things. And for good reason. For those of us racialized as black, objects haven’t necessarily served us well. In her essay, “On the Limits and Promise of New Materialist Philosophy,” Kyla Wazana Tompkins questions the “putative newness” of New Materialism and states, rather directly, that “New Materialism, particularly in Object Oriented Ontology, cannot deal with race.”² I would offer that this lack of engagement is rooted more in refusal than ability. And yet I, like Tompkins, do agree that despite this, “New Materialist thought is and can be profitably put to work alongside those projects that have so far been absent,” including race.³

For example, imbricating blackness to objects and objecthood can aid in our understanding of the limits of the body—still the preeminent site through which we come to apprehend what we know about race, even as it has and continues to confound us. *The Racial Life of Things* keeps this in mind while also understanding theoretical potentialities of this line of inquiry. Furthermore, this project also acknowledges the existence and importance of an already critical body of work that has offered postulations on blackness which are not moored in the body. One of the most significant intellectual contributions to this has been Critical Race Theory (CRT)—a body of work that has examined the law and legal system, albeit in relationship to bodies, to understand the particularities and peculiarities of blackness, particularly in the United States.⁴ Other nodes of Black Studies such as studies of space, or fields like performance studies have offered important challenges to the supremacy of the body.⁵ More recently scholars have engaged explicitly with the theory and new materialism to more explicitly imbricate these ontological questions to one another.⁶ Given its emphasis on “the potentially actant qualities of the material and non-human world” new materialism seems like an especially generative site through which to engage other non- corporeal sites of race, specifically blackness and objects.⁷

¹ Frank Trentmann, “Materiality in the Future of History: Things, Practices, and Politics,” *Journal of British Studies* 48, no. 2 (2009): 283.

² Kyla Wazana Tompkins, “On the Limits and Promise of New Materialist Philosophy,” *Lateral*, 2016, <http://csalateral.org/issue/5-1/forum-alt-humanities-new-materialist-philosophy-tompkins/>.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ For more on CRT and race and the law see the following: Patricia J. Williams, *The alchemy of race and rights*. Harvard University Press, 1991; Charles W. Mills, *The racial contract*. Cornell University Press, 2014; Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as property.” *Harvard law review* (1993): 1707-1791; Derrick A. Bell “Who's afraid of critical race theory.” *U. Ill. L. Rev.* (1995): 893; Kimberlé. Crenshaw *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement*. The New Press, 1995.

⁵ see George Lipsitz’s “The racialization of space and the spatialization of race theorizing the hidden architecture of landscape.” *Landscape Journal* 26, no. 1 (2007): 10-23; Gaye Theresa Johnson, “Spaces of Conflict.” *Sounds of Solidarity: Music, Race, and Spatial* (2013).

⁶ For example, Uri McMillan, *Embodied avatars: Genealogies of black feminist art and performance*. NYU Press, 2015.

⁷ Tompkins, “On the Limits and Promise of New Materialist Philosophy.”

To be certain, an imbrication of blackness to objects arouses a number of important questions, including: how then do we, at once, make use of objects to theorize the ways that tell and indeed recognize the ways in which they have made use of us? Furthermore, if objects are indispensable to telling the story of black subjectivity then what might this mean for the limitations of the body? How do and might objects assist us, serve as interlocutors in our queries about Blackness? This dissertation sets out to address these queries by offering a theory of racial objects, and applying that theory across a specific object—the sneaker. However, it is first necessary to acknowledge an existing genealogy of theorizing blackness and things.

Blackness and/as Objects

Thinking about blackness and/as thing(s) is not new. Indeed one of the most fecund sites around which questions of materiality and blackness have cohered is the black body. While, for some, identifying the body as a thing might seem peculiar, as Bill Brown, quoting Maurice Merleau-Ponty, asserts “the body is a thing amongst things” or perhaps *the* thing amongst things.⁸ When it comes to materiality and identity the corpus trumps all. Indeed, the physical body is often naturalized as *the* receptacle for identity. Furthermore, given the peculiarities of blackness, the black body is, arguably, the most obdurate object of them all.⁹ This foregrounding of the body as another object amongst objects, should not minimize the significance of the corpus, but rather highlight that while the implications for racialized bodies, as opposed to (non-corporeal) racial objects are assuredly different, troubling the naturalization of race around and onto the corpus can actually serve to better acquaint us with the curious workings of race across all types of materialities. Ultimately, this emphasis on the body as the material object, nonpareil, is invoked in service of more complex and comprehensive understandings of black subjectivity.¹⁰

It seems that part of the hesitancy in foregrounding the materiality of the black body is also due to a discomfiting nearness of these claims to the pernicious objectification and commodification of blackness. Indeed, American cultural objects as iconic and revered as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s landmark text, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—whose original subtitle, “The Man Who Was a Thing”—reveal the deep and unsettling associations that have been made between blackness and objecthood. However, objectification, while often imposed as part of a racist project, has also been employed by black subjects themselves to name the unique terms of their own condition.¹¹ Some of the most luminary and cited meditations on black subjectivity are articulated in relationship to objectification. While the relationship between racialization and objectification, particularly as it relates to black bodies has been a consistent thematic within Black Studies, taking up the terms of things and objects towards investigating blackness, hasn’t been as readily adopted. At the outset of his now canonized essay “The Fact of Blackness,” Frantz Fanon begins with what is, presumably an anecdote, “‘Dirty Nigger! Or simply, Look, a

⁸ Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 4.

⁹ Bill Brown, *Other Things* (Chicago, IL.: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 8.

¹⁰ The body is seldom understood as material in relationship to other material forms. Indeed, the body is often only evoked as material when the corpus is being distinguished from, say, claims around the body as discursive. In certain instances, however, the body’s materiality is foregrounded, for example when, the body is injured or post-mortem.

¹¹ Bill Brown, “Reification, Reanimation, and the American Uncanny,” *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 2 (2006): 179.

Negro.”¹² These remarks, presumably cast against Fanon, portend for the reader the types of anecdotes to come. Fanon returns to a particularly significant moment —the pinnacle of the Althusserian hailing scene, when he, while traveling by train is met by the gaze of a trembling child who remarks “‘Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!’”¹³ The moment that Fanon is apprehended by the child’s gaze becomes the entrenchment of an already brewing sense of his arrested subjectivity. He recounts his own petrification (in the multiple senses of the word) as he states “I could no longer laugh, because I already knew there were legends, stories, history, and above all historicity which I had learned about from Jaspers.”¹⁴

For Fanon, the weight of history rests on the most visible marker of his blackness or what he refers to as the “epidermalization” of his otherness —his skin, about which he states, “I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: ‘Sho’ good eatin’.”¹⁵ Through the epidermalization of his difference Fanon becomes an object bearing the weight of blackness that it is characterized by a myriad of things including ideology (intellectual deficiencies) and cultural practices (cannibalism) but not the least of which is other objects. The reference to “tom -toms” and “slave-ships” also reveals the ways that objects exist within complex ecologies, and underscores how, not only as Jean Baudrillard asserts, do they become objects in relationship to subjects, but also can elicit meanings between and from each other.¹⁶ Put another way, objects, and objecthood (or perhaps more accurately, things—a distinction that I will address in more detail later) can be constructed between objects and other objects (as opposed to objects and subjects) exclusively. Indeed, in the aforementioned schema that Fanon outlines, there is only room for abstractions (deficiency) and objects, but not subjects—his racialized-self then serving as another abstraction or object among the others he lists.

Objecthood, however, is not merely cast upon Fanon, but rather that which he does (perhaps must) elect as he states “On that day, completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object.”¹⁷ Whether through resignation, defiance, or some combination of the two, Fanon’s objectification is both imposed and enacted. Fanon’s meditations on his own experience with racialization, highlights how, perhaps more broadly, objecthood, as opposed to any number of other states of (non) being, is what is often employed in articulating a certain in- or mal-subjectivity in service of making black subjectivity legible.

Similarly, Aimé Césaire in *Discourse on Colonialism* states:

Between colonizer and colonized there is room only for forced labor, intimidation, pressure, the police, taxation, theft, rape, compulsory crops, contempt, mis-trust, arrogance, self-complacency, swinishness, brainless elites, degraded masses. No human contact, but relations of domination and submission which turn the colonizing man into a

¹² Frantz Fanon, “The Fact of Blackness,” in *Postcolonial Studies*, 1952.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Jean Baudrillard, “The System of Collecting,” in *The Cultures of Collecting* (London: Reaktion Books, 1994).

¹⁷ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York, NY.: Grove Press, 2008), 91.

classroom monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production.¹⁸

Césaire goes on to punctuate his assessment of the colonized position more succinctly identifying the colonial subject's plight as implement in a simple equation of "colonization = 'thingification.'"¹⁹ While Césaire's naming of the colonial subject as an "instrument of production" surely identifies a particular type of relation, the phrase is no less revelatory in its naming of particular and salient characteristics of the black colonial subject as objectified. The colonized subject is a thing, perhaps an implement specifically, but a thing nonetheless. The move towards the language of objects and things is strategic, in that it aids in the apprehension of the condition of black subjectivity within a number of different historical, geographical, political, and social climates. Object-hood, as a unique state of (non) being has been a mode through which racial difference is understood and articulated both among black subjects, as well as the ways in which racialized, specifically black subjects, articulated their experience as such. Understanding the utility (and limitations) of objecthood as a productive mode through which to apprehend the unique states of racial being, mandates clarification around what differentiates objects and things in and of themselves.

Subjects, and Objects, and Things

One of the primary debates that has and continues to animate thing theory and many studies of material culture is that of the difference between object-thing debate. While scholars, have written, ad nauseam, about what constitutes an object, as opposed to a thing, it nonetheless is critical to understanding the racial life of things as hermeneutic. Things are tricky. First there is the semantic trouble of things. To what do they refer? It seems, that as Heidegger states, "in general things applies to anything that is not simply nothing."²⁰ Perhaps things is what we say to "index a certain limit or liminality, to hover at the threshold between the nameable and the unnameable, the figurable and the unfigurable, the identifiable and the unidentifiable."²¹ There are the semantic challenges posed by things, but what about things in and of themselves, or what Heidegger refers to as the "thingness" of things? In differentiating things from objects Brown provides some parameters for things as he contends that "we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us; when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the window gets filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition has been arrested."²² Carrying this line of logic further, Robin Bernstein in her work, "Dances With Things" is careful to demarcate the difference between objects and things as she asserts objects "are important insofar as they manifest, respond to, or transmit meaning that originates in humans. A thing demands that people confront it on its own terms; thus, a thing forces a person into an awareness of the self in material relation to the

¹⁸ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (Monthly Review Press, 2000), 18.

¹⁹ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (Monthly Review Press, 2000), 42.

²⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, Ed. and Trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge, MA.: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 4.

²¹ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (Monthly Review Press, 2000).

²² Brown, "Thing Theory."

thing.”²³ In this regard Bernstein like Bill Brown understands that “thing” actually “names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.”²⁴

W.J. T Mitchell clarifies this point as he states “objects are the way things appear to a subject—that is with a name, an identity, a gestalt or stereotypical template, a description, a use or function, a history, a science. Things on the other hand are simultaneously nebulous and obdurate, sensuously concrete and vague.”²⁵ The thing then, marks a site when the object either descends back into or transcends into the state of the ineffable. Again, Mitchell provides some elucidative insight as he states “things play the role of a raw material, an amorphous shapeless brute materiality awaiting organization by a system of objects. Or they figure the excess, the detritus, the waste when an object becomes useless, obsolete, extinct (or conversely) when it takes on the surplus of aesthetic or spiritual value, the *je ne sais quoi* of beauty, the wild thing or the ‘sweet thang,’ or the “Black Thing” that you wouldn’t understand.”²⁶

It should be noted that this distinction between thing and object might suggest that one refers to a state of “naked matter,” or a type of noumenon, while the other is more imbued with culturally and socially inscribed meaning. Indeed, this seems to be the difference that some scholars have attempted to make. While for some, what differentiates the thing from the object is a difference in the inscription of social meaning, for others, the thing is that which chafes at this meaning either through regression or transgression of this meaning. In other words, objects are implements, they acquiesce; things, however, tend to act up. Furthermore, it is important to note that, despite the persistence of this debate, the boundaries between things and objects (and subjects) prove to be much more porous and mutable than they are concrete.

Indeed the seeming irresolvable questions of distinction between objects and things has led some thing theorist to identify it as a “much disparaged” and hackneyed debate within the field. However, the field’s inattentiveness to questions of race, makes the implications of this divide, particularly for those actors whose subjectivity is articulated through objects novel, relevant, and in need of continued theorization.²⁷ One of the foremost thinkers on things, Martin Heidegger, once stated, rather simply that “a human being is not a thing.”²⁸ While Heidegger’s assertion seems obvious enough, for many theorists, this claim is a contentious one. For example, in his piece entitled “The Thing Itself,” published after his important volume *The Social Life of Things* Arjun Appadurai asserts that , “persons and things are not radically distinct categories,”²⁹ This assertion is one that seems to function as a central tenet to much of the discourse on things, but does so without a full consideration of the peculiarities of blackness. Appadurai goes on to identify the status of the slave as in accordance with this assertion stating “Slaves, once sold as chattel, can become gradually humanized, personified, and re enchanted by the investiture of humanity.”³⁰

²³ Robin Bernstein, “Dances with Things Material Culture and the Performance of Race,” *Social Text* 27, no. 4 101 (2009): 67–94.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ WJ Thomas Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago, IL.: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 156.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Brown, *Other Things*, 19.

²⁸ Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track, Ed. and Trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes*, 4.

²⁹ Arjun Appadurai, “The Thing Itself,” *Public Culture* 18, no. 1 (2006): 15.

³⁰ Ibid.

However, blackness, which is deeply and inextricably tied to racial slavery within the United States, confounds this claim. Appadurai's easy assertion that even the slave can be "re enchanted with the investiture of the human" does not necessarily apply to non-enslaved black subjects. Indeed, it seems that the afterlife of slavery is such that even black subjectivity removed from racial slavery continues to carry with it a valence of non- or not full subjectivity.

And yet, traditional thing theory has failed to consider blackness, while simultaneously making claims, like the aforementioned one about slavery—a condition that within the context of the United States, seem to unavoidably conjure and indeed, be made culturally legible through (though perhaps not exclusively so) historical and embodied experiences of Blackness. However, I am primarily interested in the ways in which Blackness and objecthood have been cast as kindred modalities and have been undertaken as such within scholarship. One of the most recognizable associations between objects and blackness is through issues of commodification.

A Certain Something: Commodities as a Unique Category of Things

In "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof" Karl Marx begins by stating "a commodity appears at first sight, a very trivial thing and easily understood."³¹ Going on he states that "But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than "table turning" ever was."³² The anthropomorphic terms by which Marx defines commodity including "stepping forth" and standing both on its head and feet are notable. It seems that commodities are a specific category of objects that most readily lend themselves to an understanding of the ways in which objects do assert themselves within a cultural field. About the commodity's unique form, Marx continues "The mystical character of commodities does not originate, therefore, in their use value. Just as little does it proceed from the nature of the determining factors of value. For, in the first place, however varied the useful kinds of labour, or productive activities, may be, it is a physiological fact, that they are functions of the human organism, and that each such function, whatever may be its nature or form, is essentially the expenditure of human brain, nerves, muscles, &c."³³ For Marx the anthropomorphizing, the enlivening of the commodity is directly related to, or indeed, representative of human exertion, labor, that the commodity necessarily marks. It is from this curious social arrangement and indexing that Marx argues, the fetishism of commodities emerges.

Blackness as a unique condition, a condition of dispossession and abjection, has often been highly linked to objects, and more specifically to commodities. But furthermore, this association is also often linked to ideas of utility. While this association might be born out of the literal commodification of black bodies during enslavement, this intimate relationship between blackness and commodity persists. This critique has not always been cast from outside, but also levied from within. For example, In *Up From Slavery*, Booker T. Washington remarks upon his travel across the post -Emancipation rural south while examining the land to find suitable accommodations for his normal institute, Tuskegee. In one instance he describes the living quarters of one of the many families with which he boarded, stating:

³¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (C. H. Kerr, 1915), 81.

³² *Ibid*, 82.

³³ *Ibid*.

In these cabin homes I often found sewing-machines which had been bought, or were being bought, on instalments, frequently at a cost of as much as sixty dollars, or showy clocks for which the occupants of the cabins had paid twelve or fourteen dollars. I remember that on one occasion when I went into one of these cabins for dinner, when I sat down to the table for a meal with the four members of the family, I noticed that, while there were five of us at the table, there was but one fork for the five of us to use. Naturally there was an awkward pause on my part. In the opposite corner of that same cabin was an organ for which the people told me they were paying sixty dollars in monthly instalments. One fork, and a sixty-dollar organ! In most cases the sewing-machine was not used, the clocks were so worthless that they did not keep correct time - and if they had, in nine cases out of ten there would have been no one in the family who could have told the time of day - while the organ of course, was rarely used for want of a person who could play upon it.³⁴

While Washington's anecdote here, like those he outlines throughout the text, uses devices like exaggeration to communicate a moral lesson, they primarily serve to highlight the misplaced values of the people he encounters. What seems to be clear through Washington's descriptions of the daily lives of the rural Southern Black folk he encounters throughout his sojourns through the South is that his project of industrial education could rehabilitate what, more than systematic racial dispossession or economic exploitation, is revealed in their living conditions— a perversion of an ecology of subject, and objects, as evinced by their inability to exhibit mastery over things. Understanding this move is paramount, as similar sentiments persist around black consumers in the contemporary moment. Within Washington and other's admonition of the consumptive habits of black people there is a clear rhetoric of how they should or should not adhere to the dominant cultural dictates around capitalist consumption; however, there is seldom a sustained conversation about consumption in and of itself as a mode. Indeed, the core logics of capitalist consumption are never contested, only the particular spending choices of certain consumers. To eschew capitalism as a social cultural and economic mode, is to be a bad subject in and of itself, and does not lend itself to the type of reform that Washington and other capitalist are advocating—one that still requires participation in capitalism, albeit in ways that are deemed acceptable by the larger society.

Based upon Washington's anecdote, it seems that black subjects' relationship to commodities then has become an important barometer for the moral, economic, and also human ascension of black subjects themselves. While on the one hand consumptive culture may indeed be something that has been used to mark the black subject relationship to citizenship, one of the responsibilities of citizenship in a capitalist society mandates consumption, and therefore leaves black consumers in a particularly precarious space. This may not be racially unique, however due to the particularity and peculiarity of the type of dispossession within the United States, in the form of racial slavery, Black people's experience proves to be particularly generative.

Critiques like those levied by Washington, that have, because of their purchasing habits, linked black people, and blackness as that which in and of itself, marks a type of diminishing decadence. In his discussion of black decadence David Marriott asserts "unless blackness is put to work as the figure of endless, unproductive labor, its "natural" course will assert itself as an exaggeratedly inflated figure of inflation; or, rather, the way that blackness puffs itself up when possessed of capital is actually a sign of decadent inutility, as in the case of an excess noteworthy

³⁴ Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery* (New York: Courier Corporation, 2012), 54.

for its unproductive labor.”³⁵ Therefore, no matter the context the black body becomes synonymous with enslavement, and the most menial wage labor and various forms of unremunerated servitude and dehumanization to which it has been historically subjected. Blackness still indexes even in the face of a particular type of paradox— a subjecthood that it is, if not dispossessed of, is certainly incongruent with more traditional terms of subjectivity, and, perhaps one that is more near to objecthood.

Commodities and commodification, because of the ways that they already index other forms of asymmetrical power relationship, are more than any other object-type, exemplary of the racial object relation. Like bodies, objects of various types, do the messy work of making race “real.” Conversely, race gives meaning to objects. One of the primary ways blackness has worked to giving meaning to objects is through commodity culture and consumption. There is something about the commodity as a specific type of object or thing that makes it particularly resonant with racialization. As Igor Kopytoff states in “The Cultural Biography of Things,” “From a cultural perspective, the production of commodities is also a cultural and cognitive process: commodities must be not only produced as things, but also marked as a certain kind of thing.”³⁶

The specific characteristic of commodities, the “certain kind of thing that they are” is moored in their being endowed with an exchange value.³⁷ However, it is important to note that commodities are not always and forever objects that possess this exchange value, but rather accrue (or diminish) in value within certain context. Further clarifying the characteristics of commodities Appadurai goes on to assert that “out of the total range of things available in society, only some of them are considered appropriate for marking as a commodities. Moreover, the same thing may be treated as a commodity at one time, and not another. And finally, the same thing, at the same time, may be treated as a commodity at one time, and not at another.”³⁸ Bill Brown echoes and refines this sentiment as he states “commodity object is unambiguously a commodity only during the course of transaction, after which it is individualized, leading a concrete life outside the commodity structure, beyond the abstraction on which exchange depends.”³⁹ Commodities, as a specific category of things are those that are often given a particular degree of attention within theorizations of things, and additionally are a category of things, whose, seemingly predetermined specificity is often taken up as a fruitful object through which to investigate the peculiarities of things.

In her essay “Eating the Other,” bell hooks engages with the idea of blackness and/as commodity explicitly stating “the commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight more intense, more satisfying, than normal, ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes a spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.”⁴⁰ Though hooks primarily centers her discussion of racial commodification around media texts, the notion of eating the other is also applicable to the material artifacts of consumer culture. If, as Appadurai outlined commodities are objects that are

³⁵ David Marriott, “On Decadence: Bling Bling - Journal #79 February 2017 - e-Flux,” February 2017, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/79/94430/on-decadence-bling-bling/>.

³⁶ Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, UK.: Cambridge University Press, 1988),64.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Brown, *Other Things*, 246.

⁴⁰ bell hooks, *Black Looks* (Boston, MA.: South End Press, 1992), 21.

exchanged, then a great preponderance of objects are, even, if only for a fleeting amount of time, commodities. And yet, despite the prominence and importance of commodification to theorizations and understandings of the relationship between blackness and objects, it is paramount to maintain that commodification is not the sole means through which blackness has been tethered to object form. Indeed, as Bill Brown asserts, despite the pervasiveness of the commodity as a central feature of modern life “the human investment in the physical object world, and the mutual constitution of human subject and inanimate object, can hardly be reduced to those relations.”⁴¹ Brown’s assertion about commodities as the most pervasive, yet not the sole, object-type that marks the relationship between human subjects and material culture can be applied specifically to racial objects, particularly the most infamous racial objects—black collectibles.

Difference Made Material: Black Memorabilia and Racial/Racist Objects

A cursory internet search for the terms “racial object” reveals that black collectibles have and continue to be the most obvious and infamous racial objects. Black collectibles— also commonly referred to as black memorabilia, black Americana, or racial memorabilia— are objects of the most quotidian order. Most commonly they consist of things like dolls, cookie jars, ashtrays, signage, banks, salt and pepper shakers, and post cards. Their conspicuous unspectacularity is part of their appeal, and indeed, part of their violence. These objects make their home in the most intimate of our physical and psychic enclaves.

While black collectibles are often identified as originating in the late 1880’s they gained particular traction directly following emancipation. As Kenneth Goings assert in his work on black collectibles, the rapid increase in the production and popularity of black Americana cannot be divorced from growing consumerism and the expansion of advertising in American society in the early part of the twentieth century. Ultimately it was a post emancipation impulse that calcified their cultural significance and ubiquity.⁴² In the aftermath of the Civil War and during Reconstruction in particular, more direct forms of white control of black bodies shifted drastically. In the wake of this shift, Black collectibles performed a type of corporeal surrogacy. Bill Brown explains this function further, stating, that in a “world without slavery these objects enabled their owners to possess and control miniaturized black faces and black bodies”⁴³ Black memorabilia functioned as a type of psychic salve for the effects of the experience of social upheaval many whites felt in the aftermath of slavery.

Black collectibles along with their performative counterpart, minstrelsy, functioned as cultural co-conspirators in the project of marking and reifying Black racial difference, and reinforcing white supremacist ideologies. And while collectibles and minstrelsy shared in this project, noting the difference in mode between the two is important. Where minstrelsy as a performative mode was marked by movement, instability, and improvisation, the collectible in its materiality was static. Bill Brown expounds upon the implications of this rigidity as he states “the fixity of the stereotype, rendered in ceramic or iron or aluminum, compensates for the new

⁴¹ Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago, IL.: University of Chicago Press, 2003),5.

⁴² Kenneth W. Goings, *Mammy and Uncle Mose: Black Collectibles and American Stereotyping* (Bloomington, IN.: Indiana University Press Bloomington, 1994).

⁴³ Brown, *Other Things*, 254.

heterogeneity of black America; the nostalgic embodiment of some fantasmatic past compensates for uncertainties about the future place and role of African Americans in the U.S.”⁴⁴ Furthermore, the materiality of the object, its ostensible permanence, enabled and propagated its diffusion and its recalcitrant presence into the most mundane yet intimate parts of the private sphere. This nearness to the homespace served to passively instantiate ideologies of racial difference.

The obvious utilitarian function of these objects is significant. These objects were not initially collectibles in the sense that they are currently understood, but were rather, the implements of everyday domestic activity. They were used. For Goings, these objects use function is inseparable from the racist ideologies with which they were imbued. Goings asserts, that “Their very nature means they were used constantly... By using them in everyday, familiar manner, I believe the user consciously and unconsciously accepted the stereotypes they presented.”⁴⁵ The functionality of these objects coupled with their use, and then later intentioned disuse is significant. Their later disuse codifies the same insidious familiarity that Goings’ asserts comes as a result of their use—these objects last. Moreover, the collectible, through intentioned disuse, can become objects of a particular type of display—a sign of the consumer’s conspicuous consumption. Ultimately, the untethering of the object from, at least part of its initial purpose, as an ashtray, a bank, or a flour jar, crystallizing these racist meanings into perpetuity. Therefore the black collectible, in form, use, and aesthetics — cartoonish, almost carnivalesque depictions of blackness complete with exaggerated features such as large, lips, and eyes, and black and skin— works to codify the racial valence of these objects. However it is important to note that despite the ways that these objects seduce subjects towards a particular set of engagements, there were, and are a range of orientations to be had towards black collectibles. The black collectible brings to the fore many of the primary issues that are central to traditional thing theory, which include the object-subject-thing, relationship, the process of enlivenment, etc. Moreover the crudeness of the black collectible as a racial object becomes an important point of entry for more nuanced considerations of racial things. Indeed, these things do exist, and despite the dearth of engagement with race within work formally identified as thing theory, so too does scholarship that both explicitly engages as well as gestures to some of the key issues of thing theory as part of their project. I identify these texts as “racial thing theory.”

Racial Thing Theory

Arguably the most critical text of racial thing theory is Robin Bernstein’s “Dances With Things.”⁴⁶ From the outset Bernstein is intentional in her imbrication of blackness to thing theory. She explicitly situates her piece as one that engages with the critical debate about things and objects, about which she states “Objects are important insofar as they manifest, respond to, or transmit meaning that originates in humans. A thing demands that people confront it on its own terms; thus, a thing forces a person into an awareness of the self in material relation to the thing.”⁴⁷ Moreover, she draws upon some of the foremost theorists of thing theory, like Arjun Appadurai and Martin Heidegger, while also offering her own theoretical contribution—scriptive

⁴⁴ Bill Brown, “Reification, Reanimation, and the American Uncanny,” *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 2 (2006): 186.

⁴⁵ Goings, *Mammy and Uncle Mose*, xiii.

⁴⁶ *Dances With Things* is the article that would become foundational for Bernstein’s later book, *Racial Innocence*, in which Bernstein expounds upon her concept of scriptive things.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 69-70.

things, providing the concept as an answer to her own important query “how do people dance with things to construct race?”⁴⁸

According to Bernstein objects are animate in that they both perform, and impel particular performances from the more traditionally understood subjects with which they interact. In this regard, black collectibles function as what she terms “scriptive things.” According to Bernstein a scriptive thing is that which “broadly structures performance while allowing for resistance and unleashing original, live variations that may not be individually predictable.”⁴⁹ Things then, function in the Althusserian sense, hailing the subject into a set of scripted actions.⁵⁰ However, as Bernstein is careful to make clear, the scriptive thing is not all-powerful, but rather, even in its seeming interpolative, still co-labors, with the subject in a way that, like a play-script, allows for deviation and improvisation on the part of the subject while also acknowledging that a full range of performances, even those that may appear transgressive, “actually follow the scripts range of implications.”⁵¹

While Bernstein offers us a hermeneutic for examining the ways in which we engage objects, and the way they engage us, Tavia Nyong'o, in his piece “Racial Kitsch and Black Performance” hones in on particular issues of affect, performance, race and objects that congeal around black collectibles. Nyong'o identifies black collectibles as “racist kitsch” a cadre of object which he describes as “pretty disgusting.”⁵² According to Nyong'o, while kitsch is “failed seriousness” racist kitsch is “failed humor.”⁵³ Expounding on the difference of kitsch and racial kitsch Nyong'o states:

The sub-genre of racist kitsch, which was largely ignored by the modernists, attempts by contrast to say something banal. In its failed effort to move unobtrusively among the objects of our everyday encounter, racist kitsch unwittingly reveals itself to be profoundly laden with meaning. Attempting to remain ephemera at the periphery of our vision, racist kitsch in fact holds our gaze, stops our conversations, and in its demand for attention in spite of itself, is an equal embarrassment.⁵⁴

In Nyong'o's description racial kitsch is highly active, agential working “in spite of itself” to convey a range of cultural meaning.⁵⁵ While Nyong'o asserts that disgust is the only acceptable response towards black collectibles, David Pilgrim in his piece “The Garbage Man: Why I collect Racist Objects” complicates this debate. In the piece Pilgrim reveals the impetus for his own collection stating “I collect these items because I believe and know to be true, that items of intolerance, can be used to teach tolerance.”⁵⁶ Pilgrim's assertion that black collectibles have didactic potential suggests that these items can be wielded in a way that recognizes their

⁴⁸ Ibid,69.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ for more on Althusser's discussion of interpellation see: Louis Althusser. "Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (notes towards an investigation)." *The anthropology of the state: A reader* 9, no. 1 (2006): 86-98.

⁵¹ Bernstein, “Dances with Things Material Culture and the Performance of Race”, 75.

⁵² Tavia Nyong'o, “Racial Kitsch and Black Performance,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 15, no. 2 (2002): 371.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ David Pilgrim, “The Garbage Man: Why I Collect Racist Objects,” *Grand Valley Review* 32, no. 1 (2007): 10.

power to wound but is ultimately trumped by the intention of the subject. However, racist objects are unwieldy. Again Pilgrim's own anecdote "most collectors are soothed by their collections; I hated mine and was relieved to get it out of my home. I donated my entire collection to the university with the condition that the entire collection be displayed and preserved. I never liked having the objects in my home. I had two small children, they would wander into the basement and look at daddy's dolls —two mannequins dressed in Ku Klux Klan regalia. They played with the racist target games. One of them, I don't know which, broke a 'Tom' cooking jar. I was angry for two days. The irony is not lost upon me.⁵⁷ Pilgrim's admission of both his dis-ease with his collection despite the seemingly insatiable drive to continue to amass a collection of racial objects, as well as his frustration with his children breaking the cookie jar reveals the ways in which, despite a longing to have dominion over them, objects act upon us, and sometimes compel us to act, in spite of ourselves, can seduce, and are agential and have a quasi-subject quality.⁵⁸

Nyong'o, in his advocacy of disgust, as well as Pilgrim in his advocacy of the didactic purpose of objects, are, in their own ways, examples of the improvisation or refusal (i.e. actively resisting the urge to align with the proscribed dictates of pleasure that the object elicits and instead takes pleasure in the oppositional engagement with the object), of the dominant script or a type of disruption of the script in the improvisational terms that Bernstein outlines and therefore, not only do they allow for conventional engagement but also, oppositional ones.⁵⁹

Racial objects, then, can be understood as scriptive things that are marked by not only the types of performances that they impel but also by those that they afford or "affordances." First introduced by psychologist James J. Gibson in 1977 affordance is a theoretical concept that has been taken up and associated primarily with studies of space and the environment, often in fields such as architecture and planning. According to Gibson, affordances, which he explains in terms of the environment "are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill. The verb to afford is found in the dictionary, but the noun affordance is not. I have made it up. I mean by it something that refers to both the environment and the animal in a way that no existing term does. It implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment."⁶⁰

While Gibson primarily outlines affordances of objects in terms of more physical implement i.e. "An elongated object of moderate size and weight affords wielding. If used to hit or strike, it is a club or hammer. If used by a chimpanzee behind bars to pull in a banana beyond its reach, it is a sort of rake. In either case, it is an extension of the arm. A rigid staff also affords

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ In "Unbecoming Human An Ethics of Objects." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2015): 295-320, Eunjung Kim offers the concept of "quasi object." According to Kim, a "quasi-object" refers to "a laboring machine or being in an unconscious or immobile state" in which "one embodies the characteristics of objects, perceives one's body or body parts as objects, or suspends what are conventionally viewed as uniquely human capacities and values. Kim's concept of the "quasi-object" can perhaps be conversely applied to things. Objects, that act or are animate in spite of themselves also work to disrupt the boundaries between object and subject and can be understood as quasi-subjects in their curious agential, pseudo-animacy.

⁵⁹ While Bernstein outlines the incompetent performer as the one who "understands how a book or other thing scripts broad behaviors within her or his historical moment — regardless of whether or how the performer follows that script," resistant performers "understand and exerts agency against the script"(75).

⁶⁰ James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception: Classic Edition* (Psychology Press, 2014), 119.

leverage and in that use is a lever. A pointed elongated object affords piercing—if large it is a spear, if small a needle or awl.”⁶¹

When talking about objects Gibson states very plainly that “the affordances of what we would loosely call objects are *extremely* variable. In this regard, then, the malleability creates the space for what I term affective affordances. The object of affordances outlined by Gibson seem to be primarily centered around the physical engagements they allow. However, as Bernstein explains with the scriptive thing—our engagement with objects constructs race—therefore, it seems that perhaps certain objects afford engagements by subjects that construct and/or reify more amorphous things like race. Imbricating theories of affordance to performance however creates the space for affordances that are not necessarily foregrounded in Gibson’s schema. I want to think of affordance in terms of more abstract or affective affordance. In this regard affective affordance of objects can also name these objects ability to enable more abstract concepts, ideas, and ways of being. Affective affordances may be one important way of naming how objects contribute to our understanding of, and perhaps propagate race itself.

Returning to the specific qualities of black collectibles helps to clarify these points. In Nyong’o’s description of black collectibles he explains that these objects are poised and purposed to elicit pleasure, however, given the historical and social context within which they are consumed, they actually can (or should) work to engender disgust. This disgust response is often the way in which the collecting practice of many black collectors is described and justified. In other words, the pleasure in the disgust describes how some black collectors of black memorabilia understand their relation to these objects. These objects are racist because they are *racist*. While much of these objects’ incendiary racial power lie in their citation and perpetuation of racist fantasies and ideologies their ability to transmit and evoke these cannot be disaggregated from their materiality. In other words, the violence of these objects is as much a part of their form, as it is there function. These cultural objects cite and incite, marking a calcification of racial othering and they ways in which black subjects have and continue to contend with ontological questions about their humanity. Bill Brown clarifies this point about the particular violence of the black collectible object as he asserts “these objects might be said to deanimate it, to arrest the stereotype, to render it in three-dimensional stasis, to fix a demeaning and/or romanticizing racism with the fortitude of solid form.”⁶² Functioning in a way that evokes something similar to what scholar Saidiya Hartman terms the “afterlife of slavery,” in the contemporary moment these objects continue to work at the level of the affective as a site of trauma in the present.⁶³

Both Bernstein and Nyong’o, and their respective concepts of “scriptive things” and “racial kitsch”, can be clearly identified as racial thing theory as their work addresses how a subject’s engage with things (or perhaps are engaged by them in such a way) that elicits both the historical and affective experiences of blackness. Harvey Young, however, takes a different approach to the racial object. Young engages the body as material, the corpus, and the ways it becomes objectified, in the crudest of terms—through dismemberment, circulation, and display. While black collectibles are a very unique object-type with a particular racial charge, the racist character of these objects is also a function of their indexical form which clearly draws upon the black body. Within the context of the United States certain objects, particularly those that are

⁶¹ Ibid, 125.

⁶² Brown, “Reification, Reanimation, and the American Uncanny”, 185.

⁶³ Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Macmillan, 2008).

highly affixed to particular cultural practice tied primarily to racially charged historical epochs and moments (like slavery), are also racialized when levied in a certain way within the contemporary context. A noose for example, functions as a symbol for lynching. Despite the ways in which lynching is a practice that has occurred across race, gender, and time as a form of social control and terror, it still most readily connotes a black male body, functioning metonymically for a racist American past. The hanging of nooses evokes a certain racial terror even in the absence of the actors required to seemingly make it function as such. Within the United States the Jim Crow Era is the moment within United States history, more so than any other, that is associated with lynching. The noose then continues to be one of the most ubiquitous and legible objects of anti-black racism and hatred.

Therefore, the noose is an object-shorthand. Furthermore, incidents of hate crimes that have involved nooses have been cast between white assailant and black victims. The legibility of this terror requires that all subjects have some shared conceptual histories, cultural contexts, etc. in order for the symbol, and ultimately the crime to be legible. In some cases the meaning of an object is so overdetermined, that it cannot be repurposed. Nooses, like racist collectibles, are difficult. Indeed, this requires careful curation of both objects and subjects. And even then the ways in which they quicken and incite is never fully within any one's control.⁶⁴ Indeed, some items efface the possibility of pure effigy. This means that the object is such is that, even disabused from the contexts and use to which these items are often put, it can still provoke, can still incite. Their ability to be recontextualized and resignified is trumped by their codification with a singular entrenched meaning.

Furthermore, this potency seems to undermine the very idea of effigy—that which is supposed to assume a likeness to the thing itself, able to represent without surrogating. The noose does not necessarily function in alignment with these terms of comportment. When the effigy does not adhere to the strict rules of representation within a given context it becomes as much, if not more so, a part of the violence. Along with black collectibles, lynching souvenirs are another set of racial objects that should, seemingly elicit, visceral disgust. Harvey Young reveals in his work on the lynching souvenir, the objectification of blackness takes on much more crude and macabre reality where the black bodies (or parts of them) become literal objects. As Young explains, the practice of dismembering and distributing the body parts of lynching victims as has been described in the lynching murders of Sam Hose, Richard Coleman, and George Ward bespeak a unique set of racial objects. Most often these bodily relics would take the form of fingers, toes, teeth.

The lynching artifacts foreground the distinction between what Hortense Spillers refers to as the body and the “flesh”, or ‘that zero degrees of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourses, or the reflexes of iconography.’⁶⁵ Part of the ghastly

⁶⁴ For example, on December 13, 2014 effigies of lynching victims were found on the UC Berkeley campus. The effigies, one of Laura Nelson, who was lynched in Oklahoma in 1911 were also accompanied by words “I can't breathe,” a clear reference the death of Eric Garner, who was choked to death by NYPD in July of 2014. The lack of explanation or attribution around the effigies resulted in a range of responses including anger, disgust, curiosity, and praise. Eventually, an artist collective took responsibility for the effigies and stated that their intention was to draw attention to historical incidences of racial terror and violence in an effort to historicize and confront contemporary issues of racism, however many people still found the images to be violent, and obscene.

⁶⁵ Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 67

unspeakableness of the lynching artifact is the ways that it violently unmoored the flesh from the body in terms of the distinction that Spillers outlines. Young complicates the terms that Spillers outlines through his contention that these corporeal objects became transformed into keepsakes or souvenirs. While the souvenir has come to be associated with a specific type of popular cultural detritus that is readily found in hotels amusement parks, airports and other sites of transit and transience in the form of shot glasses, key chains, the souvenir actually refers more to a characteristic of an object, than a type. Presumably, any object could potentially function as a souvenir. Jean Baudrillard makes a similar claim, when describing a similar object,—the collectible, about which he states, is “divested of its [originary] function and made relative to a subject.”⁶⁶ And while the souvenir is a function of the subject, the type of function is not completely discretionary but rather, a very particular type of function. The souvenir is an object that, by definition, harkens “back to a larger experience, of which it is a fragment. If the souvenir could be the entire experience rather than just a part, then it would cease to be a souvenir.”⁶⁷ Therefore, the souvenir, akin to a metonymy made material, is a part that comes to stand for and/or conjure a whole. Incomplete in itself, the souvenir requires an accompanying narrative furnished by its possessor in order to fill in that which is missing and to allow the fragment to reflect the event or experience of which it is a part.”⁶⁸ In this regard, lynching reveals that anybody and any body, no matter racialization, could become a souvenir. Black men, while both in number and in the cultural imagination of the United States are often synonymous with the lynching victim, were, in practice not its sole victims. However, the black body as subject to a broader system of spectacularization, surveillance, and control ultimately facilitated the conditions for more forms of objectification like the lynching souvenir. In other words the always already liminal social and corporeal status of the black subject provides the conditions for which black bodies can be brutally and subjected to more crude forms of objectification like lynching, and subsequently further fragmented and dehumanized in the form of dismemberment and ultimately souvenir.

Knuckles, toes, teeth—all common parts of the body that become dismembered and distributed during lynchings— work to both call up the body, but also efface it as a cohesive whole, and further, in regards to black bodies reiterates a type of fragmented or incomplete subjecthood. Ultimately black collectibles and other, more crude, racial objects like lynching souvenirs highlight important questions and considerations of how subjecthood and objecthood, are always in conversation, that despite their seeming coherence, are not once and for all states. And, as the preceding discussion of black collectibles, and lynching souvenirs evinces, objectification is one mode through which to understand the relationship between black subjectivity and objects, more literal engagements between black subjects and more conventionally understood objects is also revelatory of the ways that blackness can and is deployed towards the end of animating objects and conversely how objects offer us insight into the world of human actors. In the case of the black collectible, the noose, or the lynching souvenir, the object come to evoke a sordid history of U.S race relations (specifically blackness). While these objects continue to be those that index, most potently, blackness within the United States, they are certainly not the only ones.

⁶⁶ John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, *Cultures of Collecting* (Reaktion Books, 1994),7.

⁶⁷ Harvey Young, “The Black Body as Souvenir in American Lynching,” *Theatre Journal* 57, no. 4 (2005): 641.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 642.

Unlike black collectibles, there are racial objects that, on their face, or subtextually, necessarily import any nefarious racial meaning or charge. Like black collectibles these objects, are of a pedestrian order. They are those that are so unspectacular that their role in affording, promoting or transmitting racial meaning might be and often goes unconsidered. For example, black books, black film, black art, are all examples of objects that in their content, and or production are affixed to black people. Along with black hair products, including picks, combs, du-rags, scarves, bonnets, as well as shampoo's conditioners, butters, creams, and pomades are all readily accepted as black. Of these objects, those tied to the beauty industry — hot combs, afro pics, du rags that— because of their nearness to the body, both figuratively and literally, are significant. Their somatic affordance, or the ways in which they are seen as enabling, though not necessitating nor exclusively the domain of particular bodily performances for those racialized as black, lends itself to understandings of the objects themselves as racial. For example, while anyone can wear a mesh cap, the du-rag, as an item with an intended utilitarian function of smoothing out and lying flat coarse hair, is most readily associated with black men who have shorter haircuts, also became understood and used as a distinct fashion choice and through chains of equivalence has become an aesthetic marker of coolness, thuggishness, and street style—all terms that have been deployed as euphemisms for blackness— in the contemporary moment.

In this regard then, these objects reflect Appadurai's assertion that "the transactions that surround things that invested with properties of social relations."⁶⁹ Given this, it makes sense that race, as an organizing feature of social life within the United States would be reflected and replicated in objects. I interpret Appadurai's use of transactions as accommodating a range of human interaction with objects including purchase, storing, collecting, selling, but also wearing, eating, throwing away, breaking, preserving, demolishing, etc. the ways that human actors interact with what Bruno Latour refers to as "actants" or actors that are "non-human" and "non individual entities."⁷⁰ Thus far, the racial objects that have been identified have either fit into one of two categories—those that are identified as racial because they are racist (or harken to a racist type of historical past), or those that have a close relationship to the somatic, enabling certain experiences of embodied blackness. The question still persists however, as to what makes things black? Or what, beyond objects being racist, marks them as racial? It is this query to which the racial life of things attempts to shed some light.

It's A Black Thing: Towards a Theory of Racial Objects

Around the late eighties the proclamation "It's a Black Thing" entered the cultural lexicon.⁷¹ Beyond its use as a verbal retort, the phrase was closely associated with objects as a host of quotidian objects — t-shirts, bumper stickers— bore the slogan. The efficacy of the is hinged upon its users (as well as those towards who it is cast) acknowledging blackness as knowable and unknowable. The phrase serves to identify and validate certain cultural practices and knowledges about blackness. The assertion of something as a "black thing" could be similarly be turned on its head to subtly or overtly cast against particular black subjects as a sign of their deviance, through the employment by these same subjects as a marker of their cultural uniqueness, and inaccessibility, as a marker and legislator of authenticity evinced by the phrase frequent supplement, addition "you wouldn't understand." While it's difficult to pinpoint the

⁶⁹ Appadurai, "The Thing Itself", 15.

⁷⁰ Bruno Latour, "On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications," *Soziale Welt*, 1996, 369.

⁷¹ There is no clear identified moment/place of origin for this phrase, however the cultural politics and production of the late eighties seemed to and is the time period with which it is primarily identified.

emergence of this phrase, its popularity and deployment revealed black people's various strategies for negotiating and squelching cultural oglers and unwelcome interlopers and their longing to know the complex interior lives of black people (it should also be noted that the term could be used intra-racially as a reflection and/or mode of policing racial authenticity) and culture usually through appropriation of cultural production, with little relationship to actual black people.

For example, the famous folklorist and trained anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston, remarking on the cultural practices of anthropologists discusses her own strategies for confounding white scopophilic curiosity often rooted in racist understandings of black difference as she states "The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song."⁷² In this regard, Hurston articulates the terms of her most intimate interior life as that which cannot be known, only misunderstood through objects, —a move that seems all the more curious given Hurston's background as trained anthropologist, but is perhaps actually informed by it. And while Hurston's comments indict a white imagination that was poised to readily and unquestionably look to the material for certain truths in ways that cultural insiders might know to actually be false sight of knowing, her claims also suggests the ways in which objects, both metaphorical and material, are important instrumental to our understandings of blackness.

The racial life of things is how objects, do the work, for better or worse, of constructing, codifying and conditioning our everyday encounters and understanding of race. Additionally, these items are imbued with racial meaning in such a way that their own legibility as an object is linked to their racial character. Furthermore, while I maintain an awareness of the ways that objectification has been levied as a critique of the constriction and even occlusion of black subjects as such, I also want to consider the possibilities of objects for black subjects. Eunjung Kim underscores this point as she states beyond simply being deployed as a condemnatory last word, 'objectification' as a mode of 'dehumanization' can offer a new way to challenge the exclusionary configurations of the humanity that create otherness."⁷³ Similarly, in his work on black women performers, Uri McMillan complicates the assumed insidious relationship between blackness and commodity as he queries "What happens, I ask, if we reimagine black objecthood as a way towards agency rather than antithesis, as a strategy rather than a site of injury."⁷⁴ Although McMillan seems more interested in how subjects might employ or assume objecthood as a strategic move, baked into this idea is the potentiality of objectification. While the racial life of things marks the ways in which objects, sometimes unwittingly and unwillingly speak on behalf or instead of racial subjects, it also cites the possibility of complicating what we know about racialization, how these processes work, and can potentially trouble the terms by which black subjectivity as a contested state in a way that doesn't reify the subject or non-subject binary, but disrupts the terms of this arrangement altogether.

The racial life of things suggests a type of anthropomorphism. At its most basic definitional level anthropomorphia refers to the affixing of human characteristics onto non-

⁷² Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 3.

⁷³ Eunjung Kim, "Unbecoming Human An Ethics of Objects," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2015): 295.

⁷⁴ Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (New York, NY.: NYU Press, 2015), 9.

human beings like an animal or an object. However this racial anthropomorphia complicates this entirely. The endowing of black racial characteristics to things is always already complicated by the ways in which blackness in and of itself, already suggests alterity, or some different state of humanity. Therefore, for a thing to have black characteristics, however unintentionally, this suggests a doubling on the thing's object-hood. In other words, if, as theorizations of black subjectivity seem to suggest, blackness demarcates a type of liminal, if not altogether different status of subjecthood then blackness can be understood as an already anthropomorphic-like state.

While my use of the racial life of things attempts to differentiate between the aforementioned racist objects or those that are racial because of somatic associations, and the alternative cadre of objects that I would identify as racially neutral, the ways in which these objects acquire a racial life is actually very similar. Racial objects function as such either through, like racist objects, eliciting a certain history that is highly racially charged, and/or through their somatic affordances—their enabling of certain embodied racial performances. Like racist objects, those that are racially enlivened draw upon a history of race, albeit, unlike racist objects or those with explicit somatic affordances, the objects don't automatically or always elicit or enable racial meaning.

The utility of a theory like the racial life of things is best highlighted through an engagement with objects, and the remainder of this project is committed to that task. While the racial life of things is a heuristic that can be applied across any number of objects, I restrict my analysis of objects to those that are both physically near and indexical to the body. I am specifically interested in clothing and apparel. This work, albeit still deeply engaged with studies of fashion as a social practice, is more interested in clothing objects as a particular set of object types that, through propinquity to the corpus, have a particularly elucidative potential for understanding race. In what follows, I offer a brief cultural biography of my object—the sneaker, in order to better situate the chronological evolution of the object, and highlight the ways in which the particular moments I identify fit into the broader life of the sneaker.

In his piece “The Cultural Biography of Things” Kopytoff asserts:

in doing a biography of things one should ask similar questions to those asked about people: What sociologically are the biographical possibilities inherent in its ‘status’ in the period and culture and how these possibilities are realized? Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognized ‘ages’ and periods in the things ‘life,’ and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing's use change with its age, and what happens when it reaches the end of its usefulness? ⁷⁵

Each of my chapters then represents a distinct moment, a biographical snapshot, within the broader life of the sneaker—a life that, in order to properly situate the aforementioned moments, must first be outlined.

Brief Cultural Biography of the Sneaker

The earliest accounts of the sneaker date back to the 19th century. According to most accounts, the term sneaker is said to derive from the wearer's ability to move with a degree of stealth, or “sneak,” afforded because of the shoe's quieter soles—a marked difference from

⁷⁵ Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*, 66.

harder bottoms, typically associated with early shoe types.⁷⁶ While early models of sneakers were made for performance, and most commonly associated with tennis (hence the name ‘tennis shoes’, some of these initial models would be almost unrecognizable as shoes, let alone sneakers, as their construction typically consisted of a crude, relatively shapeless leather upper with a rubber sole, a direct precursor to what would typically be referred to as plimsolls today. While the sneaker is an object that is understood as initially emerging for the purpose of athletic performance enhancement, it has always been replete with social, cultural, and political signification.

The creation and development of the sneaker is inextricably linked to the invention and evolution of rubber production. In 1831 Nathaniel Hayward figured out a way to stabilize the already booming market for rubber shoes by adding sulfur to latex.⁷⁷ Charles Goodyear would then add heat to this processes to further stabilize the rubber and patent this process— a process that would finally be improved by British scientist, Thomas Hancock and come to be known as vulcanization. With vulcanization the sneaker industry (as well as the tire industry) would be revolutionized.⁷⁸ The Candee Rubber Company is one of the earliest cited companies to affix rubber soles to canvas uppers. The Keds company, however, is one of the most iconic sneaker companies to have the canvas sneaker during the nascent years of sneaker development.

In the United States there are few sneakers as emblematic of the early years of sneakers history as Converse. Founded by Marquis Converse, in 1908, The Converse Rubber Shoe Company would release its iconic basketball silhouette in 1917. The Converse All Stars became unofficially rebranded as Chuck Taylor's or simply “chucks” for short, a reference to basketball enthusiast and beloved shoe salesman and (eventual coach and clinician) Charles Hollis “Chuck” Taylor.⁷⁹ Taylor’s sales acumen and eye for innovation—which included things like the addition of the circular patch used for ankle protection— coupled with his tireless advocacy of the shoe through his traveling basketball clinics at colleges and high schools throughout the country were instrumental to the expansive reach and eventual national popularity of the line.⁸⁰ Working during the still nascent stages of the sport of basketball, Taylor was able to link each technological innovation to the player’s ability to improve on the court. Converse Chuck Taylor All Stars are one of the highest selling individual sneaker models of all time with over 900,000,000 pairs sold worldwide, and are arguably the most iconic sneaker of all time, a testament to Taylor’s vision and advocacy for the game of basketball.⁸¹

With industrialization and the expansion of the rubber industry in the 1920’s sneakers increasingly became a staple of everyday dress as opposed to an accoutrement of the leisure activities of the elite that they represented decades prior. During the same time the United States as well as parts of Europe and Asia were being swept by nationalist sentiments which often took

⁷⁶ Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, “The Long Political History of Sneaker Culture,” *The Atlantic*, December 28, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/12/sneakers-have-always-been-political-shoes/511628/>.

⁷⁷ Elizabeth Semmelhack, *Out of the Box: The Rise of Sneaker Culture* (Rizzoli International Publications, Incorporated, 2015), 23.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ The Chuck Taylor is the earliest example of a popular sneaker being associated with a specific person— a trend that continues in the ways sneakers are marketing in the contemporary moment.

⁸⁰ Hal Peterson, *Chucks!: The Phenomenon of Converse Chuck Taylor All Stars* (New York, NY.: Skyhorse Publishing Inc., 2007), 44.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

the form of eugenics projects. This upsurge in nationalism which often translated to ideas about ideal citizens and promoted ideas of physical fitness had a significant effect on the performance wear industry.⁸² Perhaps the most infamous figure of this moment was Adolf Hitler. For example, Hitler's "Hitler-Jugend" or Hitler Youth were required to partake in physical activity as a demonstration of both allegiance to the nation as well as a display of superiority, values he would attempt to demonstrate on the world stage in the 1936 Olympics. During the same time German brothers, Adi and Rudolf Dassler (who were reportedly Nazi sympathizers), started a shoe company, Gebrüder Dassler Schuhfabrik (Dassler Brothers Shoe Factory).⁸³ However, an eventual dispute caused the siblings to part ways and develop independent shoe companies—Adi would go on to found Adidas and Rudolf would found Puma, in 1949 and 1948 respectively.⁸⁴

While Puma would maintain a more provincial focus for many years, Adidas assumed a global prominence early, when during the 1936 Berlin Olympics, the brand's founder, Adi Dassler outfitted African American sprinter Jesse Owens. Owens would go on to become the most storied athlete of the year's Olympic games, taking home four gold medals in sprinting and long jumping. The symbolism of Owens's victory cannot be overstated. Like many sporting activities, the 1936 Olympics showcased athletic talent, but also, particularly during a nationalist moment, and in Germany where the games were held, was a display of national influence and power. While it is unclear how Owens got the shoes from Adi Dassler, what was clear was that Owens's victory in the shoes undermined much of the very racial superiority that Hitler sought to display at the games with German products, and was a boon for Dassler. World War II also marked an interesting moment in the life of the sneaker in the United States, as the sneaker or "play shoes", by that time a beloved national object, was one of the few items exempted from the strict rubber rationing of WWII.⁸⁵

The proliferation of television culture during the fifties brought to the national fore youth culture that venerated figures like James Dean, who became the symbol of (white) American cool that served to iconize Converse.⁸⁶ However, the late sixties and early seventies brought with it a sea change in the ways that sneakers were constructed, marketed, and worn. In 1964 Blue Ribbon Sports was founded in Oregon by University of Oregon track and field coach, Bill Bowerman and former Oregon track athlete, Phil Knight. Initially the company served as a distributor for Japanese brand, Onitsuka Tiger (which would later become Asics). This partnership would be the nascent stage for the most iconic and successful athletic apparel and shoe company of all time—Nike. Unsurprisingly, given the running background of its founders, the company gained its initial popularity during the jogging craze of the nineteen seventies. With distance runner Steve "Pre" Prefontaine as the face of the young company, Nike ushered in what we become one of the most meteoric rises in popularity of any American Brand, and become global giants in the realms of athletic wear, technology, fashion, sports and culture.

Furthermore, as cultural critic Bobbito Garcia discusses in his important volume on sneaker culture in New York during the 1970's, *Where'd You Get Those*, the expansion of basketball within the United States and globally is essential to the emergence of sneaker

⁸² Chrisman-Campbell, "The Long Political History of Sneaker Culture."

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Barbara Smit, *Sneaker Wars: The Enemy Brothers Who Founded Adidas and Puma and the Family Feud That Forever Changed the Business of Sports* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008).

⁸⁵ Semmelhack, *Out of the Box*, 63.

⁸⁶ Chrisman-Campbell, "The Long Political History of Sneaker Culture."

culture.⁸⁷ Concomitantly, the rise of hip hop during this time would also contribute immeasurably to the shifting cultural prominence of the sneaker. While the earliest associations between hip hop and sneakers are often attributed primarily to b-boys and b-girls—break dancers who used their bodies to emphasize the break-beats whose distinct style of dress—which often become synonymous with track suits, bucket caps, and low profile sneakers in bright hues that matched the rest of their garb—was as much a display of one’s aesthetic sensibilities as it was a uniform for the physical particularities of this type of performance. Hip Hop culture contributed immensely to the notion of the “lifestyle” sneaker, as the sartorial objects became dislodged from their functional origins. While initially this was a trend or practice amongst consumers, eventually sneaker companies would produce shoes towards this end and even create an entirely new category of sneakers (albeit not necessarily new styles of sneakers) often referred to as “lifestyle” to mark this type of consumer orientation to sneakers.

The nineteen-eighties and the culture wars that marked the era were also exemplified in sneaker culture. For example, RUN DMC’S ode to their favorite brand, “My Adidas” in 1988 served as a sonic rejoinder to the increasing cultural rhetoric of the era that associated certain consumers (primarily young black men) as criminal enthusiasts of ‘felon shoes.’⁸⁸ The nineteen eighties also saw aerobics sweep the nation as the next fitness trend. This is significant because, not only did brands like Reebok—whose Reebok Freestyle became one of the highest selling women’s sneakers of all time—establish themselves as titans within the sneaker industry, but for the first time women were at the forefront of the cultural for sneaker marketing. While Reebok was able to capitalize on the aerobics craze of the eighties, Nike, who at that time was primarily associated with running, was slow to adjust and saw sales falter a bit during this period.⁸⁹ However, Nike’s fortunes would quickly shift when it signed the promising young basketball player from North Carolina, Michael Jordan, in 1984. The eventual enormity of Nike’s partnership with Jordan could not have been anticipated at the time. Indeed, Jordan was not only a stellar player, but as Walter LaFeber argues, the success of Air Jordan was, not merely the result of Jordan’s amazing play, or Nike’s savvy marketing, but also to the emergence of new technologies including cable and satellite that facilitated his global reach (and also further contribute to his status as meta-object).⁹⁰ If Nike and Michael Jordan weren’t the progenitors of a shift towards a global sneaker culture they certainly would come to epitomize it. While Nike represented a type of optimistic universality through Jordan, they also became the primary target of criticism of the nefarious effects of globalization.⁹¹ The company’s foray into overseas

⁸⁷ Bobbito Garcia, *Where’d You Get Those?: New York City’s Sneaker Culture: 1960-1987* (Testify Books, 2006).

⁸⁸ The sneaker has for a long time been linked to criminality. For example the term “sneaker” while associated with the shoes quiet sole has also been undergirded by a subtext of “sneakiness” or the ability to commit theft without being detected. A 1979 New York times article entitled “For Joggers and Muggers, the Trendy Sneaker” discussed the link between tennis shoes and crime a decade before the upsurge in print news media rhetoric around sneaker violence that occurred in the late eighties and nineties.

⁸⁹ Geraldine E. Willigan, “High-Performance Marketing: An Interview with Nike’s Phil Knight,” *Harvard Business Review*, July 1, 1992, <https://hbr.org/1992/07/high-performance-marketing-an-interview-with-nikes-phil-knight>.

⁹⁰ Walter LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism (New Edition)* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 15.

⁹¹ For more on Nike sweatshop controversy see: Lena Ayoub, "Nike Just Does It—And Why the United States Shouldn't: The United States' International Obligation to Hold MNCs Accountable for Their Labor

markets and outsourcing of much of their production to developing countries who had cheaper labor and more lenient policies around production tied the shoe giant to a number of human right violations, and made them the primary target of broader cultural concerns around the real cost non-vital American goods had for the quality of life of people in the developing world who were producing the shoes. This rhetoric of sweatshop exploitation for both evinced and fueled the curious divide between the materiality of the sneaker as cheap rubber and cloth, and the discursive meanings of the sneaker as that which is highly and valued amongst certain consumers.

The increasing media discourse around violence over sneakers that percolated throughout the history of the sneaker but reached a fever pitch in the nineties further exemplified this seeming discord between the materiality of the sneaker as “just a shoe,” to its discursive significance for different consumers. By the nineties sneakers were firmly ensconced into the category of everyday wear—with most Americans owning a pair. With the increasing democratization and ubiquity of the sneaker came increasing (though not entirely new) associations and promotions of sneakers with exclusivity and luxury. For example luxury brands and fashion houses, including Louis Vuitton, Gucci, Prada, Fendi, and Givenchy and other designer sneaker sneakers have been legitimated as a luxury fashion item.⁹²

Charting the technological as well as cultural development of the sneakers highlights its polysemous nature. Though not foregrounded in existing scholarship, these various social and cultural meanings that the sneaker has and continues exemplify, are inextricably tied to blackness, and specifically black masculinity.

Chapter Outline

In my first chapter, “Banned! Michael Jordan, Mis-Use Value, and the Making of the Sneaker as Racial Meta-Object,” I argue that the 1985 ban of Michael Jordan’s first signature sneaker by National Basketball Association Commissioner, David Stern, is the inaugural moment that shifted the cultural meaning of sneakers in the United States. Furthermore, I assert that this moment marks the embryonic stage of the sneaker’s shift from mere object to metaobject—a process that happens concomitantly with Jordan’s ascent into global popularity. I argue that ways in which Jordan’s body is levied to market the sneaker (amongst other objects), in combination with a number of cultural forces casts Jordan himself not as merely commodified in a thematic sense, but as an object, and eventually a metaobject. I read the infamous Nike Jordan Banned Commercial that, through the invocation of visual and rhetorical devices in addition to Jordan’s bodily performance, is a cultural artifact that showcases this slippage between subject and object in the crudest of terms. Moreover, I argue that the reading of Jordan as both meta-object and synonymous with sneakers can be foundational for understanding black masculinities as ineluctable from contemporary sneaker culture—and the sneaker as an object that is racially enlivened, henceforth.

Rights Violations Abroad." *DePaul Bus. LJ* 11 (1998): 395. 'Sweatshops, Nike, and SOCIAL JUSTICE. "Behind the Swoosh." *Dir. Jim Keady. Perf. Jim Keady and Leslie Kretzu. Web*; Max Nisen; "How Nike solved its sweatshop problem." *Business Insider* 9 (2013).

⁹² While established high-end brands such as Prada, Louis Vuitton, Gucci, Rick Owens have made successful forays into the sneaker market, there is also an increase in luxury brands that have become synonymous with high end sneakers including Maison Martin Margiela, Golden, Common Projects, and Filling Pieces concretizing the evolution of the sneaker from purely utilitarian to purely luxury leisure objects, and troubling the boundary between the category of lifestyle, leisure, and performance footwear.

Chapter Two, “Killing for Kicks: Conspicuous Consumption, Gratuitous Violence and Media (Mis) Representations of Sneaker Culture” uses discourse analysis as well as Barthes’ theories of imaging to analyze the May 1990 issue of *Sports Illustrated* magazine’s cover and accompanying article as exemplars of a broader cultural panic around the relationship between sneakers, black masculinity, and violence. I argue that the discourse and imaging of sneaker violence as exemplified by this text not only uses and contributes to a delimiting set of visual and textual cues regarding black masculinities within popular media more broadly, but that the implications of this discourse serve to codify the sneaker as material object, ineluctably linked to black masculinity.

Chapter Three, “‘I’m a Shoe Connoisseur, I Been Gettin Shoes:’ Sneakers, and the (Im) Possibility of Black Male Fandom” is offered as a meditation on an alternative framing of the famous Spivak-ian query— can the (black) consumer speak? This chapter builds on questions of media discourse presented in Chapter Two by centering the voice and meaning making practices back with consumers. I attempt to complicate ideas of sneakers and sneaker consumers as pathologized, misguided, and morally vacuous that undergird much of the popular discourse, by proposing consumers’ relationship to the object as a type of fandom. Furthermore, I examine how the dearth of engagement of black masculinity within the field of fan studies also highlights a curious phenomenon of black masculinity—what I term the “always the fan object, never the fan” through a maintenance of illegible black male fandom as illegible.

Finally, Chapter Four, “Respect M.E: Sneaker Endorsements, Black Female Masculinity and the Marketing of Mis-Embodiment” offers some concluding thoughts for the entire project. In this chapter I investigate two sites that have greatly contributed to popular imaginings of sneakers as black — athletics and hip hop. More specifically, this chapter focuses on the respective sneaker endorsement deals of WNBA standout Sheryl Swoopes and rapper Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliott. This chapter continues an engagement with the sneaker as an object with a racial life that has been outlined throughout the project, but further examines how these racial objects function in relationship to black masculine actors, who, like the sneaker, trouble the compulsory corporeality that persists around black masculinity. Ultimately, I contend that an explication of the proliferation of female sneaker endorsements contributes important nuance to the overarching concerns of racial embodiment that are central to this dissertation, while simultaneously highlighting an undertheorized, yet vitally, important contribution to work on black masculinity—black female masculinity.

Chapter I

Banned! Michael Jordan, Mis-Use Value, and the Making of the Sneaker as Racial Meta-Object

Letterman: "What's wrong with the coloring, what rule are we violating?"

Jordan: "It doesn't have any white in it"

Letterman: "Well, neither does the NBA."

In 1986 Michael Jordan appeared as a special guest on *Late Night With David Letterman*. While Jordan was an invited guest on Letterman's shows several times throughout his career, this particular appearance was notable. To begin, it was during the 1985/1986 season when Jordan — despite suffering a broken foot in the third game of the year which resulted in him missing sixty-four games— managed to return to the Bulls in time for a historic playoff performance in which he scored a National Basketball Association (NBA) single-game playoff record sixty-three points against the Celtics (who would go on to sweep the Bulls and win their sixteenth NBA Championship). Most significantly, however, is that the episode became one of the first times Jordan spoke publicly about the controversy surrounding the release of the first shoe of his eponymous line, the Air Jordan 1. During a segment of the episode when Letterman is shown pulling the sneaker from underneath the desk he turns to Jordan to ask the question that is most paramount to the ban—What's wrong with the colors, what rule are we violating here?¹ Jordan replies, with a very matter of fact "Well, it doesn't have any white in it" to which Letterman automatically quips, "Neither does the NBA!"² While David Letterman's inquiry into the controversy surrounding the release of Michael Jordan's first signature sneaker is mostly a tongue-in-cheek jest about the seeming ridiculousness of the ban, the truism of his statement regarding the racial demographics of the NBA speaks to a subtext of racial anxiety that permeates much of professional sports culture, particularly the NBA.

David Stern, who began his thirty-year term as the NBA commissioner in 1984, was particularly interested in "cleaning up" the NBA's image as "accusations of selfishness, criminality, drugs, disconnect between fan and player and overall contempt for the NBA's product plagued his early tenure."³ Therefore, the future financial and cultural success of the league was contingent upon, in the eyes of many like Stern, carefully controlling the league's blackness in its various manifestations— "aesthetics, styles, and transparent blackness in its bodies."⁴ While ostensibly unrelated, this sluicing of the NBA's image, and the subsequent regulation of black bodies, was inextricably linked to the regulation of objects—particularly the sneaker that both adorned and at times surrogated these bodies.

In this chapter I argue that the design, ban, and subsequent commercial for Michael Jordan's first signature shoe, the Nike Air Jordan 1, in 1985 marks the beginning of a new and significant epoch within the history of sneaker culture in the United States and globally. One particularly productive starting places for thinking through issues of race and objectification is what Yuniya Kawamura identifies as the "post-Jordan Era."⁵ According to Kawamura "The post-

¹ kingambersley, "Michael Jordan When He Was 23-Year-Old On David Letterman!," *YouTube*, accessed September 22, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t7vxRSn_qqc&t=320s.

² *Ibid.*

³ David J. Leonard, "It's Gotta Be the Body: Race, Commodity, and Surveillance of Contemporary Black Athletes," in *Studies in Symbolic Interaction* (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2009), 166.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Yuniya Kawamura, *Sneakers: Fashion, Gender, and Subculture* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 43.

Jordan era is the start of the commodification and massification of sneakers.”⁶ Moreover, she asserts that during this moment “the sneaker phenomenon spread further and more widely to the world while transcending cultural, racial, class, and national boundaries.”⁷ I agree with Kawamura’s assertion that the introduction and expansion of the Jordan shoe line marks a significant moment with sneaker culture, and go further to contend that the sneaker’s transition from a niche sporting good to a global phenomenon is highly contingent upon the successful commodification of blackness, specifically a form of black masculinity indexed by Michael Jordan, and in this regard was and continues to be deeply implicated with race. Furthermore, the global circulation of Air Jordans is also significant because, as Bill Brown asserts, “Air Jordans could well serve as the paradigmatic object for apprehending a global object culture.”⁸ I would argue not only, as Brown correctly contends, do Air Jordans serve as the paradigmatic object for a global object culture, but that this object’s emergence and continued staying power within a global ecology (and economy) of things are inextricably linked to blackness.

The significance of Air Jordans to a “global object culture” is reliant upon Michael Jordan’s body as a potent sign of black masculinity. I take the Air Jordan 1 as a cultural artifact that is both representative, and a unique iteration, of a racialized global object culture. Furthermore, I argue that Jordans function in the aforementioned regard through their status as a meta-object. A meta-object is defined as “an object that seems to investigate its own status as an object” as well as an “object that seems to reflect on objecthood or the object world more generally.”⁹ Esteemed Nike product designer Tinker Hatfield makes it clear that objects have always been a part of the design logic and inspiration for the Jordan line. For example, later models of the line were inspired by a myriad of objects including sports cars (Porsches and Ferraris), luxury cars like Bentleys, World War II fighter jets, West African tribal art and even a lawnmower.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, the objects informing the design of Jordans—planes, sports cars and luxury vehicles, and home improvement tools—have all traditionally been associated with masculinity.

I however, am interested in how Jordans, beginning with the inaugural design, function as meta-objects in more subtle ways. In this regard, I argue that the Jordan 1, levied Jordan’s body, has, along with the cars and planes that came to inspire the design of later models, become a type of meta-object, in and of itself. More specifically, in this chapter I focus on the iconic television commercial released for the Air Jordan 1, and how it exemplified a localized moment of slippage between object and subject, where Michael Jordan is actively constructed or cast as object, while simultaneously the sneaker moves into an agential space. While I am interested in the case of the Air Jordan 1 for its own intellectual merits, I also recognize how this specific moment can be projected out to capture a broader phenomenon of race and meta-objecthood.

Beginnings

Sneakers have had a long history of being linked to a specific player, primarily through endorsement deals. All endorsements, however, do not function the same way. Some players

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Brown, *Other Things*, 214.

⁹ Ibid., 372.

¹⁰ Brandon Edler, “30 Years In The Making: Tinker Hatfield’s Best Sneaker Designs | Complex,” *Complex.Com*, accessed September 9, 2017, <http://www.complex.com/sneakers/2011/07/30-years-in-the-making-tinker-hatfields-best-sneaker-designs/>.

have signature models while others are just endorsed by the respective company. Furthermore, while some players are recognized for their close partnership with a brand, others seem to be subsumed by it. For example, LeBron James, through his endorsement with Nike, is heavily associated with the brand but still maintains a degree of conceptual autonomy. For other athletes, the line between the product they endorse and their person become much more inchoate. This latter association between brand and athlete is exemplified by Chuck Taylor and Converse, and Michael Jordan with Nike (and later Jordan Brand).

In the six decades between the release of the Chuck Taylor and the Air Jordan 1 basketball as a sport as well as the process of sneaker production, design, and manufacturing grew immensely. While Chuck Taylors are reportedly the first sneaker ever produced that were based around a specific athlete, even with the ubiquity of the shoe, Chuck Taylor, the person, has remained a marginal figure within the history of sport and popular culture. Jordan, however, as a basketball player and cultural icon, and his eponymous sneaker became very much co-constructed. Even Jordan's eventual logo, the jumpman, which used his likeness, marks the ways that Jordan as person, symbol, and shoe all function as signs that index and are inextricable from the others.

Jordan's marketing and endorsement became the prototype for many sneaker endorsements to follow, including those of Shaquille O'Neal, Ken Griffey Jr., Kobe Bryant, LeBron James, and Kevin Durant. Therefore, to apprehend the expanse and significance of this global object culture, the Air Jordan sneaker (and the first sneaker specifically) must be identified as both marking and contributing to the significance of sneakers as not only racial objects, but as *the* racial object, par excellence. This is the case, because, in large part, the shoe was designed from the outset to assume this position. Indeed, with Jordan, Nike strategically set out to deviate from many of the conventions of sneaker marketing that had been established up to that point. It is important to note that Nike's early brand ethos (from the founding of the company as Blue Ribbon Sports in 1964 until Jordan in 1985) was oppositional to more standard marketing practices of other companies. As founder of Nike, Phil Knight explains:

The Air Jordan project was the result of a concerted effort to shake things up. With sales stagnating, we knew we had to do more than produce another great Nike running shoe. So, we created a whole new segment within Nike focused on basketball, and we borrowed the air-cushion technology we had used in running shoes to make an air-cushioned basketball shoe. Basketball, unlike casual shoes, was all about performance, so it fit under the Nike umbrella. And the shoe itself was terrific. It was so colorful that the NBA banned it—which was great! We actually welcome the kind of publicity that pits us against the establishment, as long as we know we're on the right side of the issue. Michael Jordan wore the shoes despite being threatened with fines, and, of course, he played like no one has ever played before. It was everything you could ask for, and sales just took off.¹¹

Knight's comments about the company's partiality to a type of anti-establishment ethos might seem, in hindsight, a curious one given how Nike has come to stand for a type of athletic innovation, and excellence that is in sync with certain mainstream culture. Take for example, Nike's genealogy of athletic endorsements. The company has been known for endorsing athletes who were identified as exemplifying both athletic excellence and nonconformity. The company's

¹¹ Willigan, "High-Performance Marketing."

first ever endorsement athlete, Steve Prefontaine, and many of their later athletes like Charles Barkley and John McEnroe are exemplars of this. While the earlier years of the brand did seem to earnestly reproduce this feeling of an avant garde, anti-establishment ethos, the company quickly had to reconcile this identity in relationship to its rapid ascent as one of the world's most successful brands, in terms of cultural influence and profit. As Knight asserts, the success of Michael Jordan's first signature shoe was central to this shift.

Jordan was widely successful endorser, having an appeal that was unprecedented for a black athlete. Jordan's ability to appeal to a broad swathe of consumptive desires was contingent upon what Herman Gray calls a "cultural sign for race and difference."¹² According to Gray, these cultural signs were often based on insidious stereotypical depictions of black masculinity. During the nineteen-eighties Ronald Reagan employed rhetorical and imaging strategies that depicted drugs, gang violence, and abject poverty. At the same time, popular culture also relied on representations of Blacks (and other minority groups) that adhered to appropriate, dominant ideas of comportment. This cadre of black representation was seen as incidentally, as opposed to explicitly, racialized. Bill Cosby and *The Cosby Show* became one of the greatest popular examples of this sensibility. While these images of upwardly mobile, professional, middle class African Americans served as a counterpoint to those that vilified and criminalized black people as financially, intellectually, and morally depraved, in many ways these respectable images of blackness served a similarly damaging effect. Indeed, a certain permutation of black respectability was levied and identified as proof of the ways that access to dominant American ideals justified the vilification of poor and working class blacks and served as evidence that their economic and social hardships were merely the result of their own moral turpitude."¹³

Michael Eric Dyson further expounds upon this dynamic with regard to Jordan as he states "Jordan was consciously marketed by his agency Proserv as a peripatetic vehicle of American fantasies of capital accumulation and material consumption tied to Jordan's personal modesty and moral probity."¹⁴ Indeed, Jordan as a representative of a certain type of southern Black propriety was central to his ability to amass and sustain such an impressive roster of high profile endorsements. This speaks to an unprecedented mass appeal that is predicated on both an amplification and eradication of his personage as a potent sign of black masculinity. Advertising culture is often replete with a type of object fetishization and animacy. With regards to the Air Jordan 1, anthropocentrism, one that centers specifically around the black male body, can only be made legible through an attachment to, and espousal of, the power of things. Consider how "It's Gotta Be the Shoes," a slogan used in subsequent Nike advertisements that also featured Spike Lee as Mars Blackmon, exemplifies this. While attributing Michael Jordan's prowess to his shoes is a relatively innocuous component of a marketing strategy deployed to pique consumer interest, this strategy becomes instructive in outlining how objects become racialized and perhaps how people become objectified. Furthermore, Jordan's partnership with Nike—his most significant endorsement— was only successful through the leveraging and incorporation of highly-racialized codes as well as those moored in racial transcendence.

Over the course of his career Jordan amassed a myriad of high profile endorsements which included Hanes underwear, Wheaties cereal, and McDonald's—all of which not only

¹² Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for "Blackness"* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1995), 18.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ David L. Andrews, *Michael Jordan, Inc.: Corporate Sport, Media Culture, and Late Modern America* (SUNY Press, 2001), 264,

levied his body in more conventional ways, but also by invoking more literal modes of consumption. For example, in 1992 McDonald's released the McJordan burger—the equivalent of a quarter-pounder with bacon and barbecue sauce. While this is a seemingly benign branding effort, it serves to highlight the ways in which the Black male body, despite (or perhaps because) of the ways in which it serves as a sight of fear, has been made most palatable through consumption. Michael Eric Dyson clarifies this point as he states “the black male body that has been historically viewed as threatening and inappropriate in American society (and remains so outside of sports and entertainment) is made an object of white desires to domesticate and dilute its more ominous and subversive uses, even symbolically reducing Jordan's body to dead meat (McDonald's McJordan hamburger), that can be consumed and expelled as waste.”¹⁵ Even with the diversity of products associated with Jordan, his Nike endorsement continues to be his most significant.

In 2014 it was reported that Michael Jordan attained the status of billionaire.¹⁶ Jordan's wealth is due in large part to the appreciating value of his NBA franchise, the Charlotte Bobcats. However, his sneaker deal is also one of his most lucrative ventures. Take for example, that in 2016 Jordan was estimated to have made more in one year from endorsements (over one hundred million dollars) than he made as a player over the courses of his fifteen year NBA career (his career earnings numbered ninety-four million dollars).¹⁷ Jordan's endorsements have been central to both his monetary worth as well as his unsurpassed cultural purchase. Given Jordan's status as arguably the most recognizable person on the planet during his playing years and perhaps still one of the most recognizable global figures his relationship to products is significant. As Bill Brown asserts, “objects mediate our sense of ourselves, as individuals and collectivities, and our sense of others”¹⁸ For example, Jordan has come to symbolize a number of more amorphous ideas and processes including—global culture, Americanization. Moreover, more than any other object, it is the sneaker (both Jordans specifically, but sneakers generally), that has become the object through which consumers and fans have come to know Jordan. Therefore, understanding the specific terms under which Nike and Michael Jordan partnered to cement the sneaker endorsement is paramount.

The Deal

While Michael Jordan and Nike have become signifiers of one another, the initial partnership between the icon and the brand was uncertain. From the outset Jordan was reported as being less than enthusiastic about taking a meeting with Nike, only doing so at the behest of his mother. During the meeting, Jordan was described as aloof and uninterested. Furthermore, upon seeing the initial design, Jordan was reportedly very vocal about his dislike of the shoe and went so far as to say that he couldn't wear them because they were Devil's colors, presumably a reference to his collegiate rival, North Carolina State, despite the shoes matching his Bulls

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Chase, Chris, “Forbes: Michael Jordan Just Became a Billionaire,” *For The Win*, June 13, 2014, <http://ftw.usatoday.com/2014/06/michael-jordan-billionaire-net-worth>.

¹⁷ Kurt Badenhausen, “How Michael Jordan Will Make More Money Than Any Athlete This Year,” *Forbes*, accessed September 10, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kurtbadenhausen/2016/03/30/how-michael-jordan-will-make-more-than-any-other-athlete-in-the-world-this-year/>.

¹⁸ Brown, *Other Things*, 200.

uniform.¹⁹ Jordan's hope was to garner a deal with Nike competitor, Adidas. However, Adidas, had a far more tempered interest in Jordan. In retrospect, Adidas explained that in the 1980's their basketball endorsements were typically reserved for centers, as they believed, however curiously, that basketball big men, specifically centers (they would endorse Kareem Abdul-Jabbar) has greater appeal for consumers.²⁰ Despite the protestations of the company's distributors, the company maintained its position about avoiding guards, and decided to forgo a sponsorship deal with Jordan.²¹

Other companies like Converse did express interest in Jordan, but the financial remuneration they offered the future star was reportedly only a modest one hundred thousand dollars per year.²² Nike, as well as a company called Spot Bilt had the highest bids. In the end, Nike offered Jordan five hundred thousand dollars per year for five years and stock options that Jordan's agent, David Falk, stated were altogether worth about seven million dollars.²³ While the endorsement deal that Michael Jordan signed with Nike in 1984 might appear fairly modest by contemporary standards, it was actually one of the most lucrative sneaker deals to that date. The deal was not guaranteed, however, but outlined that Jordan must achieve at least one of three benchmarks— winning Rookie of the Year, becoming an All-Star or averaging twenty points per game in his first three years, or Nike could forgo the final two years of the deal.²⁴ Curiously, Nike did not initially outline a benchmark for sneaker sales. Jordan's agent, David Falk was reported as asking Nike about this stipulation, stating "What happens if he doesn't do any of those three, but still sells shoes?" to which Nike responded that Jordan would get the final two years of the five-year deal if he sold \$4 million of shoes in his third year.²⁵

In a May 1985, an article from the *Chicago Tribune* entitled "Michael Jordan Shoes Also Having a big Rookie Season" reported that initial estimates of the Jordan 1 were modest, with the expected sales range to be around one hundred thousand units, however over one million pair were ordered within the first six weeks of release.²⁶ The initial release was so successful that a spokesperson from Nike stated "Air Jordan has become our Cabbage Patch doll," a reference to the unexpected consumer fervor and fandom around another (and at the time fairly recent) object that became an unexpected and somewhat inexplicable sensation amongst consumers.²⁷ While the sales around the Jordan 1 exceeded projections, the source of the consumer fervor around the sneaker seemed to also baffle Nike executives. As one spokesperson from the company stated about the popularity of Jordans "It's one of the best things that's ever happened

¹⁹ Brandon Edler, "23 Things You May Not Know About Air Jordans | Complex," *Complex*, accessed September 10, 2017, <http://www.complex.com/sneakers/2012/09/23-things-you-may-not-know-about-air-jordans/>.

²⁰ Des Bieler, "A Young Michael Jordan Wanted Adidas for His Shoe Deal. Adidas Passed.," *Washington Post*, March 24, 2015, sec. Early Lead, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2015/03/24/a-young-michael-jordan-wanted-adidas-for-his-shoe-deal-adidas-passed/>.

²¹ *Ibid*

²² Darren Rovell, "How Nike Landed Michael Jordan," *ESPN.Com*, February 15, 2013, http://www.espn.com/blog/playbook/dollars/post/_/id/2918.

²³ *Ibid*.

²⁴ *Ibid*.

²⁵ *Ibid*.

²⁶ George Lazarus, "Michael Jordan Shoe Also Having Big Rookie Season," May 14, 1985, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1985-05-14/business/8501300378_1_basketball-shoes-nike-shoes-and-clothing.

²⁷ *Ibid*.

to us... A lot of people obviously are wearing Air Jordan for basketball footwear, but we're also finding that the shoe is not being worn exclusively playing the sport but rather as a 'hip' shoe as something fashionable.'"²⁸The Nike spokesperson's comments about the non-athletic interests driving consumption of the first Jordan may seem curious for contemporary consumers given that sneakers in general as well as Jordans specifically are overwhelmingly associated with casualwear and fashion (as opposed to athletic performance). Understanding the Air Jordan 1's disruption of clear and expected boundaries between performance wear and fashion necessitates more consideration and analysis of the sneaker itself.²⁹

The Shoe

In order to understand the controversy of the original Air Jordan 1, the subsequent ban, and its impact culturally, it is imperative that the proper amount of attention be given to the sneakers themselves. The original Jordan sneaker featured a conventional high cut frame that was very much typical of basketball shoes during the time, primarily for its increased ankle support. The Air Jordan 1 served to further popularize this frame through innovations in the sneaker's technology such as shock absorbency, and light-weight air cushioning. The shoe was novel in its technology as well as aesthetics. The silhouette of the Air Jordan 1 is a standard design for Nike basketball from the 1970's and 1980's however; it is often credited as having a more streamlined look than earlier and contemporary models. Furthermore, the blocking on the shoe would allow for multiple color combinations to grace the silhouette, an approach which seems to have been effective given the myriad of colorways, materials and designs that have graced the shoe over the course of its life³⁰

While the shoes featured the iconic Nike swoosh, they were also accompanied by an early iteration of a Jordan-specific logo. On the upper side panel of the shoe was a symbol of a basketball with wings outlined in black and accompanied by the words "AIR JORDAN" arced over the upper part of the ball (a precursor to the "jumpman" symbol that would emerge as the iconic logo for Jordan sneakers and apparel). The sneakers' winged logo was inspired during the course of a flight in which Peter Moore saw a child wearing pilot wings and made the association between Jordan and flight.³¹ The colorway of the Air Jordan 1 was rooted in an interest to disrupt common practices around team sports sneakers at the time. Part of the thinking of team sports is to promote cooperation and oneness through uniformity, even down to color palette. In the case of the Air Jordan 1, according to one of its primary designers, Peter Moore, the shoe was meant to intentionally deviated from these conventions. The shoe featured a primarily black base, with red accents on the toe, heel, and back base. The signature Nike "swoosh" and the bottom sole of the shoe were also red. The shoe's overwhelmingly rich color scheme was accented with the subtlest inclusion of white that wrapped the sneaker's midsole. These aesthetic features of the sneaker are vitally important, as the colorway of the shoe, and its lack of white, is what prompted NBA Commissioner David Stern's ban.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Kim, "Unbecoming Human An Ethics of Objects."

³⁰ Brett Golliff, "The Evolution of the Black and Red Air Jordan 1, the Sneaker That Started It All," *Complex*, accessed September 10, 2017, <http://www.complex.com/sneakers/2016/09/air-jordan-1-bred-evolution>.

³¹ Russ Bengston, "Still The One: Why the Remastered 'Chicago' Jordan 1 Is a Must-Have," *Complex*, May 27, 2015, <http://www.complex.com/sneakers/2015/05/why-the-chicago-jordan-1-matters>.

Despite the incredible numbers of the initial release, and the aesthetic and technical innovations of the sneakers, perhaps the greatest testament of the cultural significance of the Jordan 1 is the continued consumer interest in the shoe. Even with the production of, to date, thirty-one different iterations of the signature line, the Jordan 1 has maintained its significance within sneaker culture, and popular culture, and has not only defined the Jordan Line, but also a generation of sneakers. Moreover, several reproductions of the shoe have been released since the original 1985 release (including in 1994, 2001, and 2016). Since its 1985 release the Air Jordan 1 has gone through a number of iterations in the form of reproductions or retros. The first re-release of the Jordan 1 was in 1994. This particular re-release is cited as being wildly unsuccessful, with huge quantities of the shoe being moved to discount shelves across the country. The second re-release of the shoe in 2001 proved much more successful with consumers, and marked the beginnings of a retro craze around Jordans that, despite a more recent tempering off period, continues to be a significant segment of sneaker consumption within the United States and globally.

The shoe's success beyond the performance market reveals the variety of investments and affinities that different constituencies can have around a singular object. While, perhaps for Nike (as represented by Luhr), at least initially, these shoes were to appeal to a consumer who wanted to use them for sport, for others the function, lie in its aesthetics and cultural purchase. Furthermore, these early models were presumably designed for function, even as it was clear that many consumers were putting them to different purposes, and were constructed with that in mind in ways that later models were not. It is important however, to not create such a binary. The relationship between fashion and function, like that exemplified by the initial Jordan, are inextricably linked.

Jordans are a productive object for examining how and why objects are often put to uses different than those intended on a mass scale. Furthermore, these sneakers also reveal the ways in which human actors are, often violently, committed to policing the meanings of objects. Indeed, few clothing objects that are not explicitly controversial seem to have galvanized the same widespread vitriol as sneakers. The deployment of the sneaker in ways that deviated from their intended function as performance wear can be likened to a type of "misuse value," or the idea that "the efficacy and the effects of some untoward deployment of an object— some new valuation of the emerging from the object's displacement from routine systems or networks of use."³² To this point Bill Brown offers us the example of the key that can be used as a knife to clarify that with misuse value when " you typically see and feel an object with a specificity that disappears when you deploy it routinely."³³ Finally, it is important to note that as Brown argues, "Misuse value also captions the effectiveness of a broken routine (the interruption of habit) as an unanticipated mode of apprehending the object world anew."³⁴ From a certain perspective Air Jordans can be understood as so firmly ensconced within a culture of "misuse value." I want to add that misuse value, like use value, is not neutral, but rather dependent on who is doing the using, and therefore highly subjective. These valuations are inflected with all types of factors including ideas about race and gender. Therefore, use value and misuse value are much more dynamic than they are static. The ways in which Jordans circulate within popular culture, specifically after his tenure as a player, both reveals and contributes to the difficulty in recognizing them as having a use-value different and independent of their mis-use value.

³² Brown, *Other Things*, 373.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

From the outset the Air Jordan 1 troubled the idea of clear points of demarcation between use-value and misuse value. Certain cultural critiques (particularly those that abounded in a late eighties to early nineties moment marked by increasing cultural panic around violence which will be explored in greater depth in the subsequent chapter) reveal the haziness of these distinctions. Along with the ways in which consumers took up these objects (ostensibly outside of the control of the consumer) Nike's early advertising also revealed that the company in and of itself partook in, and even promoted this indistinction (a point which will be expounded upon below).

This change in the cultural ideas of sneaker's use value of can also be understood as both fomenting and reflecting shifts with Nike's corporate identity. In a 1992 interview, Nike founder Phil Knight explained the company's ideological shift in the eighties:

for years, we thought of ourselves as a production-oriented company, meaning we put all our emphasis on designing and manufacturing the product. But now we understand that the most important thing we do is market the product. We've come around to saying that Nike is a marketing-oriented company, and the product is our most important marketing tool. What I mean is that marketing knits the whole organization together. The design elements and functional characteristics of the product itself are just part of the overall marketing process. We used to think that everything started in the lab. Now we realize that everything spins off the consumer. And while technology is still important, the consumer has to lead innovation.³⁵

While the early history of the company reveals its identity to be centered around their products and their performance, eventually the company became primarily associated with marketing. Therefore, Knight's comments reveal the ways in which, not only in function, but also as part of the company's espoused identity, Nike has and continues to function as a marketing company just as much as a producer of athletic apparel. The company's longstanding relationship with renowned marketing firm Wieden+Kennedy also underscores the prominence of marketing to Nike's brand identity. However, despite the ways in which Nike's identity as a sports apparel company has become ineluctable from its marketing, this was not always the case. Michael Jordan's arrival and unprecedented success, a success that was fomented by the 1985 ban of his first shoe, was instrumental to this shift.

The Ban

The Air Jordan 1 is a sneaker around which a cultural lore has and continues to persist. For example, until only recently there was a longstanding debate as to whether or not the sneakers that Michael Jordan wore during his first season were actually the Air Jordan 1. For years, many people attempted to identify clear game footage of Jordan actually wearing the Air Jordan 1. There were sneaker enthusiasts and historians who claimed that the sneaker that Jordan wore during the initial part of his rookie campaign—the sneaker that was banned—was not the Air Jordan 1, but actually a similar model that preceded it—the Nike Air Ship. In a 2016 article with *Complex* magazine Peter Moore confirmed that for the initial part of the 1985 season Jordan was not wearing his signature shoe, but, in fact the earlier prototype called the Nike Air

³⁵ Willigan, "High-Performance Marketing."

Ship.³⁶ However, despite Jordan not actually wearing the Air Jordan 1 all of the season, and therefore the shoe not being that which was initially banned, Nike capitalized on the spectacle of the ban in its marketing of the Jordan 1, as was evinced by the Jordan Banned commercial.

While the expressed reasons for the ban of the Air Jordan 1 (Nike Air Ship) were rooted in dress code violations, it is important to understand that dress code within the NBA has often been about more than the functionality or safety. Dress code, within the NBA, has actually been an apparatus used for the regulation of black masculine bodies and performances of black masculinity within the league. Ultimately dress code is put towards the end of regulating subjects through the legislation of objects. Furthermore, within a larger historical context, Jordan and the banned sneaker came to represent a disruption to the stifling climate of the nineteen-eighties; one marked by Reaganomics and cultural conservatism.³⁷ For many disaffected youth, Jordan's refusal to conform to the dress codes of the NBA, despite evidence that this was a marketing strategy employed by Nike, represented, for many consumers, a larger defiance of the strictures of an oppressive and silencing white patriarchal hegemonic establishment. Young consumers

³⁶ Russ Bengston, "Shipwrecked: The Untold Story Behind Michael Jordan's Banned Sneakers," *Complex*, August 31, 2016, <http://www.complex.com/sneakers/2016/08/nike-air-ship-history>.

³⁷ Since the widespread live televising of the league in the 1990's, the NBA has been a visible public arena for both the strictures as well as resistance around stylizations of the black body. One of the many ways that this dynamic has been displayed is through the negotiation between player's choices of self-styling and the league's rules around dress code. Any cursory view of images of the NBA reveals that player uniforms have gone through a number of league sanctioned changes most notably with things like the length of shorts. In addition to the league sanctioned uniform, the supplemental athletic apparel has served as the palette upon which players have been able to express individuality and both inform as well as reflect broader cultural trends around dress including donning of longer shorts and shorter socks, headbands, shooting sleeves, etc. Professional basketball's primacy as one of the most public arenas of black masculine bodies, has often made it a jumping off point for broader cultural conversations on the public policing (particularly aesthetic) of black males. For example, on October 17, 2005, David Stern, responding to a growing concern about the league's "image problem" implemented what would become the first mandatory dress code in professional sports in the United States. Set to be implemented on November 1, 2005—the start of the 2005 season—this new dress code required players to wear "business casual attire whenever they are engaged in team or league business" the boundaries of which appear more opaque than clear in regards to "team or league business." Furthermore, the two pronged dress code, also prohibited a number of things. As part of the new dress code players were "not allowed to wear at any time while on team or league business" certain items, which included: sleeveless shirts, shorts, t-shirts, jerseys, headgear of any type, sunglasses, and timberland boots." Of particular note are the explicit ban on gold chains, pendants, or medallions worn over the player's clothes. Also, the dress code dictated specific rules around footwear, stipulating that players must wear "Appropriate shoes and socks, including dress shoes, dress boots, or other presentable shoes, but not including sneakers, sandals, flip-flops, or work boots. While the banning of sneakers is common to general dress codes, presumably to avoid a certain casualness, and ostensibly a more unsavory element or set of behaviors that seem to be associated with it, within professional sports, particularly basketball, this particular clothing regulation seems baffling. It seems that in part, this ban was the NBA's response to the Allen "Iverson-ization" of the NBA image, or the influx of more casual streetwear and styling often marked by oversized shirts, baggy jeans, excessive chains, and ironically enough, sneakers (along with bodily markers like visible tattoos and cornrows). In this regard, the influence of street fashion, with which sneakers are often associated, was seen as inconsistent within the very cultural arena which produced it.

were interested in the Air Jordan 1, for any number of reasons—fashion, trendiness, idolization, as well as a means to engage in some act of resistance by proxy.

Nike's attempt to cull all of these various investments was exemplified in its marketing, specifically in a commercial released after the ban. While the commercial seemed like timely and clever marketing on behalf of the company, it also represented a pivotal moment in the ethos of the company. Prior to the signing and success of Jordan Nike was experiencing some of its worst years in terms of sales in the company's short twenty-one year history. ³⁸Part of the issue for Nike was, unlike its competitor, particularly Reebok (who at the time held firmly to the position as an athletic footwear giant) it failed to capitalize on the boon in aerobics that would come to shape much of the athletic gear market in the 1980's.

Furthermore, the company was struggling to get its product and advertising in sync. When the company had good advertising it had poor product and when the company finally had good product its advertising wasn't as effective. Michael Jordan's popularity, then, was indispensable in helping to get the fledgling company back on track. Nike's drive to maintain its identity as a company committed to its Oregon running shoe countercultural roots, with the help of avant-garde advertising company, Wieden+Kennedy, sold a type of sub-cultural currency on a grand scale. The early marketing of the company reveals the brands' ability to maintain and mass market its counter cultural identity. Ultimately, the Jordan Banned commercial managed to cull all of these various components—Jordan's body, the Ban, countercultural appeal, and mass consumer-interest into one cultural artifact. Explicating the commercial then, can highlight the ways in which Jordan's body, as well as the sneaker, become and blur the clear line of subject and object.

The Commercial

Released in 1985 the commercial, which came to be known as the "Jordan Banned" commercial, both represents and portends a larger cultural phenomenon of the commodification of blackness, specifically black masculinity. The commercial is best characterized by aesthetic minimalism. Through a cursory viewing one merely sees an austere scene. The commercial is shot against a grey background with no accompanying images or accoutrements. A youthful Jordan is positioned in what appears to the viewer as the exact middle of the screen. Despite being dressed in a generic black and red basketball uniform and having a basketball, which he bounces leisurely, the commercial appears to purposely downplay any features that would emphasize more overt athleticism, while still maintaining a subtle visual association between Jordan's athletic prowess and the sneakers.

Take for example the narrator's assertion that "The NBA threw them out of the game." The language of being thrown out of a game is obviously Nike's attempt to use the lingua franca of the NBA to enliven the shoes. Being thrown out of a game is a reference to an ejection of a player. To throw a sneaker out of a game suggests a certain unruliness or discord not of the player but of the sneaker—the object itself. In the case of the Jordan 1 then, the sneaker is not an object which is put to use by the subject that it adorns, but rather, should be understood as having a life in and of itself. In regards to the Nike Air Jordan 1 and its discussion within the commercial it seems that the sneakers levied Jordan as much as he employed them.

Understanding sneakers as a cadre of objects, most readily identified as performance gear, highlights how these particular objects are marked by a certain animating quality. However, this performance quality is to enable certain performances of the subject. Thinking about how

³⁸ Willigan, "High-Performance Marketing."

these objects perform, in and of themselves, however, might actually be another way to situate their inherent “performance” enabling characteristics. What is significant about the sneaker in this case, what highlights its animacy beyond the more traditional ways that it is activated is the relay between the object and what (or who) would be generally identified as the subject—in this case Jordan. A close reading of the commercial reveals the slippages between subject and object more explicitly and helps to highlight the two actants— Jordan himself, and the shoes.

The camera travels the length of Jordan's body and maintains such a nearness to its subject that there is never any one moment where Jordan's entire body is visible. The commercial begins with the camera at the top of Jordan's head, slowly panning down the length of his body. Jordan is dressed in an unremarkable red and black uniform. As the camera nears the bottom of his body and focuses on the shoe, Jordan's white mid length tube socks are brilliant against his rich skin, while also serving as the perfect canvas for the black and red sneakers. An unidentifiable monotone voice emerges from the background stating “On September fifteenth Nike Inc. released a revolutionary new basketball shoe. On October eighteenth the NBA threw them out of the game.”³⁹ This statement is punctuated with two black boxes appearing over Jordan's feet simultaneously accompanied by a sound that is most readily comparable to that of a prison door clanging shut. The “blacking out” of Jordan's sneakers is an obvious attempt for the commercial to evoke, through the visual, a feeling of censorship for the viewer. The commercial is ultimately a clever use of visual censorship as a means of connecting the consumer via their television to the controversy experienced by Jordan and Nike Inc. The commercial finally ends with the same unidentifiable voice stating “fortunately the NBA can't stop you from wearing them. Air Jordans by Nike.”⁴⁰ The commercial's use of both visual and audio cues contributes to the ways in which Jordan and the sneaker become much more indistinct and arguably transubstantiate as subject and object, respectively.

For example, despite being in color there is a certain muted quality to the overall sensory aesthetics of the commercial. This muted-ness of color as translates kinesthetically, as there is a conspicuous listlessness to Jordan's body. Aside from few leisurely bounces of the ball, Jordan's body is relatively still, his expression flat. Moreover, even with the myriad of additional signifiers which gesture towards athleticism—primarily his athletic attire and the presence of a basketball— it is Jordan's body that is the primary sign of physicality and play, and yet, aside from a few perfunctory bounces of the ball, he is configured as inert. This stillness is even more curious given that, although there is no sign of real exertion within the commercial, Jordan's skin, particularly his legs (which receive a disproportionate amount of attention because of the commercial's panning effect) are glistening. It is unclear whether this is a result of lightning, sweat, or both. However this emphasis on Jordan's skin is important. As Kobena Mercer quoting Homi Bhabha asserts, skin color “functions as the most visible of fetishes,” and goes on to state that “whether it is devalorized in the signifying chain of ‘negrophobia’ or hypervalorized as a desirable attribute of ‘negrophilia,’ the fetish of skin color in the codes of racial discourse constitutes the most visible element in the articulation of what Stuart Hall calls the ethnic signifier.”⁴¹ Indeed, the epidermis is the first visual bodily sign of blackness. Jordan's skin is one

³⁹ shatoosh, “Michael Jordan ‘Banned’ Commercial - YouTube,” December 12, 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKXkrSLe-nQ>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 183.

type of bodily signifier of race that works in conjunction with a number of other factors—including his muscular physique, bald head, and hoop earring etc.

To the scrutinizing viewer, the commercial, while thoughtful in conception and clear in execution, may not seem especially striking, but is rather quotidian, conventional, and overwhelmingly unspectacular. However, this space of the starkly unremarkable is part of the process through which specious racialized (and gendered) phenomena play out. In the particular case of the Jordan Banned commercial the spectacle of the black (male body) becomes non-spectacular. In the commercial Jordan is positioned as a specimen that the consumer is called to visually inspect. As the camera pans down it appears that Jordan's legs, the most obvious outward sign of his physical prowess (consider the moniker's associated with Jordan such as "His Airness" and "jumpman" all refer to his seeming ability to defy gravity), are shiny. While one might attribute this glossiness to perspiration, within the context of the commercial the shininess seems misplaced. Jordan is never shown exerting himself. A move that is even more curious given that, As Peter Moore's winged ball logo, and Jordan's later Moniker as "His Airness" are all based not only on movement, but on movement as essential to his cultural identity. The voyeurism, indeed the scopophilia, that this commercial solicits speaks to the ways in which blackness (more broadly) is made spectacle, the subject of an ambivalent cultural ogling that ultimately makes this seemingly inevitable ocular consumption that solicits delight through a simultaneous appeal towards difference and sameness, disquietedness and desire are at the heart of the banned shoes incident.

Through a foregrounding of the materiality of Jordan's body in a way that elicits a certain type of restrictive gaze, the commercial is able to also seamlessly introduce other aesthetic and conceptual elements that promote a reading of Jordan as object, such as its use of silence. Silence, as a particular part of Jordan's slippage between subjecthood and objecthood would come to mark much of his off court persona. For example, in response to news media reports of increased violence regarding sneakers consumption (an issue that will be expounded upon in the next chapter) Michael Jordan was criticized for his overwhelming silence, he's seeming abdication of the social responsibility or subjectivity towards a more desirable end of maintaining his mass consumptive appeal, maintaining as much of a likeness as possible to a commodity, an object.⁴² Relatedly silence, was also a consistent device employed or enacted in (but also many of his other endorsements) in his sneaker advertisements. Indeed, many of his early television advertisements for Nike depict Jordan as silent or with a minimal speaking part (consider the most iconic Jordan commercial's featuring Spike Lee as Mars Blackmon, where he becomes the spokesperson) —an advertising strategy that seems to serve as the prototype for later NBA players like standout and Nike basketball athlete, Anfernee Hardaway and his line of commercials with his miniature alter-ego voiced over by Chris Rock, Lil Penny

Jordan's characteristic silence plays out in the Banned commercial. Take for example the overlay of narration atop of the action in the commercial. Given what was being said Jordan could have easily narrated the commercial himself, however this would have animated him in a way that the commercial appears to want to intentionally avoid. Furthermore, not only is Jordan silent, but the outside narration never makes mention to Jordan himself. Jordan is

⁴² Jordan was heavily criticized throughout the course of his career for not speaking out on a number of social ills, most notably the cost of his sneakers, issues of youth violence, and sweatshop conditions and labor practices where the shoes are manufactured. In 2016 however, Jordan did make headlines for uncharacteristically speaking out about issues of police brutality against African Americans while also encouraging respect for law enforcement.

overwhelmingly still or acted upon by the narration and the shoes. He assumes the space of object- a curious position that may suggest a type of agency in and of itself. A willful relinquishing of one's subjecthood, even briefly towards a particular end that also suggests a type of truncated subjecthood, as his acquiescence is part and parcel to his ability to sell-himself.

Jordan's silence, his stillness, and seeming lack of agency not only contribute to how he becomes a quasi-object, but also to how the sneaker, within the context of the commercial, and in ways that have resonances beyond, moves into a more animate state. Returning to the commercials is necessary here. Like with Jordan (though towards a different end), the commercial's use of motion contributes to the viewers reception of the sneakers as agential. Consider the ways in which, the camera, as it pans down the length of Jordans body ultimately stops and lingers at his sneakers. This move panning-down, as opposed to up, (and then lingering) suggest the sneakers are not only the subject of the commercial in a more general sense but also in more theoretical terms, as the camera motion configures Jordan's body as merely an accoutrement, a backdrop for the shoes. Furthermore, the sneakers which are blacked out, as a way of eliciting, visually, a sense of censorship or contraband, coupled with the assertion that they were "thrown out of the game," or ejected suggests that they, not Jordan who is wearing them, but the sneakers themselves are acting in a way that is unsanctioned or insubordinate—a behavior often reserved for subjects.⁴³ Ultimately, it is the total coupling of attributions of silence, muted-ness, and stillness to Jordan, as well as censorship and insubordination to the sneaker, that creates and reinforces the ways in which Jordan and the sneaker both trouble traditionally configured boundaries of subject and object.

Conclusion

The design of the Air Jordan 1, its explicit eschewal of the standard conventions of uniformity already marked it as having a recalcitrance typically only reserved for subjects—an obdurateness that was only greater instantiated through the NBA's ban of the shoe and then the subsequent commercial released by Nike. The commercial, which highlighted the sneakers' insubordination, was also reliant upon taming it enough within the confines of an advertisement to make its insolence and ultimately its appeal accessible to all. Furthermore, this double-move necessitated displacing the agential qualities of Jordan. Indeed, the sneaker could be possessed in ways that Jordan could not, and its fleeting moment of agential exchange with Jordan, offered an animacy that what was used to entice consumers.

The of consumers served to catapult the Air Jordan 1 and sneakers more generally into a new stratosphere of cultural significance, and marked the beginning stages of the sneaker as a culturally significant meta-object (and more specifically a racial meta-object) as was as cast tennis shoe into an increasingly complex (racial) object. It was under these shifting terms that a myriad of constituencies—sneaker companies, consumers, and the general public began to have increasingly dynamic relationships to these objects. Indeed, if the fervor for consuming sneakers was not changing, the discourse around sneaker consumption was. More specifically, during the late eighties and early nineties there seemed to be a heightened cultural attention around black male's specific orientation to sneaker, and the increasing new media discourse and cultural panic around these consumers that both drew from and contributed to a broader cultural discourse of criminalization of black masculinity and that had significant implications for prevailing ideas of black masculinity as well as well as sneakers as objects.

⁴³ "Michael Jordan 'Banned' Commercial - YouTube."

Chapter II

“Killing for Kicks: Conspicuous Consumption, Gratuitous Violence and Media (Mis) Representations of Sneaker Culture”

“What is clear, for starters, is that robbing people for their sneakers was, and still is not, a media fabrication¹” —Dennis Tang (May 14, 2015)

“What's baffling to us is how easily people accept the assumption that black youth is an unruly mob that will do anything to get its hands on what it wants...They'll say, 'Show a black kid something he wants, and he'll kill for it.' I think it's racist hysteria, just like the Charles Stuart case in Boston or the way the Bush campaign used Willie Horton.”²

-Liz Dolan, Former Director of Public Relations for Nike Inc. (May 14, 2005)

On the cover of the May 14, 1990 issue of *Sports Illustrated* (SI) magazine, in brilliant white lettering starkly juxtaposed against a dark, grainy, and almost illegible background image reads the caption “YOUR SNEAKERS OR YOUR LIFE.” Offset in the upper right-hand corner in much smaller print is the accompanying subtitle —“SNEAKERS AND TEAM JACKETS ARE HOT, SOMETIMES TOO HOT. KIDS ARE BEING MUGGED, EVEN KILLED, FOR THEM. WHO'S AT FAULT?” Inside, the issue's cover story, “Senseless,” begins with a harrowing vignette—the murder of fifteen-year-old Michael Thomas at the hands of his teammate, sixteen-year-old James Martin, presumably for a pair of Air Jordans (which, despite being the wrong size, Martin was purportedly found wearing at the time of his arrest).³

On May 14, 2015, twenty-five years to the date after its *Sports Illustrated* antecedent, online culture and lifestyle magazine, *Complex*, released a retrospective piece entitled “Your Sneakers or Your Life: 25 Years Later, Has Sneaker Crime Changed?” The *Complex* piece revisited many of the issues that were germane to the anterior *Sports Illustrated* article — youth disaffection, urban poverty, materialism, and corporate vs. consumer responsibility— and, taking a cue from its antecessor, it too begins with the murder of Michael Thomas. In the *Complex* account, however, the details of an already unconscionable crime are revealed to be far grislier, far more morose. According to *Complex*, the story of James David Martin's murder of Michael Thomas wasn't merely an instance of misguided commodity fetishism or youth covetousness gone wrong, but rather a far more unsettling account of a sociopathic criminal act that included sodomy, and strangulation. As the *Complex* piece asserts, “the story of James David Martin was not one of a fanatical sneakerhead, or an urban case study. James David Martin was a serial killer. One can speculate on the role a pair of Jordans, which didn't even fit him, played on that day in 1989. But to borrow a phrase from Mars Blackmon, Spike Lee's character from those iconic Nike ads: It probably wasn't the shoes.”⁴ While it is difficult to know the actual impetus for Martin's murder of Thomas, what both the *Sports Illustrated* and *Complex*

¹ Dennis Tang, “Sports Illustrated: Your Sneakers or Your Life, 25 Years Later | Complex,” May 14, 2015, <http://www.complex.com/sneakers/2015/05/your-sneakers-or-your-life-25-years-later>.

² Rick Telander, “Senseless,” *Sports Illustrated* 72, no. 20 (1990): 44.

³ Ed Bruske, “POLICE THEORIZE ARUNDEL YOUTH WAS KILLED FOR HIS AIR JORDANS - The Washington Post,” May 6, 1989, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1989/05/06/police-theorize-arundel-youth-was-killed-for-his-air-jordans/f5dc8ea5-376e-44bc-9ee2-19dff47c514b/?utm_term=.87d9f8d490aa.

⁴ Tang, “Sports Illustrated: Your Sneakers or Your Life, 25 Years Later | Complex.”

accounts reveal is that there has and continues to be, if not an actual crisis of sneakers violence, a vigorous and enduring discourse of crisis around sneaker violence that has been propagated through popular news media.

In this chapter I examine how discourse and images have been fundamental to the racialization of sneakers. I focus my analysis on the May 14, 1990 issue of *Sports Illustrated*, specifically the issue's cover imagery and its accompanying article, "Senseless" as exemplars of broader cultural production and sentiments around sneaker violence that peaked in the late eighties and early nineties. I explicate both textual and visual discursive codes central to the aforementioned issue to highlight how popular news media discourse and imaging reveal the complexity of a larger phenomenon that has circulated in the popular media for the past three decades – the entrenched relationship between (black) men's avid sneaker consumption and violence. And while I address the ways in which these discursive modes have worked to create and sustain dominant understandings of black masculinity, I argue that the specific discursive and visual codes that are propagated during this time are foundational to the racial life of the sneaker. Put another way, I plot out how popular news discourse about sneaker violence or "the sneaker killings" that are concentrated in the late-eighties and early nineties are situated within larger discourses of black masculine criminality, a discourse that has irrefutably contributed to broader cultural understandings of the sneaker.⁵

While, as I will outline below, incidences of violence over sneakers—including robbery and death—assuredly did occur, (albeit much more aberrantly than moral panic around the "sneaker killings" of the eighties and nineties might suggest), and continue to occur in contemporary moment, I argue that the upsurge in popular news accounts of sneaker violence in the late eighties and early nineties, that appear to reach an apex in nineteen ninety, is revelatory not necessarily of an increase in incidents of sneaker violence, but of a moral panic around black masculinity.

I begin by outlining moral panic as a phenomenon and offer an account of how the political, social, and cultural climate of the time created the conditions for panic around sneakers and violence, as revealed and perpetuated by multiple news reports citing incidents of sneaker violence. I then offer a brief history of *Sports Illustrated*, outlining its emergence and cultural significance, as well as analyzing it as a specific text type—the magazine—that employs both the textual and the visual as both an example and function of power. Finally, I use Roland Barthes' concepts of anchorage and relay, and offer a close reading of the visual elements of the cover to contend that despite the absence of any clear reference to race in the written or visual elements of the cover, blackness, specifically an imperiled black masculinity is at the center of the issue. Ultimately, this chapter explores the pivotal role of popular news media in the construction of broader cultural conceptions of the sneaker as both a synecdoche for and as racial subject in and of itself.

Constructing the Crisis: Sneaker Violence and/as Moral Panic

In their important text, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*, Stuart Hall et al, explicate legal cases, crime statistics, popular news discourse, etc. to address what is presumably the sudden and inexplicable appearance of a new form of crime—mugging—occurring in Britain during the seventies. While, as Hall asserts, the term "mugging" seems to

⁵ Catherine A. Coleman, "Classic Campaigns-" It's Gotta Be the Shoes": Nike, Mike and Mars and the "Sneaker Killings"," *Advertising & Society Review* 14, no. 2 (2013), <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/513992/summary>.

have emerged in popular news discourse in Britain, “the crime it purported to describe was not.”⁶ If mugging was not, in actuality, a new phenomenon brought from “across the pond” as many in Britain feared (despite appearing to be a national neologism imported from the United States), then what could explain its uptake as nomenclature and its upsurge in terms of incidence, and subsequently the widespread moral panic it elicited? For Hall, mugging was, at its core, a discursive phenomenon that, despite being framed as an earnest concern with crime, was actually indexical of a range of other factors including youth, race, and nation, and therefore an apparatus of social control by which virulent forms of state power and dominance, in the form of policing, could be instantiated and enacted.

Hall et al.’s assessment of mugging in Great Britain has important illuminative implications for thinking through the moral panic and cultural and social climates in which issues of race and sneaker violence have emerged and persisted in the United States. Stan Cohen, in his work on mods and punk rockers in Britain offers an important elaboration of the general characteristics of moral panic stating:

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic is passed over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times, it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society perceives itself.⁷

As Cohen outlines, sometimes the object of moral panic is novel, and at other times it is banal. In the case of the sneaker killings it would seem that the cultural anxiety around these issues was the result of these incidents being constituted by equal parts banality and novelty.

The discourse surrounding the sneaker killings levied both the banal and the spectacular. For example, robbery (and to a lesser degree murder) as a general class of crime within the United States does not, in and of itself, necessarily invoke outrage or shock. Even in the case of the sneaker killings, when the crimes are framed primarily in terms of theft, they are often utterly unremarkable (perhaps even more so when it comes to certain objects). Chicago police officer Michael Chasen’s comments regarding an incidence of sneaker violence reflects this as he states “when you really think about the crime itself—taking someone’s clothes off their body, you can’t get much more basic.”⁸ It is clear from Chasen’s response that not only does he see the crime in and of itself as relatively common, but also the object of crime—clothing, and more specifically footwear. Sneaker violence was also banal in that it relied upon and perpetuated

⁶ Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (New York, NY.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 10.

⁷ Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (London: Routledge, 2002), 1.

⁸ Telander, “Senseless,” 38,43.

longstanding ideas of criminal black masculinity that align with the predominant scripts of black masculinity that are taken up in popular news media. However, the sneaker killings were also novel.

The novelty of these crimes laid primarily in relationship to the specific object—sneakers—around which these age-old modes of crime were now being centered and how this deadly attachment to a seemingly inconsequential and random object portends endless possibilities for similar attachments. This criminality, coupled with the sense of misdirected and indiscriminate nature of its object, reifies the notion of black masculinity as inherently and irredeemably pathologized. Given these characteristics, the coverage of the sneaker killings can be understood as demonstrative of a racial moral panic in the United States. And, while there were numerous incidences of robbery and of murder involving sneakers say, from the period of 1985 to 1990, moral panic identifies how, at a particular historical juncture, various social and cultural forces were ultimately responsible for propagating this sense of fear and anxiety, the primary of which being popular news media discourse.

Circulating the Crisis: Discourse as Ideological Conductor

The attribution of sneaker violence to criminal black masculinity is fundamentally a function of discourse. My use of discourse here mandates further clarification. While I use discourse in the way the term is often generally employed—to designate a set of related ideas through language—I also employ discourse in terms of what Michel Foucault outlines as that which connotes a certain power relation.⁹ Discourse is not neutral. Furthermore discourse not only does the work of describing power relations, but also of constructing them. Discourse then, as Foucault asserts, “is not that which simply translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized.”¹⁰

Furthermore, in his work on racial discourse and the media Stuart Hall asserts, “the media’s main sphere of operations is the production and transformation of ideologies.”¹¹ While the media is perhaps readily understood as having an explicitly ideological project, it is certainly not the sole domain of the production and dissemination of ideology. Ideology, according to Hall refers to images, concepts, and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand and “make sense of” some aspect of social experience.¹² Hall’s definition of ideology is highly resonant with Barthes’ concept of written and imaged fashion. Fashion transmits all manner of ideologies, including racial, and even racist, ones. In the case of the *SI* cover and “Senseless,” sneakers are one point in a constellation of racialized ideologies. Indeed, they are the primary focus, both visually and discursively, as the cover—through its situation of the image—highlights the primacy of the sneaker, despite the ways in which the subheadings refer to both sneakers *and* team jackets. Despite being mentioned on the cover and in the story the importance of team jackets seems subordinate to that of sneakers in constructions of black male consumptive deviance. Therefore, while the actual image of the team jacket is

⁹ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

¹⁰ Robert Young, “Introduction to Foucault, M. The Order of Discourse,” 1981, <https://philpapers.org/rec/YOUIF-2>.

¹¹ Stuart Hall, “Racist Ideologies and the Media,” in *Media Studies: A Reader*, vol. 2 (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 271.

¹² *Ibid.*

present on the cover, it really merely serves as both the literal and figurative backdrop to the sneakers. It is also important to acknowledge that while, in the contemporary moment fervor over team jackets seem passé if not completely illegible to consumers, and goes all but unheard of in popular news media discourse, reports on sneaker violence persists. Ultimately, I understand the ideological power that is represented and transmitted in and through the May 14, 1990 issue of *SI* as working through both rhetorical (written and stated claims) and visual modes.

The May 14, 1990 issue of *SI* both informs and is informed by an internal rhetorical discourse through the specific claims made by the article “Senseless” as well as an external rhetorical discourse which includes other similar texts such as print media, but also political and popular discourse. Making the distinction between visual and rhetorical and further between external and internal discourse highlights the ways in which discourse generally, is a highly complex and ensnaring phenomenon.

In a 2015 interview with online sneaker magazine *Sole Collector* Rick Telander, the author of “Senseless,” explained that the impetus for the initial *SI* article came about quite organically. Through his perfunctory daily perusal of local Chicagoland newspapers, Telander began to notice a number of reports of youth being robbed and violently attacked for team jackets and sneakers. This observation prompted further investigation only to reveal that what seemed to be merely an unsettling local problem was actually an inexplicable and rampant national phenomenon.¹³

“Senseless” then, picks up, where the incendiary visual politics of the cover leave off. The article begins with a harrowing vignette— the murder of fifteen-year-old Michael Eugene Thomas at the hands of his then seventeen-year-old basketball teammate James David Martin. According to the article Thomas had been choked to death and left in the woods barefoot. James Martin was charged with murder, the motive as simple as it was chilling— towards the end of commandeering Thomas’ size ten sneakers; not even Martin’s size. While ostensibly this pathology is affixed to Martin, in more subtle ways the article implicates Thomas as both victim and co-conspirator in his own demise. In the article, Thomas’s relationship to his shoes is described in terms similar to, if not more pathological than those affixed to Martin. Thomas is described as cleaning “his own pair each evening. He kept the cardboard shoebox with Jordan's silhouette on it in a place of honor in his room. Inside the box was the sales ticket for the shoes. It showed he paid \$115.50.”¹⁴ The article's account of Thomas’s meticulous care and oversight of his sneakers suggests an attachment that goes beyond mere care for one’s possessions. Martin's relationship to his sneakers teeters upon fetishization.¹⁵ This issue of sneakers as fetish or totem is further corroborated by the foreboding suspicion that is suggested by Thomas’s grandmother of their potential to elicit trouble. Martin’s grandmother is quoted as cautioning the young man about wearing the shoes stating “we told him not to wear those shoes to school...somebody might like them” to which Thomas is reported as responding “Granny, before I let anybody take those shoes, they’ll have to kill me.”¹⁶

The naming of a subject’s fetishistic relationship to an object inherently names a type of pathology as the fetish by definition is about an “abnormal” investiture of desire (often

¹³ Justin Tejada, “Your Sneakers or Your Life: Behind the Story That Shook Up the Industry | Sole Collector,” accessed July 16, 2017, <https://solecollector.com/news/2015/05/sports-illustrated-sneakers-or-your-life>.

¹⁴ Telander, “Senseless,” 37.

¹⁵ See Marx and Engels, *Capital*.

¹⁶ Telander, “Senseless,” 37.

sexualized) for or power into what is more commonly understood as an ordinary object. While the youth's assertion that someone looking to take his sneakers "would have to kill him" can be simply read as a hyperbolic assertion of attachment or affinity for an object, given that the black masculine body already functions as a type of fetish in and of itself, the coupling of his (dead) body, with the sneaker, serves to further entrench this relationship, and highlights these investitures in power.

In his work on black male bodies in the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe, Kobena Mercer asserts that there is often a relationship between bodily fetishism and object fetishism. For example, he argues that the leather associated with BDSM, with its "sensuous appeal" represents a type of "second skin" and that the almost invariable blackness of these objects gestures towards the black body. Similarly, the sneaker, as a bodily accessory that clearly indexes the body can be read as more than mere object or utilitarian good. In the case of Thomas, his care of and attachment to his sneakers could represent a range of meanings personally, however, what seems to be implied in the particular case of Michael Thomas is that the sneakers functioned as a type of appendage and accessory for and *to* his own body. Furthermore, both the Thomas incident specifically, and sneaker consumption by Black people more broadly, must also be understood within a broader cultural and historical relationship of African Americans to commodity culture.

Consuming While Black

Sneakers, as a particularly coveted commodity (specifically Air Jordans) which were at the center of the article (and seem to be overrepresented in many of the accounts of violence), are both exemplary and divergent from the ways in which Black people's collective consumptive habits are broadly understood. In his work on African American consumptive patterns, scholar Jason Chambers complicates the idea that black consumers are less discerning, more materialistic, and brand-obsessed. Chambers argues for an understanding of the nuances of African American consumption that is very much in alignment with broader American ideals around consumption, while also taking into account the particularities and peculiarities of the history of African Americans as both consumers *and* commodities.¹⁷

In her ethnographic work on the consumptive habits and values of black youth, Elizabeth Chin corroborates this point as she states, "African Americans have engaged with the consumer sphere from the outset, both in terms of limiting their ability to consume and constructing enslaved people as objects of consumer desire of others."¹⁸ African Americans throughout history have not only used material goods, and specifically brands as markers of their humanity in the face of virulent social and political practices working to undermine it, but also cultivated brand loyalty as a means of establishing built-in surety in the midst of a hostile social, political, and economic climate that often occluded their access to quality goods and services. Chambers, like Chin, rightly calls us to "complicate our picture of consumption and the role of material goods by trying to understand what they have meant in the lives of individuals and to understand that, specifically because of the dictates of race, goods very often have meant something

¹⁷ Jason Chambers, "Equal in Every Way: African Americans, Consumption and Materialism from Reconstruction to the Civil Rights Movement," *Advertising & Society Review* 7, no. 1 (2006), <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/202983/summary>.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Chin, *Purchasing Power: Black Kids and American Consumer Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 3.

different to blacks than they have to whites.”¹⁹ This assertion that objects often mean something different to different consumers is particularly apt with regard to sneakers given that the sneaker has been an object often cited as evidence of black people’s misguided materialism and moral depravity.

The sneaker is a clothing object that, despite the ways in which its use has evolved, continues to be deeply tied to its utilitarian origins. Furthermore, that object’s expanse (i.e. within the context of the United States most people own or have owned sneakers) creates a familiarity that often foments a false knowing around others’ affinity for the object. For example, for consumers who buy and understand sneakers for purely functional purposes such as athletic performance and/or comfort, the behavior of other consumers such as those who only use their sneakers judiciously or never wear them, and would be especially averse to wearing them for any arduous physical activity, may seem baffling, even arousing criticism.

However, sneakers are not merely or solely utilitarian goods (or those that have a singular utility), but those that also have, for many consumers, what Dylan Miner terms “juice value.”²⁰ Juice value is a type of cultural currency placed on an item that is less around the assumed use and more about the cultural or social currency that is invested in the object. Therefore, the castigation of Black people because of the seeming vacuity of their consumption choices not only ignores the ways in which most object attachment is divorced from any intrinsic value in the object, but rather a marker of one’s particular cultural, social, and often racially informed attachments to different objects, but also is contingent upon a denial of the widely recognized and accepted concept of taste. While an emphasis on taste might seem both obvious and insignificant, both incidences of actual sneaker violence as well as the discourse of violence around sneakers rooted in promulgations of shock or perplexity are, at their core, informed by this basic difference.

In his work, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Bourdieu expounds upon these issues of taste, stating:

Whereas the ideology of charisma regards taste in legitimate culture as a gift of nature, scientific observation shows that cultural needs are the product of upbringing and education: surveys establish that all cultural practices (museum visits, concert-going, reading etc.), and preferences in literature, painting or music, are closely linked to educational level (measured by qualifications or length of schooling) and secondarily to social origin. 1 The relative weight of home background and of formal education (the effectiveness and duration of which are closely dependent on social origin) varies according to the extent to which the different cultural practices are recognized and taught by the educational system, and the influence of social origin is strongest—other things being equal—in ‘extracurricular’ and avant-garde culture.²¹

Bourdieu's assessment of taste is significant in that it suggests that, though notions of taste are seemingly naturalized or “gifts of nature”, in actuality they are highly complex constructions that are the result of one’s relationship to other modes of identity and experience, particularly class and education. And while differences in taste might appear as a trite or reductive way of

¹⁹ Chambers, “Equal in Every Way.”

²⁰ Dylan AT Miner, “Provocations on Sneakers: The Multiple Significations of Athletic Shoes, Sport, Race, and Masculinity,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 9, no. 2 (2009): 82.

²¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard university press, 1984), 1.

assessing the chasm between various constituencies that are implicated in the discourse of sneaker violence, a more complicated understanding of taste reveals it as a highly intricate and complex modality.

I want to offer that in addition to class and education, ethnic and racial identity (as these intersect with other identity categories) may also inform constructions of taste. While this might gesture towards a type of essentialism, I propose that it is people's experiences of racialization, as opposed to race as a phenomenon in and of itself, that inform what I would identify as "racial taste." It is important to note that racial tastes do not necessarily occlude the possibility of shared trans-racial affinities. Nor are racial tastes inherent proclivities that racial groups share as a result of a racial essence, but rather affinities that may be formed out of unique but collective experiences of people who are racialized as black.

Moreover, it should be mentioned that the ways in which black people, because of the economic realities that many have faced within the United States, have often physically and conceptually repurposed items as direct response to, and not as evidence of a lack of consideration for, their economic conditions. This type of resourcefulness, creativity, and ingenuity can be understood as highlighting what Paul Willis calls a type of "grounded aesthetic" or "the creative element in a process whereby meanings are attributed to symbols and practices and where symbols and practices are selected, reselected, highlighted and recomposed to resonate further appropriated and particularized meanings."²² This is not to say that all Black masculine consumption is moored in a type of transformation or re-configuration of meaning, but that like all forms of consumption and object-attachment there are any number of complex constructions and negotiations of meaning taking place for consumers. The overdetermined narrative of criminality that dominated media discourse around Black men's' relationship to sneakers in this cultural moment both reflected and perpetuated these elisions and erasures.

Furthermore, this discursive constructions of black male depravity around sneaker consumption is rooted in paradox, one that Robin Kelley highlights, stating "We have consistently been marked as dysfunctional: ironically dysfunctionality is both the source of the slander directed at us, as well as a source of attraction. Our dysfunctionality fascinates, it is alluring."²³ This allure and aversion is part and parcel to sneaker consumption, even the modes that aren't vilified. Indeed corporate marketing of sneakers that is intended to appeal to consumers across race, typically employs the black male body in ways very much in accordance with dominant and restrictive notions of a static black masculinity often marked by aggression violence to make its marketing claims legible. Herein lay another example of the longstanding American (il) logic regarding the black male body, where black masculinities are welcome as long as they don't become unbridled, bristling at the sensibilities of those who have always constructed the parameters of proper racial decorum. In regards to sneakers then, the paradox is that these cultural codes are promoted by sneaker and marketing companies in service to a type of cultural cool or physicality that is intended to appeal to consumers, and yet when they are effective for the very consumers upon whose identities (however skewed) they rely, these subjects are cast as criminal and deviant.

In her work on African American consumption Regina Austin suggests that black consumption is often characterized as deviant, in two distinct ways. The first way has to do with

²² Paul E. Willis, *Common Culture: Symbolic Work at Play in the Everyday Cultures of the Young* (Open University Press, 1990), 21.

²³ Robin DG Kelley, *Yo'mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Beacon Press, 2001), 3.

the activity of consumption itself.²⁴ Elizabeth Chin also examines the notion of black consumption as a deviant action with the notion of “combat consumers,” or the idea that the purchasing habits and practices of “black and minority youth as out of control.”²⁵ At the most fundamental level, combat consumption is the idea that black consumers, particularly youth, will brave and enact physical harm for the attainment of commodity goods.²⁶

An additional way in which black consumption is perceived as deviant is linked more to the objects of consumption. Austin elaborates on this point when she asserts that, for black consumers, “Consumption is acceptable if it is associated with the uplift of the race, as distinguished from consumption that is coarse and demeaning, or that affirms the worst black stereotypes.”²⁷ As Austin cogently argues, “Blacks are condemned and negatively stereotyped for engaging in activities that white people undertake without a second thought. Among the most significant of these activities is buying and selling goods and services.”²⁸ However, despite whether the deviance of black consumption is situated in the act or in the object, ultimately the how or what of black consumption seems (if not rooted in from the outset) to construct ideas of a deviant black subject. And while reports of sneaker violence seem to corroborate ideas of black consumption as deviant, with the sneaker killings, the subtext is that black deviance precedes the occurrence of an actual legitimate crime. The discourse around the sneaker killings suggests that there is something inherently pathological about these racialized subjects such that even banal and quotidian activities like purchasing are viewed as deviant or criminal. The existing notion of black people as evacuated of both moral values and economic resources means that, in the case of the sneaker killings, victims like Michael Thomas, if not criminal, are certainly not offered the same status and privilege of unquestioned victimhood that they might deserve. Instead of the “everyone's a victim here” rhetoric that is customary when talking about incidences of violence, especially those that involve youth, in the case of the sneaker killings this logic seems to be is turned on its head, and instead, everyone is actually culpable.

The discourse around sneaker killings, therefore, is founded upon ideas of black deviance that are located not only in the activities or objects of consumption, but rather in the subject himself. Simply put, depraved subjects can't help but consume in ways that are pathological. Consider for example, Veblen's classic concept of conspicuous consumption, or the idea that in increasingly urbanized spaces where anonymity as opposed to familiarity abounds, it is consumption (and the most apparent objects of its practice), as opposed to leisure, that becomes the greatest marker of one's class status.²⁹ In the case of Black men's avid consumption of sneakers, however, consumption serves not only as an unreliable marker of class ascension, but furthermore a trenchant cultural signifier of economic, social, and moral deprivation. This effective perversion of Veblen's concept is significant in that it reveals that social practices or behaviors are not necessarily deviant or criminal in and of themselves. What this reveals about deviant consumption is that it is “gauged not by the nature of an act, but by the responses of powerful people to that act. Deviance is a social construct and a mechanism of social control. An

²⁴ Regina Austin, “A Nation of Thieves: Securing Black People's Right to Shop and to Sell in White America,” *Utah L. Rev.*, 1994, 147.

²⁵ Chin, *Purchasing Power*, 23.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁷ Austin, “A Nation of Thieves.”

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1912).

activity may be labeled deviant even though it does not represent a threat to the social order.”³⁰ This is not to say that there is a neutrality to objects or practices, but that the presumption of neutrality is enabled, in part, by broader understandings of the consuming subject. The meaning created between black masculine subjects, and sneakers as objects then, is one of mutual exchange, that, though highly linked to conventional monetary modes of exchange and value, are not restricted to them.”³¹ In other words, the tenuous often degraded status of black subjectivity, particularly black male subjectivity, lends itself to a broader cultural valuation of sneaker consumption as practice, and sneakers as objects.

Given the ways then, that ideas about black masculinity have come to inform understandings of sneakers as cultural objects, it is not entirely surprising that within the fabric of American social and cultural life, sneakers have become the necessary object to which popular discourses of gratuitous black male violence and abject criminality have been moored, and imbued with a pedestrian spectacularity. Furthermore, the presumed triviality of sneakers as a catalyst of black male violence has implications that reverberate beyond the bounds of sneaker violence, and suggests more broadly that incidences of violence enacted by and against black males are very much, as goes the idiomatic expression, “for kicks.” While it is difficult to pinpoint a progenitive incident that marks the origins of the association between sneakers and violence, within the United States a host of cultural phenomena— including the utilitarian origins of sneakers, the association of shoes like Chuck Taylors to youth culture and rebelliousness in the nineteen fifties, and sneakers as predominate form of footwear that would come to be integral to the aesthetic and artistic milieu of hip hop— have all worked to contribute to dominant understandings of sneakers as closely tied to contest and contestation in the United States.

It does seem, however, that there are particular moments where these associations took on a heightened prevalence within popular culture. Songs like Creative Funk’s 1985, “Felon Shoes”, which begins “we’re gonna tell you about a couple felony cases, that started with the brothas with the fat shoe laces” gesture to the ways in which sneakers, violence, and black masculinity have been depicted as inexorably interconnected within popular media culture.³² “Felon Shoes,” As a response to “Felon Shoes” Run DMC released, arguably the most iconic musical ode to sneakers ever, “My Adidas.” To Creative Funk’s musical invective, Run DMC retorted, “ My Adidas walk through concert doors, and roam all over Coliseum floors, I stepped on stage at Live Aid, All the people gave and the poor got paid, and out of speakers I did speak, I wore my sneakers but I’m not a sneak...my Adidas only bring good news, and they are not used as felon shoes”³³ The exchange between Creative Funk and Run DMC both reflected and contributed to broader popular media phenomenon in which the May 14, 1990 issue of *SI* is merely one, albeit an extremely important, artifact. The issue’s continued citation in the contemporary moment bespeaks its cultural significance to the broader popular media discourse about sneaker violence.

External Discourse

³⁰ Austin, “A Nation of Thieves.”

³¹ See Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*.

³² McSaszi84, “Felon Shoes by Creative Funk,” *YouTube*, 1985, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3wBE7gYbe6I>.

³³ IHS7, “RUN-DMC - My Adidas - YouTube,” *YouTube*, February 5, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JNua11FDuDI>.

I am particularly concerned with the production and dissemination of racial discourses through popular news media. Popular news media is an institution which both reflects and propagates certain projects through discourse as it is conveyed through rhetoric, both written and spoken, and images. Ostensibly charged with the task of reporting, the “News is the end product of a complex process which begins with a systematic sorting and selecting of events and topics according to a socially constructed set of categories.”³⁴ The news, then, is a series of projects, including racial projects.³⁵ Furthermore as esteemed scholar of race and media Herman Gray explains, “Black bodies, and especially the constructions and representations on commercial television news, provide the cultural symbols out of which whites fashioned their increasingly conservative, intolerant, and hostile positions.”³⁶ Therefore the media, specifically popular print news media, was an important ideological conductor of moral panic that informed interpersonal behaviors and individual beliefs but also had broader social implications. Indeed, as Gray also explains, “politically and culturally the images of blacks, the poor, and immigrants anchored a moral panic about the decline and erosion of American civic and public life and fueled conservative and neoliberal public policy positions (on the sanctity) of citizenship, nation, community, and family.”³⁷ Therefore, this relationship between seemingly accurate portrayals of Blacks (specifically men) in media representation and in terms of social policy and the criminal justice system is one that is mutually reinforcing as “media narratives presume and then fix the purported natural affinity between black criminality and threats to the nation. By fixing the blame, legitimating the propriety of related moral panics, these representations (and the assumptions on which they are based) help form the discursive logic through which policy proscriptions for more order—more jails—are fashioned.”³⁸ Understanding the ways in which black masculine criminality is represented in popular news media reveals how news media functions as the source as well as a reflection of popular cultural understandings of black male criminality generally, and subsequently the media climate within which the “sneaker killings” emerge.

There are ways in which the sneaker killings are both explicitly and implicitly situated within these media discourses. Consider for example, that in the wake of the May 14, 1990 *SI* issue, a number of major news outlets from across the country published articles citing it as they offered their own take on issues of sneaker violence. For example, that same day, the *New York Times* ran an short piece in its “Sports of the Time” section entitled, “The Murder’s Over the Sneakers.” The piece begins by expressing a sentiment that marked a good majority of popular news accounts of sneaker violence—a commingling of disbelief and outrage captured by the quote, “The initial thought is to laugh. First, at the absolutely preposterous, totally implausible notion that someone might actually live or die or be murdered for a pair of shoes that were originally designed for children to scuff around in, or for adults to wear at tennis, or mowing the

³⁴ Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*, 56.

³⁵ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

³⁶ Gray, *Watching Race*, 32.

³⁷ Herman Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation*, vol. 15 (Berkeley, CA: Univ of California Press, 2005), 25.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

lawn, or washing the car.”³⁹ This dismissal of actual incidences of violence that involve black men and sneakers as “preposterous” and outside of the realm of comprehensibility serves to instantiate blackness in and of itself as that which is outside of reasonable conceptual frames of value and of violence. This type of logic becomes further entrenched, oddly enough, with the inclusion and comparison of reasonable, knowable, and “safe” black masculine subjects (or those that have been deemed safe, however strategically, or fleetingly). Pointedly, The New York Times piece continues by identifying Michael Jordan, John Thompson (the head coach of the Georgetown University basketball team at the time), and Spike Lee as having an important role in the incidents through their targeted marketing to impressionable youth— youth towards whom they should, presumably by virtue of shared racialization, have an ethical responsibility. Lee’s retort to these accusations was complete dismissal as he states, “It’s ridiculous to say that the blood of America is on the hands of Michael Jordan and John Thompson and me...Are you going to blame killings on the sneakers?” Lee goes on to identify what he believes is responsible for the violence, stating, “the breakdown of the family structure is the major problem.”⁴⁰ Lee’s indictment of the family teeters on a particular Reagan-era culture of pathology discourse that the article at large goes on to substantiate. The article offers, as cultural salve, an emphasis on American ideals of meritocracy, hard work, and individual responsibility, even using Jordan, Thompson and Lee as its exemplars through a tokenization that undermines the very catholicism that is being offered-up as it states, “Which brings us back to Jordan and Thompson and Lee. They are quintessential role models for inner-city youths, or for anyone else. They work. They work hard. They have attained status by developing their talents to the highest degree they could, by sweat and by brains, and they have done so within the social system, and within the laws of the land. They have kept the faith. They are champions.”⁴¹ These fundamental American values have often had speciously nefarious implications for African American communities. Indeed, the citation of exemplary blacks who have “made it” has often been a tactic used to divert attention away from the systemic forms of anti-black racism that preclude access and opportunity for the masses of black people. Additionally, articles in the *Los Angeles Times* entitled “How Do We Stop ‘Sneaker Killings’?” and the *Chicago Tribune* entitled “Sneaker Companies Deny Link to Urban Crime” run on May 22nd and May 29th respectively, also cited the May 14, 1990 issue of *SI*, attesting not only to the expanse of concerns around sneaker violence, but perhaps just as significantly, to the impact and gravitas of *SI* as a cultural object. A clear understanding of the discourse of sneaker violence, then, can be better apprehended through a closer look at *Sports Illustrated* itself.

The Issue At Hand: *Sports Illustrated* as Cultural Object

Prior to the more recent cultural dominance of the Entertainment Sports Programming Network (ESPN), *SI* was the most iconic cultural producer of sports news across any medium in the United States. However, the publication’s eventual status as the preeminent sports news publication was preceded by a more humble and precarious beginning. Founded in 1954 by *TIME* Inc.’s Henry Luce, *Sports Illustrated*’s later status as the preeminent sports news publication belies the magazine’s early challenges. The original magazine had an ambivalent

³⁹ Ira Berkow, “SPORTS OF THE TIMES; The Murders Over the Sneakers,” *The New York Times*, May 14, 1990, <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/05/14/sports/sports-of-the-times-the-murders-over-the-sneakers.html>.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

project which consisted of, on the one hand, being configured “as a way to offset Madison Avenue’s perception of spectator sports as catering to an undesirable, blue collar audience... partly due to the Ivy League -influenced provincialism” while on the other capturing the leisure and lifestyle hobbies of the well-to-do.⁴² Furthermore, the magazine was plagued by the harsh realities of financial hardships, including tens of millions of dollars in losses. Although the early years of the publication were fraught with financial peril, Luce continued with the publication. It would be under the guidance and vision of Andre Laguerre that the magazine would go on to become the preeminent sports news publication in the United States. According to Michael MacCambridge, in his work on the history of *Sports Illustrated*, by the 1990’s “*Sports Illustrated* had become a national institution, the only large-circulation title ever to win consecutive National Magazine Awards for general excellence. The magazine also boasted more than 3 million subscribers and a readership of 24 million adults each week. It also was one of the great financial success in the world of publishing, with more than a billion dollars in profit since 1984, and of course, covers that became icons of popular culture.”⁴³

This final point is noteworthy. In a 2015 interview “Senseless” author Rick Telander asserts that “You have to understand the importance of being on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* at that time. That was a statement about whatever was going on in sports in the entire United States.”⁴⁴ Furthermore, Telander explains, “when *Sports Illustrated* said something, it had a lot of weight.”⁴⁵ While Telander is clear about both the gravity of the issue of sneaker violence as well as the significance of landing an *SI* cover, he never makes mention of the cover imagery.⁴⁶ While the cover of *SI* may seem marginally important to the broader history of the magazine, as the previous quote asserts, covers are often central to magazine’s identities as well as to how consumers are oriented towards them.

Magazine covers, independent of the comprehensive magazine text can be understood as their own genre, and, according linguistic scholar Gudrun Held, covers, are “very complex texts.”⁴⁷ Gruden goes on to assert that magazine covers are the epitome of multimodal text types, as characteristic of the “multi medium” text-picture-medium ‘magazine’” and that they “represent a complete and holistic product consisting of visual and text, optics and stylistics.”⁴⁸ Based on these markers, advertisements are perhaps the most culturally abundant and readily identifiable text-type. The similarity between these text types is important. Magazine covers function similar to advertisements in that “the signification of the image is undoubtedly intentional.”⁴⁹ Beyond the intentionality of the text-type, magazine covers resemble advertisements. As Robert Goldman, in his discussion of advertisements states, “because ads are so pervasive and our reading of them so routine, we tend to take for granted the deep social assumptions embedded in advertisements: we do not ordinarily recognise them as a sphere of

⁴² Michael MacCambridge, *The Franchise: A History of Sports Illustrated Magazine* (Hyperion, 1998), 67.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁴ Tejada, “Your Sneakers or Your Life: Behind the Story That Shook Up the Industry | Sole Collector.”

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Gudrun Held, “Magazine Covers—a Multimodal Pretext-Genre,” *Folia Linguistica* 39, no. 1–2 (2005): 173–196.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 33.

ideology.”⁵⁰ I would offer that magazine covers too, in their pervasiveness and visual logics, are imbued with and reflective of a myriad of ideological investments. Unlike advertisements, however, the magazine cover as a specific text type does not necessarily create for the consumer a certain awareness of this intentionality as a function of its mode, and therefore does not reflect the workings of ideology in quite the same way. In other words, even though part of the project and power of the advertisement is to seduce, as a textual mode, advertisements are text types, towards which consumers are already oriented (despite whether or not they suspend this orientation) as having a baked-in end-goal of eliciting a certain consumer behavior, most notably purchasing. Magazine covers, as an overall genre, do not.

For example, consider the way in which magazines are sold. Often sold and displayed (in libraries, bookstores, offices, and homes) in relationship to other similar -text types, the magazine cover is charged with a dual task: “on the one hand it has to make regular readers recognise the brand label by means of the repetition of accustomed visual elements; on the other hand it constantly has to sign on potential customers by adroitly deploying new means in a most striking way.”⁵¹ Since the 1990’s *Sports Illustrated*’s covers have taken on a fairly standardized presentation. The conventions of the cover include brilliant often bright colors, with the magazine title placed towards the top of the issue and centered in a plain type-like script. The title of the magazine is almost always partially obscured, by the cover subject; most typically a single sports figure (but also regularly a group of athletes or a team) — and effects which creates an illusion of scale and contributes to a sense of the sports figure (or figures), and indeed sports in and of themselves, as larger than life.

Additionally, it is important to note that *Sports Illustrated* was innovative in its visual practices. *SI* is often credited as the first magazine to place cameras in obscure places such as the back of hockey goals and on the top of basketball hoops, effectively shifting (literally) audiences’ views of sports. Furthermore, the magazine was pivotal in popularizing the widespread use of color printed photos in magazines. The combination of “real” news reporting and innovative photographing techniques of the magazine itself is essential to understanding the visual and discursive logics of the May 14, 1990 issue and the continued implications for the discourse and imaging of black masculine moribundity and/as object in popular news media. And while understanding the specific visual conventions of *SI* are critical to reading the visual logics of the May 14, 1990 issue, so too are broader popular news media representations of black masculinity, specifically those of criminal black masculinity both historically and in the eighties. The visual (and textual) logics of the May 14, 1990 issue of *Sports Illustrated* cannot be divorced from one of the most infamous representations of criminal black masculinity —Willie Horton.

Weekend Prison Passes and White Broncos: Popular News Media and the Imaging of Criminalized Black Masculinities

While black representations in popular news media draw upon seemingly immutable archetypal representations of blackness within popular culture more broadly, these images can transform to accommodate the unique social and political preoccupations of the time.⁵² For example, news media in the late eighties and early nineties, while clearly citing the discursive and imaged conventions of race reporting that existed in previous years took on a unique tenor, marked by an upsurge in urban riots, the War on Drugs, Reagan-esque pathological discourse of

⁵⁰ Robert Goldman, *Reading Ads Socially* (London: Routledge, 1992), 1.

⁵¹ Held, “Magazine Covers—a Multimodal Pretext-Genre,” 174.

black families and ghettoization. Furthermore, this moment marks a critical shift in the ways which people talked about race. The move away from an explicit language of race towards the use of coded terms including “urban,” “inner city” and “crime,” highlights that while the language of race became more opaque, the image of it did not. In fact, this peculiar dynamic of discussing race without mentioning it explicitly was crucial in the affixing of coded terms such as “crime,” “urban,” and “welfare,” to Black people in seemingly ineluctable ways. While multiple forms of media were implicated in circulating these images and ideologies, popular print news media, because of its reach, is especially notable. It is within and because of this cultural and social climate that *Sports Illustrated* May 1990, issue and story emerge. The visual and discursive components of the *SI* piece are situated within, arguably, one of the most infamous, damning and nefarious black masculine representations within news media of the late twentieth century—the Willie Horton Ad of the 1988 Republican Presidential Campaign.

As part of a 1988 National Security Action Committees campaign against Democratic presidential nominee Michael Dukakis, the NSAC ran an ad outlining then, Vice President George W. Bush’s position on crime. According to the ad, Bush was “for the death penalty,” while Dukakis was characterized as providing “weekend passes for prisoners.”⁵³ While the use of often incendiary and even slanderous political ads during presidential campaigns isn’t particularly noteworthy, the ad’s use of long-standing racial fear tactics. For example, the ad outlined the notion of the “the revolving door,” referring to Governor Dukakis’s support of prison furlough plans (which allowed inmates to leave prison for lengths of time) in his home state of Massachusetts featuring convicted felon William “Willie” Horton. According to the ad, under an ongoing prison furlough program Horton was released ten times—during one of which he allegedly kidnapped a young couple “stabbing the man and repeatedly raping a young woman.”⁵⁴ In the ad, Horton is both named as well as figured, in a grainy black and white photograph—a close-up in which Horton’s mouth is slightly agape, with a gaze that simultaneously meets that of the viewer even while seemingly evacuated of emotion, becoming the image of unbridled and also sexualized black masculine menace that is actualized in America’s longest and most deep-seated fears of black criminality that are made manifest in not just crime, but specifically through the rape of white women. Willie Horton, the cultural object, at once, drew upon a history of racist representations of black masculinity— including sexually predatory and violent bucks and brutes; while simultaneously becoming in the moment of his emergence and henceforth a new short hand for contemporary black masculine representation that would be crystallized in the world of popular news media. Horton marked a certain Post-Civil Rights media orientation to popular black representation where, in the wake of the depictions of righteous civil disobedience of Civil Rights, emerged the shift towards Reagan-era rhetorical and visual representations of abject black depravity and unredeemable criminality. The Horton Ad, in its use of narrative and visual conventions of news reporting of race, would become the cultural antecedent for other infamous popular news media representations of black masculine criminality including Rodney King and OJ Simpson.⁵⁵ While the *SI* cover and article

⁵³ Ilehman, “Willie Horton 1988 Attack Ad,” *YouTube*, November 3, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Io9KMSSEZ0Y>.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ On June 17, 1994 *TIME* magazine released a cover featuring the mugshot of former NFL standout turned alleged murderer, OJ Simpson, with the headline “An American Tragedy.” The *TIME* cover featured a straight-on portrait of Simpson holding the customary mug shot identification placard. Similar to the photo of Horton, there seemed to be a grainy quality to the image with Simpson’s gaze meeting that

employed visual cues, similar to those that marked the Horton ad, there are also important divergences. For example, in terms of imaging, the Horton ad (and later such as O.J Simpson's infamous mug shot on the cover of *TIME*) used portraiture of an individual black male in a way that functioned archetypically, and worked to stand-in for black men writ large. Both Horton and (later Simpson) are depicted as gazing, however vacuously, in a way that presumably elicits aversion from the viewer, while the *SI* article, with its graininess and lack of readied intelligibility almost compels closer scrutiny from the viewer in order to discern the only actual body—that of the victim—that is comprehensively figured on the cover. Black male faces and bodies do the sole work of making black male criminality legible in the case of *TIMES* and *Newsweek* while it is the job of objects like sneakers, and guns in concert with what can only be conjectured to be a black male hand, that does this same work on the *SI* cover. Within the broader cultural context sneakers and guns are racially loaded signs. Furthermore, these objects and their reasonable association with bodies through which they are deployed highlights the ways in which blackness becomes a phantom limb, not necessarily present, but still perceptible and necessary as a pregnant absence, and therefore implicated—a contention that will become more clearly elucidated through a close reading of the cover.

Relaying Race: The Rhetoric of Images

The May 14, 1990 issue of *Sports Illustrated* is a polemic. In a retrospective account of the story, author Rick Telander once explained that he “wanted it to be as devastating as possible. I wanted people to not be able to ignore this.”⁵⁶ And while it's not clear if Telander was referring to the article, the cover or both, I would argue that the cover, perhaps more so than the accompanying article “Senseless,” is central to Telander's project, and what most contributes to the issue's continued citation within contemporary popular culture. Understanding the cover—in its composition, visual, and textual elements—reveals how race is apparent even when it fails to appear. In his essay “Rhetoric of the Image,” Roland Barthes outlines the concepts of relay and anchorage as they relate to visual and written texts. As Stuart Hall asserts, images, while not pluralistic, are polysemous, and therefore open to a number of meanings.⁵⁷ While these meanings are limited by the social and cultural contexts of their production and reception, ultimately resulting in preferred or dominant readings, written text, as an accompaniment to the images, serves to limit and ultimately direct, if not instantiate or “anchor,” a preferred reading of the overall image.

While certain signs, through frequent social and cultural citation appear natural, the preferred connotative meaning “consists of work required to enforce, win plausibility for, and

of the viewer, but with a look that was emotionally vacuous. The photo was immediately met with an onslaught of backlash as critics stated that *TIME* had altered the photo to make Simpson appear more sinister. Fueling the controversy was the release of weekly news magazine *Newsweek*'s use of the same portrait. The *Newsweek* cover, “A Trail of Blood” that the photo of Simpson on the cover of *TIME* was clearly manipulated, as the *Newsweek* version was a much lighter, and, seemingly, more accurate representation of the photo as it was initially taken. In a *New York Times* article, *TIME* magazine responded to charges of racism by stating that the photo had been given to Matt Mahurin, a photo-editor, for “artistic interpretation” and then described the artistic rendering — “the merciless bright light, the stubble on Simpson's face, the cold specificity of the picture — had been subtly smoothed and shaped into an icon of tragedy. The expression on his face was not merely blank now; it was bottomless” – in a way that only served to confirm accusations that the photo had indeed, been darkened.

⁵⁶ Tejada, “Your Sneakers or Your Life: Behind the Story That Shook Up the Industry | Sole Collector.”

⁵⁷ Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” in *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, 2001, 166–176.

command as legitimate a decoding of the event within the limit of dominant definitions in which it has been connotatively signified.”⁵⁸ Similar to anchorage, relay also refers to a specific way in which text and image work in concert to create meaning. However, the meaning-making process under relay is slightly different. With relay, “text... and image stand in complementary relationship; the words in the same way as the images, are fragments of a more generalized syntagm and the unity of the message is realized at a higher level, that of the story, the anecdote, the diegesis.”⁵⁹ Relay is most often seen in comic strips or movies where the image and the text are usually incoherent without the other. I would argue that in the case of the *SI* cover, while the text does anchor the image in a way that makes it clear that what is being depicted is a sneaker robbery, blackness as the subtext is anchored in the absence of the actual word or black bodies. Blackness is, even without making a clear appearance in the imagery or text on the cover, apparent.

The May 14, 1990 issue of *Sports Illustrated's* cover is, upon initial glance, somewhat difficult to completely discern. Foregrounded in the left-hand side of the cover are the dark hands of an assailant, one slightly higher than the other, gripping the inner-part of a pair of white Air Jordan V's (a sneaker which at the time of publication would have been the most recent iteration of the eponymous line). The sneakers are casually slung across the left shoulder of the victim while the assailant's other hand firmly clasped around the handle of a non-descript pistol—pointed in the center of the victim's back—a back that is clad in a billowing burgundy satin, with yellow and white ringing the jackets waist and collar. The jacket is a prototypical example of the satin baseball jackets that were popular in the eighties and nineties. It seems that it is the presence, albeit marginal, of somatic codes like dark hands, and their nearness to specific objects (the gun and the sneakers) that do the work of importing a black masculine subject for the viewer. Consider that on the right side of the cover the hand that grips the pistol, while swarthy, does not actually clearly identify the person's race or gender. Ultimately, the cover image reveals is that based off solely off the aggregate irreducible components—guns, sneakers, etc.—(black) male subjectivity is what is (dis)figured.

Furthermore, despite or perhaps, because of the importance of the somatic dismemberment that occurs in the image, it is actually objects that become centered, both literally and figuratively. Both the gun (clasped by a hand) and the sneakers occupy the center of the image. Corporeal bodies are ultimately secondary to the objects on the cover image in conveying race—so much so that they are literally pushed outside of the frame. Again, for many onlookers, initially, it is difficult to even make-out the victim in the photograph. This is due, in part, to the scale and framing of the bodies in the image. Despite using *SI's* conventional stylistic approach of foregrounding and exaggerating the scale of its cover's subject in a way that codified their subjectivity, in this instance the tactic actually serves to obscure and marginalize, the embodied subject. However, the spatial marginalization and partitioning of the corporeal subject does not evacuate the sense of a subject within the frame, but rather displaces it onto the objects within the frame. While guns commonly function representationally (and materially) as symbols and instruments of violence, sneakers are typically devoid of that meaning. And yet, it is in both the image and the discourse of sneaker violence outlined in the May 14, 1990 *SI*, that the gun and the sneaker both supplant black masculine subjects (both the assailants and victims within these incidents), and in so doing also serves to summon these same displaced subjects. The rhetoric of images means that because images, like text, can connote meaning,

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁵⁹ Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, 41.

images can also do the work of anchorage and relay. Even without the written text of the cover it ultimately becomes clear that some people, and presumably black men, are both robbing and being robbed for their sneakers. For the viewer, it is the objects, the gun and the sneakers, that are centered in the image and that become the repository for the now racial anchored meaning. The placement and order of the objects also contributes to a logical chain of meaning. Reading from left to right it is the hands of the presumably black assailant, gripping the gun that is aimed into the back of a victim towards the end of unlawfully procuring the victim's sneakers. Dark hand. Weapon. Sneakers. This trifecta functions as an unending loop, with each sign ultimately working to instantiate the blackness of the other signs/objects in the image, and collaborate to create the seeming presence of a coherent black male subject. While the implications of this are most significant and apparent for black male subjects, in that they continue to be subjected to certain readings and also material consequences based on discourses of criminality that are assumed and codified by their sartorial choices, this chain of meaning also has implications for objects. Indeed, the discourse of black masculine criminality linked to sneakers has informed cultural understandings of the sneaker as both synecdoche and symbol for black masculinity.

Conclusion

The imagery and the discourse about sneakers and violence captured by the May 14, 1990 issue of *Sports Illustrated* is both informed by and contributes to a larger media culture current that frames African American masculinity in relationship to pathology and criminality through visual and discursive codes. While this discourse has important implications for the material lives of black masculine racial subjects in the form of more of surveillance, policing, and violence, relatedly, this discourse also has important effects on the objects that are associated with this phenomenon.

For example, in 2006, a group of six Black male teenagers from Jena, a small town in central Louisiana, were catapulted into the national spotlight. Robert Bailey, Mychal Bell, Carwin Jones, Bryant Purvis, Jesse Ray Beard, and Theo Shaw—who became collectively nominalized as the Jena Six—brought to the national fore, yet again, the deeply seeded racial tensions that have continued to pervade the social climate of the United States. As the story goes, a Black student at Jena's eponymously named high school sat under a tree that had been designated a, de facto, whites only space. The following day three nooses adorned the tree. According to the students the noose incident was one in a series of racially charged incidents that were punctuated by the beating of white student, Justin Barker. Barker suffered a concussion and multiple bruises. Bailey, Beard, Bell, Jones, Bryant, and Shaw were all charged with attempted second-degree murder and conspiracy to commit murder for the beating of Barker—charges that, if convicted, could have the young men facing up to one hundred years in prison. The District Attorney at the time, Reed Walters, unabashedly promulgated that he would be “seeking the maximum penalty allowed by law” for the young men, aged fifteen to seventeen.⁶⁰ Among the six young men who were charged with the beating of Barker, it would-be sixteen-year-old Mychal Bell, whose name is most synonymous with the incident. In Bell's case, DA Walters pushed for an aggravated battery charge, a more severe charge than standard battery, because of the assailant's use of a deadly weapon. In the case of Mychal Bell, the deadly weapon that garnered the aggravated battery charge was his sneakers. Despite occurring over

⁶⁰ “The Case of the Jena Six: Black High School Students Charged with Attempted Murder for Schoolyard Fight After Nooses Are Hung from Tree,” *Democracy Now!*, July 10, 2007, http://www.democracynow.org/2007/7/10/the_case_of_the_jena_six.

fifteen years after the height of “the sneaker killings,” of the nineties, the weaponization of Mychal Bell’s sneakers is significant as it both cites and contributes to the complex tautological dance between identity, and objects, specifically black masculinity and sneakers.⁶¹ As a case that existed at the nexus of race, space, and criminalization the sneakers, other than the ways that they served as an object that allowed for the garnering of a more serious offense, seem incidental to the overall arc of the case. What the sneakers in this case do, however, is function through a type of cultural citationality, one that harkens back to the ways that more quotidian associations between black men and sneakers that are still marked by deviance and criminality.

The question arises as to how can we thoughtfully and responsibly hold a conversation about sneakers and violence, that at once acknowledges 1) the self-propagating ways in which imperiled and criminalized black masculinity has consistently served as the object of affinity for popular media culture within the United States and 2) actual issues of violence, both individually and systematically, and the real effects of these incidents. Indeed, it seems that the most productive course of action must resolve both. Admittedly this is a challenging task. However, to attempt to not understand black masculinities as so firmly tethered to death or imperilment, but rather to a creativity and vitality is to encounter modes of popular black masculine representation that unsettle the collective expectation and imagination around what black masculinities look like. In this vein, I want to propose the inclusion of another discourse—the specter of which has hovered within the discourses of sneaker consumption that have circulated throughout the last thirty years, but has seldom risen to the fore—that of fandom. Given the urgency and seriousness of issues of black imperilment and death, particularly within a cultural climate that is, woefully, always awash with stories and images of it (the face of which is often young black men), how can proffering something like fandom be a plausible and productive analytic for such a serious matter? First, the language of fandom, both explicitly and subtly, already abounds within the existing discourse. Consumers are often described as fanatical, and the discourse of sneaker consumption includes the general language of fandom, but also the inclusion of circumscribed fan communities often marked by specific nominalization such as “sneakerheads”, shared lexicons, histories, and practices that define them. All of these pre-existing components of sneaker consumption should, seemingly, make black masculinity and black men, legible as fans. Academically and popularly this is an issue that continues to be neglected. Indeed, black masculinity, as the phenomena with sneakers in many ways reveals, has continued to be subjected to an “always the fan object, never the fan” dynamic that continues to occlude thoughtful engagements with fandom, not merely the object of fandom, but fans themselves. Although perhaps met with derision, or dismissal, the central subject of fandom is the actual fan. Within a discourse replete with corpses and criminals, there has been almost no voice extended to sneaker consumers, which begs the question, can the (sneaker) consumer speak? And what new insights and subjugated truths might interposing a conversation about fandom into a discourse of black masculine commodity fetishization with regards to sneakers offer us?

⁶¹ Coleman, “Classic Campaigns-” It’s Gotta Be the Shoes”.

Chapter III

“I’m A Shoe Connoisseur, I Been Gettin Shoes:’ Sneakers, and the (Im) Possibility of Black Masculine Fandom”

In this chapter I continue with my grounding analytic of the racial life of things and consider how fandom can be a productive mode for interrogating both black men’s consumption of sneakers as well as the sneaker as object. I begin by outlining the larger issues that have been central to scholarly theorizations of fandom and fan studies including the questions of what constitutes fans and fandom. I then move to an account of the ways in which both masculinity and blackness are modalities that, within fan studies literature, remain marginalized. Although black masculinity is not the sum of these two modalities, I situate my analysis of black masculine fandom in relationship to these two discourses as their own unique development and concerns highlight the points of convergence while also illuminating points of discord that need to be more fully addressed regarding the unique contours of black male fandom.

Relatedly, it is also worth noting that the materiality of the sneaker as fan object arouses a number of issues within fan studies including the field’s inclination to “privilege textual over tactile engagement.”¹ Moreover, as scholar Lincoln Geraghty points out in his work on collecting, object-based (as opposed to media text) fandom is often dismissed or denigrated because of the ways it is often highly implicated by material consumption.² In this regard then, the actual fan subjects (black men) and the objects of their fandom (sneakers), have remained marginalized because of the ways that they both connote consumption. Black male sneaker fandom, then, is a particularly fecund site of analysis—not only serving to highlight a community that has been illegible within the field, but also attending to its marginalization of material-based fandom.

I attempt to show how sneaker fandom, as a form of object-based fandom, as opposed to its oft-privileged counterpart — media-based fandom — highlights the ways in which the relationship between black male subjects and their relationship to their fan objects troubles the clear demarcation of between objects and subjects, through what I refer to as the “always the fan object never the fan” phenomenon. Fans and their objects are assumed to be distinct and self-contained categories. Black masculine fandom seems to trouble this. On its face this collapse is problematic and lends itself to the marginalization and even invisibility of actual black male fans. However, I also want to acknowledge how leaning into the discomfort of these silences and elisions might also inadvertently create the space for novel engagements with the terms of black subjectivity.

I identify three important sites of analysis. The first is one of the most famous representations of black male fandom within popular culture—the character Mars Blackmon, who originally appeared in Spike Lee’s 1986 film *She’s Gotta Have It* (and was played by Lee himself), and later became the spokesman for a number of Nike’s Air Jordan televisual advertisements throughout the late eighties and early nineties. Blackmon’s character is a representation of a fan but also highlights, meta-textually, the ways in which Black men become fan objects. More specifically, Blackmon’s deployment across media texts by Nike can be read as a type of fanfic.³ In both sites Blackmon is important as he both aligns with the mainstream

¹ Bob Rehak, “Materiality and Object-Oriented Fandom,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 16 (2014), <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/622/450>.

² Lincoln Geraghty, *Cult Collectors: Nostalgia, Fandom and Collecting Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 2.

³ “fanfic” is short for “fanfiction,” a term that usually refers to a genre of cultural production that takes characters from existing, often popular, texts and places them into fan-produced storylines and texts. For

archetype of the male fan that has circulated within popular in his slight and geekish persona, but also diverges from this. Mars does possess a certain degree of cool and sociality that complicates the masculine (and heterosexual) failure that has been a persistent marker of other male fans.

I then turn to another set of media texts, new media that (as was explained in the previous chapter) continues to usurp fans into a discourse of deviance, and does so in a way that ultimately marginalizes the actual fans and their self-narratives. More specifically, I examine a news media segment from the 2011 Air Jordan Concord release that was reproduced and re-viewed on, YouTube. These artifacts are significant as not only do they contribute to an existing discourse on black male sneaker consumption, but they also do so in such a way that unavoidably allows black male consumers to speak for themselves, through and often against these narratives as they are being constructed. Finally, I turn my attention to the fan object—the sneaker—and foreground the affective and performative slippages between sneakers and black men as fan objects

Defining Fandom

There is little debate that sneaker fandom is an actual fandom. Indeed, any cursory engagement with sneaker culture reveals that it contains many of the conventions of traditionally-defined fandoms. For example, the existence of a vibrant fan community amongst many sneaker consumers is evinced by things like online forums like NikeTalk (the self-proclaimed “the premier gathering point for the world’s most dedicated and knowledgeable sneaker fans”), where fans gather and exchange information, and national and global sneaker conventions like Sneaker Con, Dunkxchange, Sneaker Pimps, as well as a bevy of local sneaker meet-ups and smaller gatherings.⁴ Additionally, these fans have shared lexicons, and even nominalizations like “sneakerhead,” as well as engage in practices like camping-out, and deadstocking.⁵ Even with the migration of much of sneaker shopping onto online platforms, sneaker fans continue to engage in a variety of practices or, what John Fiske terms “textual productivity” behaviors, where they “produce and circulate among themselves texts which are often crafted with production values as high as any in the official culture.”⁶ While textual productivity is another way in which media texts seems to be centered, this concept is still applicable to object based fandoms and the creative ways that fans, formally and informally—through art, curation, stylization, customization, and even through invitation by formal entities like sneaker companies, produce and exchange objects for their own pleasure. And yet, even with the exhibition all of the aforementioned conventions of fandom, black male consumption of sneakers continues to be positioned outside of the purview of fandom. Defining what

more on fanfic see: Henry Jenkins, *Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture*. Routledge, 2012; Karen Hellekson, and Kristina Busse, eds. *The fan fiction studies reader*. University of Iowa Press, 2014; Katherine Larsen, ed. *Fan culture: Theory/practice*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012; Matt Hills, *Fan cultures*. Psychology Press, 2002.

⁴ niketalk admin, “About Us | NikeTalk,” *NIKETALK*, July 9, 2012, <https://niketalk.com/ams/about-us.7526/>.

⁵ while camping-out is the practice of waiting at retailers often hours and sometimes days in advance of a release to increase one’s chances of successfully procuring sneakers, deadstocking refers to stockpiling unworn shoes for wear at a later date, presumably when a given model is less readily available.

⁶ Lisa A. Lewis, ed., *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, 1 edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 1992), 39.

constitutes a fan generally can perhaps help illuminate why black men specifically have and continue to be occluded from traditional fan discourse.

Defining fandom is difficult. Indeed, who and what constitutes a fan has been a central concern of fan studies scholars and literature. In one of the most influential texts of fan studies, *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins provides an etymological outline of the term fan. According to Jenkins, “‘Fan’ is an abbreviated form of the word ‘fanatic,’ which has its roots in the Latin word ‘fanaticus. In its most literal sense, ‘fanaticus’ simply meant ‘Of or belonging to the temple, a temple servant, a devotee.’”⁷ While the etymology of the term offers clarification around its intended meaning, perhaps less clear, and ultimately what informs the scholarly debate within the field, is the term’s varied use and meaning within academic and popular culture. As fandom scholar Matt Hills notes, because of the ways in which the term has become part of our everyday parlance when naming even the most casual affinity towards an entire range of objects—media texts, including sports teams, music, quotidian objects, food, celebrities—its meaning and efficacy is much more nebulous than clear.⁸

Some fan studies scholars have attempted to parse out the terms by which one is a fan; for example, Longhurst and Abercrombie have created a type of taxonomy of fandom, with the author’s making substantive differentiations between fans, enthusiasts, and cultists.⁹ These terms have been employed in hopes to more precisely name different types of affinity groups, however, these diverse nomenclatures may have actually served to perpetuate the lack of conceptual clarity, as they are not used uniformly or consistently, and ultimately “fan” still persists as the dominant term (consider the name of the field, journals, conferences, etc.).

In addition to the issues that arise due to the lack of uniformity of use, fan has also been a term that has elicited issues because of certain meanings it connotes, despite variation in application. For example, as Joli Jensen argues in her chapter “Fandom as Pathology”, while all of us are fans of something, “fan” is often a term that is employed to mark fanatic or deviant behavior. Jensen argues that this deviance takes on two primary configurations—the obsessed loner and the hysterical crowd.¹⁰ According to Jensen, the obsessed loner is one “who (under the influence of the media) has entered into an intense fantasy relationship with a celebrity figure”, while the hysterical crowd which is “the image that predominates in discussions of music fans and sports fans.”¹¹ Both are pathological, as they highlight the “Suffering from the disease of isolation” and “the disease of contagion” respectively. It is important to highlight that the notion of hysteria to which Jensen refers has traditionally been assigned to women (hysteria originated from the Latin word meaning “of the womb”) often characterized by hordes of young girls.¹²

Indeed, many early studies of fan behavior were centered around female homosocial fandoms. Eventually fan studies literature that conceptualized fandom in terms of deviance,

⁷ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York, NY.: Routledge, 2012), 12.

⁸ Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (Psychology Press, 2002), <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=t10zMpqK4gC&oi=fnd&pg=PR9&dq=matt+hills+fandom+&ots=J9zqmNro47&sig=Gsq1gDKVUYzKbi9M8sOJBavObGA>.

⁹ Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian J. Longhurst, *Audiences: A Sociological Theory of Performance and Imagination* (London: SAGE, 1998).

¹⁰ Joli Jensen, “Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Categorization,” in *The Adoring Audience*. London: Routledge, 1991.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹² Lewis, *The Adoring Audience*, 89–90.

however, fell out of favor. These seems to be related, at least in part, to an upsurge in fan studies work focusing on men. This is not to say that fandom did not still engage with deviance, but rather attributed it to other modes.

And yet, theorizations of certain male fandoms, specifically racialized ones, continue to be marginalized within the field. This scotoma is even more severe when it comes to black male fans. Why? I want to contend that, outside of sports fandom (which continues to be a culturally sanctioned site for particular configurations of dominant masculinity) dominant conceptions of masculinity remain, for the most part, incongruent with fandom. This is the result of limited and often erroneous constructions of both fans and black masculine identities that ultimately position black males and fandom as incongruent. It is important to note that black men's fandom cannot be reduced to the sum of men and fandom or blackness and fandom, but understanding the contours of these specific areas of fan studies is important for illuminating the unique contours of black male fandom.

Masculinity and Fandom

Any exploration of sneaker culture fandom must first be preceded by a critical interrogation of male fandom. Because, as was mentioned, fandom has often been identified with women, male fandoms (outside of a few sanctioned sites such as sports fandom and certain types of music). Therefore, male fans have always posed an interesting quandary. And yet some of the most recognizable fans are predominantly (or imagined as such) male—trekkie.

However male fandoms tend to be affixed to a certain type of gendered failure. In his work on whiteness and fandom, Mel Stanfill argues that men, who have traditionally been positioned outside of early understandings of fandom are often characterized as failing at whiteness. Using the work of whiteness studies scholar Richard Dyer, Stanfill argues that while white male fans are “skin white” or possess the phenotypical markers of what constitutes whiteness in the United States, they are not “symbolically white” as the images of white male fans that are pervasive in the media “do not fit comfortably within the positive valuation usually attached to whiteness in dominant American culture.”¹³ Furthermore, Stanfill states:

Fans are, first, men who are questionably masculine, and, particularly, not virile or athletic. This is particularly interesting given that sports fandom, at least, would commonly be understood to be integral to normative masculinity. This points to the way in which masculinity is precisely something that must be enacted; these fans may be oriented toward a masculinizing object, but, at least as constructed in dominant cultural representations, they don't act very manly about it, namely, through their exhibition of excessive, uncontrolled affect.¹⁴

While Stanfill is clear to identify how sports fandom is perhaps the most culturally recognizable site of male fandom, Stanfill is also circumspect and sure to point out that sports fandom is actually aberrant as opposed to representative of masculine performances of fandom. Interestingly, in this regard, Stanfill identifies these white male fans as “mis-doing whiteness.”¹⁵

¹³ Mel Stanfill, “Doing Fandom,(Mis) Doing Whiteness: Heteronormativity, Racialization, and the Discursive Construction of Fandom,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 8 (2010), <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/256>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Stanfill argues that ultimately white male fans fail a performance of white masculinity in their inability to exhibit a type of control or mastery of their object. Similar to Jensen's claims about deviant groups then, for Stanfill, whiteness represents a type of control, a control that is relinquished by white male fans.

Along with the issue of relinquishing control (or perhaps another manifestation of it) is the way that male fandom also brings up issues of sexuality. In certain ways then, queer sexuality seems to function as a capacious term for all forms of "variant" male gender and sexual identity. This is to say, that it is not that these men are as homosexual in and of themselves (or this is not entirely the critique launched at them), but rather queer sexuality becomes a means through which to characterize what is actually deemed as gender deviance. Akin to the ways in which "no-homo," a term that proliferated as a part of popular parlance in the middle two thousands, to articulate a disassociation or demonstrable refutation of any interaction or language that might be interpreted as having explicit or implicit queer subtext, homosexuality seem to function similarly. In certain instances, "charges" of homosexuality seem less a commentary on sexual identity and more a shorthand for describing seemingly gender variant masculine performances. This is not to undermine the possibility of sexually queer fans, but rather to highlight the complicated terms by which these designations are employed/deployed.¹⁶

For example, in 2012 the film *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony*, released. The use of the term "Adult" in the subtitle is a bit misleading as the film focuses almost exclusively on men, who are often castigated for their enthusiasm for the children's cartoon (and toy doll line) *My Little Pony*. These fans, who self-identify as "Bronies" or "bros+ponies" were the subject of an article in online magazine, *Wired*, entitled "In Defense of Bronies." In the piece, the author attempts to make a case for the ways in which a specific community of fans. The author moves to defend Bronies and tout their ability to be heterosexual (in the face of accusations of sexual queerness and epithets) despite what their fandom might indicate. However, there is in no real discussion of sexuality, but rather explanations of the seeming gender deviance that is evinced by the MLP fandom of otherwise gender-normative white men. Judith Butler explains this phenomenon stating "homophobia often operates through the attribution of a damaged, failed, or otherwise abject gender to homosexuals."¹⁷ This misattribution is clear in the case of Bronies, and despite the author's attempt to critique problematic and erroneous claims that Bronies' fandom is evidence of their homosexuality or pedophilic, a claim that seems solely hinged on a chain of signifiers where pastel colored ponies her defense of them ultimately lends credence to preposterous and dangerous associations. Particularly as she attempts to talk about her and other women's fandom of children's television show, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, a move that ultimately codifies as opposed to undoes the ways in which masculinity functions differently in terms of cultural codes around proper gender performance. Both Stanfill's general assessment of white male fandoms as well as Rebecca Angel's suggestion that part of this notion of whiteness as a failure of masculinity seems also to proceed and contribute to a broader troubling logic where black men, who are seen as always already sexually potent and hypermasculinized, are therefore outside of the possibility of fandom.

¹⁶ For more on "no homo" see Joshua R. Brown PhD, "No Homo," *Journal of Homosexuality* 58, no. 3 (February 22, 2011): 299–314, doi:10.1080/00918369.2011.546721.

¹⁷ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 238.

Furthermore, if fandom and masculinity are often deemed irreconcilable, as is evinced by the ways in which many of traditionally male fandoms like sports, are deemed as incongruent from the fandoms that fan studies takes up, then cultural spaces where black male fans congregate, and therefore black male fans, continue to be marginalized. This is curious given that, in the case of sports for example, the “Excessive, uncontrolled affect” that Stanfill, mentions is as marking white male fans, does not apply. Indeed sports sanctions and even expects and certain forms of excessive affect as part of a proper demonstration of masculinity and fandom. Therefore, it seems that it is both the combination of certain affects cast towards “proper” texts/objects that reflects an adherence or failure of proper masculine performances. Ultimately, Stanfill’s work, like much of the fan literature, that the unmarked fan subject defaults to white and often male, though not conventionally masculine. If then, these are the markers of fans within fan studies, not only does instantiate very static notions of black masculinity, but contribute to the impossibility black male fandom. Looking beyond theorizations of masculinity and fandom, then, is paramount in locating black male fans within the field. Indeed, the body of work on black fandom offers one such space in which to consider the black male fan subject.

Black Fandom

Explicating the ways in which blackness and fandom have been imbricated to one another, serves is productive for understanding the aporia of black masculine fans and fandoms in particular. There are two distinct frames through which to understand blackness and fandom — the first is the terms by which fandom has historically been constructed as white, and the second is a lack of explicit engagement with black subjects and their practices.

Although fan studies hasn’t always foregrounded race as a modality when explicating fans, race has always been a central part of fandom. As Rebecca Wanzo outlines in her important essay on black fandom fan studies has failed to produce work on race, primarily because fan studies’ scholars’ own myopia around this issue. Wanzo references John Fiske’s as she states: “Scholars sometimes lament the ubiquitous absence of race as an object of analysis. In his 1992 study of fans, John Fiske stated that he regretted ‘being unable to devote the attention to race that it deserves’ but that he had ‘not found studies of non-white fandom.’ He argued that most studies focused on “class, gender, and age as the key axes of discrimination.””¹⁸ In making this case, he not only claims that there are few studies of fans of color but also fails to treat whiteness as a racialized identity. The ways in which whiteness (as the work of people like Mel Stanfill attests) has become an increasingly popular axis around which fan studies work is centered has not served to resolve the dearth of work on racial fandoms that are racialized as nonwhite—and specifically black. Fan studies’ traditional notions of who claims fandom and the validity of such claims has always been exclusionary of black fans. Wanzo explains that

The kinds of claims made about who can be a fan, often privileging science fiction fans, favors the identities and affective structures that are most apparent in that group of consumers. This framing privileges people who have produced an historical record through letters, fan fiction, and conventions and who have the leisure time to be cult fans. However, the emphasis on cult fans encourages a narrowness of what constitutes a fan and performs a profound set of historical erasures of fandom that could not be performed

¹⁸ Rebecca Wanzo, “African American Acafandom and Other Strangers: New Genealogies of Fan Studies,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 20 (2015), <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/699>.

in that way. Moreover, the framing of fans as in opposition to normative practices of consumption and to culture more broadly talks about othering in a manner that valorizes people who have claimed otherness for themselves, as opposed to having otherness thrust upon them.¹⁹

Additionally, there are the traditional ways in which certain fandoms, and certain framings of fans, have occluded more expansive understandings of the aforementioned that would necessarily include black fans. For example, as Wanzo rightly explains in her reading of work like that of Tricia Rose whose work on hip hop and its discussion of issues such as the creative labor of people who might be otherwise materially disposed, consumers repurposing of texts, and challenging of conventions of textual ownership, aligns with much of canonical fan studies work. Yet other factors, including persistent idea of who fans are, has precluded readings of these texts and their subjects as speaking to fandom.²⁰

Furthermore, issue of alterity are also significant for black fandoms. As Wanzo goes on to further explain, “The political or oppositional content of black hip-hop fandom has a different configuration: it is part of an everyday culture, and it articulates an otherness that is somewhat normative for many in the hip-hop generation. In other words, the counterculture otherness of hip-hop is attractive to many African American youth because it describes the alterity they already experience, not an otherness they seek to claim.”²¹ Wanzo’s ability to point to the source of alterity is important, and I believe can be expanded beyond hip hop fandom. For example, in the case of black masculine fandoms like sneakers, black men’s fandom is often not read as such because their behaviors and interests are marked as deviant—a deviance that is located in the racial and gendered identity and not in their fan identity, and ultimately furthers their illegibility as such.

There are also the ways in which certain affinities seem so endemic to their racial identity, that they are illegible as such. As Wanzo explains, “African American fans make hypervisible the ways in which fandom is expected or demanded of some socially disadvantaged groups as a show of economic force and ideological combat. They call attention to how fandom can be part of an effort to show that subjected populations are normative and that their experiences, desires, and lives should be considered part of the American imaginary.”²² The ways in which that fandom is not reflective of other states of social alterity, but rather a display of normalcy and inclusion, is important. Black fans coalesce around objects because of their shared affinity, but also the ways in which fandom, for black subjects, is not seen as uncool or deviant but rather a site of affirmation, communality, and pleasure. Indeed, dominant tropes of commiseration, loserdom, or outsiderhood—all of which have circulated around white (male) fandoms—do not translate the same to black fans.

Along with issues of different affirmative relationships to texts, perhaps another reason that African Americans have been marginalized within fan studies is because they have taken a decidedly anti-fan position in regards to popular cultural texts. While anti-fandom is seemingly outside of the purview of fandom, the work of scholars like Jonathan Gray reveals the opposite—anti fandom is indeed a present, and central part of a larger ecology of fan engagement with texts. When describing anti fandom Gray states “This is the realm not necessarily of those who are against fandom per se, but of those who strongly dislike a given text or genre, considering it

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel.”²³ According to Wanzo “African Americans have a rich history of anti-fandom, demonstrating the ambivalence—and at times hatred—they experience with many popular texts. Anti-fans both have and have not consumed their hate objects, but they know much about, or have definitive opinions about, their injuriousness.” With regards to black anti-fandom, a few things arise. The first being that just like with affirmative fandoms, black people’s anti-fandom may simply be on whose dislike of a given text counts. Ultimately Wanzo’s assertion that “African Americans are always already improper subjects; part of their pleasure in a text can thus be about resisting the normativity of whiteness even as they claim their own normativity” can be refined to speak pointedly to the pleasures black men take around objects of fandom, specifically sneakers.²⁴

In addition to work that addresses some of the central concerns of fan studies, even as it has not been framed as such, there is a growing body of scholarship that could be nominalized as black fan studies scholarship. To date a small cadre of scholars have attempted to theorize Black fandom. Jacqueline Bobo’s *Black Women as Cultural Readers*, which focuses on black women audiences in relationship to literary consumption, is often cited as one of the of the earliest and most texts on black fans. Bobo offers that black women are cultural readers who have important, albeit often overlooked, subversive capacities, through their engagement with popular culture and “empower themselves through negotiated reception” of texts.²⁵ Bobo’s work has laid the foundation for more scholarship with regards to blackness and fandom.²⁶ For example, Kristen Warner’s work on Black women’s fandom for the hit television show, *Scandal* is highly indebted to the piece. While Bobo’s work is framed more specifically around audiences, Warner’s is much more in accord with contemporary scholarship on fandom, addressing issues of media consumption as well as the way fans are increasingly understood in terms of the production of their own types of fandom ephemera.

For example, with regards to black women televisual media consumers, Warner also emphasizes that part of understanding black women’s *Scandal* fandom lies in understanding the ways in which the show also takes place within a larger intertextual mediascape (meaning that viewers are watching the show, as well as engaging with other viewers via twitter, text, making memes for Instagram, concomitantly) that for this community, cannot be disaggregated from the life of the show. Furthermore, Warner suggests that black women have been often invisible in cultural representation as well as fans. She states “few people even realize that Black women take part in fandom at all. The stark reality is that the only people who are allowed to be visible within fandom and imagined to be fans by the media industries are White men and women.”²⁷ Curiously, this lack of visibility might actually be an impetus for the burgeoning of their fandom, as because of this, black women often corral around limited representation of themselves, as well as imagine themselves into media texts through practices such as “racebending.” Warner goes on to define racebending as a practice where fans “change the race and cultural specificity of central

²³ Jonathan Gray, “New Audiences, New Textualities: Anti-Fans and Non-Fans,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (March 1, 2003): 70, doi:10.1177/1367877903006001004.

²⁴ Wanzo, “African American Acafandom and Other Strangers.”

²⁵ Jacqueline Bobo, *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (Columbia University Press, 1995), 5, https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=1NmEzAuQNk4C&oi=fnd&pg=PA1&dq=jacqueline+bo+o&ots=3BnWv__CyQ&sig=X1XFU_HWCMqyWQQ4RWOpbcfjteY.

²⁶ Kristen J. Warner, “ABC’s *Scandal* and Black Women’s Fandom,” in *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn: Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century*, 2015, 173–184.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

characters or pull a secondary character of color from the margins, transforming her into the central protagonist. Racebending allows for a negotiation between the original actor's performance and the audience's acceptance of the performance."²⁸

I agree with Warner's contention and also want to suggest that certain racialized groups, specifically black men, experience this illegibility and marginalization in especially virulent and unique ways. For example, there is not a readily identifiable black male fandom that partakes in similar type of fan practices of racebending. This is not to say that there are not black male fans who do imagine themselves within roles formerly inhabited by non-black people, but rather that these expressions of fandom seem more applicable to an aberrant black male within a racially neutral (or often unmarked or marked space of white) fandom than characteristic of a black male fandom at large.

Black women's participation in (media) fandom is interesting as even spaces such as black twitter which are ostensibly gender neutral, often default to a black female subject. It seems that within media and fan culture (and the ways that they overlap), the traditional ways in which the universal black subject has almost always defaulted to male does not translate. And unlike their female counterparts, as evidenced by shows like *Scandal*, the inability to imagine black male fans persists marginalization even around media texts that center black men.

For example, one of the critiques of popular culture's most ardent television fandoms, *The Wire*, illustrates this point. The now defunct but highly acclaimed show is centered around the complex engagements between a narcotics unit and a series of players in the illegal drug game in Baltimore. One of the show's greatest accomplishments is its breadth and depth of character development. More specifically, the show was able to represent a fuller range of black masculinity. In its diverse representations it not only addressed the issues of lack of representation of black masculinities in televisual dramas, but also did so in such a way that humanized black masculine people—even those that have normally only been static tropes of black masculinity, drug dealers, drug addicts, pimps. Additionally, *The Wire* also addressed and gave sustained and nuanced attention to queer black masculinities as well as black female masculinities that were also relatively absent in television prior to its release.

In the wake of the show, many think pieces, op-eds, and even a *Saturday Night Live* skit have emerged around *The Wire* fandom. Much of this attention has been around the rapacious, and partly inexplicable and arguably voyeuristic obsession of white people (and a particular cadre of white people) at that with the show. Beyond the voyeurism, the primary critique seems to be that white fans affinity for the show is rooted in a certain type of objectification of black masculinity, where white fans only engagement and investment in black masculinities lie in watching the show (or asking black people if they've seen it). This suggest a lack of sincerity, an investment in black masculinities that isn't about the actual black men who occupy and partake in these spaces but rather a racial phantasmagoria that persists within the space of fandom. In this regard then, *The Wire* fandom highlights the ways in which black men and masculinities are often the objects of fandom, even as their own subjectivity as fans remains invisible. In recognizing and legitimating black fandom it is central to account for the possibilities of exclusively or overwhelmingly black male fandoms, as well as the existence of black male and masculine people within other fan communities. Black male sneaker fandom, then, brings to the fore issues of race, and gender that have been troublesome for fans studies, but additionally become complicated further through the type of fandom—that which is material as opposed to media based.

²⁸ Ibid., 39.

Object-Based Fandoms, Objectified Fans

As Benjamin Woo emphasizes, fandom can never really be disaggregated from objects. As he states, “Things are the sine qua non of fandom, that without which it remains only potentiality and not realized capability.”²⁹ Despite this fact, the great preponderance of fan studies work is still dominated by what Bob Rehak terms textual as opposed to tactile fandoms.³⁰ However, media-text based fandom, as Rehak points out, is often marked by the presence of its object-based counterpart. For example, the trekkies or Star Wars fans of our collective popular imagination are not only marked by an investment and facility with the media texts, but could not be legible as the fans we have come to know in the absence of a series of material accoutrements including videos, costumes, light sabers, action figures, and other paraphernalia.

As scholar Lincoln Geraghty points out in his work on collecting, object-, as opposed to media-based, fandom is often dismissed or denigrated because of the ways it is often highly implicated by material consumption. And yet consumption, of one type or another, is integral to any sort of fandom. So too is some sort of object. As Benjamin Woo asserts, fandom is ineluctably linked to objects in such a way that the notion of dissociation, this way of talking about fandom as though it were merely affective or intellectual property, is confounding.³¹ Indeed, only a cursory engagement with the affective and intellectual parts of fan identity reveals that they are produced by various types of object-engagement. Woo goes on to clarify the ways in which fans as subjects are reliant upon objects and that they “produce themselves as agents, as people who can do certain types of things” through their relationship to objects.³² As he rightly asserts, practices like researching, exchanging, storing, repairing, cleaning, disposing and displaying which are all part of the quotidian practices of fandom, though perhaps not explicitly, are all related to objects in some way.³³ Moreover, other fan-activities, including collection and curation, foreground the relationship between fans and objects. As such a significant part of fan culture, the practice of collecting in particular, deserves further examination.

In “On Collecting” Baudrillard identifies a certain type of practice that is often to endemic to object-based fandoms—collecting. Baudrillard outlines two distinct orientations that subjects can have to objects as he states “any given object can have two functions: it can be utilized or it can be possessed.”³⁴ He goes on to explain the difference between the two stating: “the first function has to do with the subject’s project of asserting practical control within the real world. Ultimately, the strictly utilitarian object has a social status: think of the machine, for example. Conversely the object, pure and simple, divested from its function abstracted from any practical context, takes on a strictly subjective status.”³⁵ While Baudrillard argues that “the two are mutually exclusive,” I however, would trouble this idea of the of collecting and possession as mutually exclusive. The racial object confounds this clear boundary.

Furthermore, I would contend that people both produce themselves and are produced through their engagement with objects. The implications of this phenomenon not only contributes to an objectifying relationship between non-black consumers or fans and black

²⁹ Benjamin Woo, “A Pragmatics of Things: Materiality and Constraint in Fan Practices,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 16 (2013), <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/495>.

³⁰ Rehak, “Materiality and Object-Oriented Fandom.”

³¹ Woo, “A Pragmatics of Things.”

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Baudrillard, “The System of Collecting,” 8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

masculinity, but can work similarly intra-rationally. Fans that are racialized and gendered as black and masculine are just as capable of making black masculinity into a fan object as non-black masculine subjects. More specifically, black male consumers and black masculinities are produced through an engagement with things, but not always, as Woo argues, as agents. Indeed objects, in this particular case, can (though not always or exclusively) have the curious effect of producing other objects.

Consider that if sneakers and black masculinity are tautological signs then, black male sneaker fandom is one such site where this dynamic often plays out. While it seems clear then, that black masculinity is objectified, and sneaker is can the simultaneously be the subject and object of their own fandom. All of these issues of masculinity, blackness, and objects, come to bare and can be understood through a more pointed explication of black male fans and fandoms.

Mars Blackmon: Black Male Super Fan

In 1986 Spike Lee released his first major motion picture, *She's Gotta Have It*. The film is primarily centered around beautiful, charming, and commitment-adverse protagonist Nola Darling, and her various love interests. Throughout the film we are privy to Nola's caprice in love primarily through her interactions with three male suitors—Greer, Jamie, and Mars. Each of the men are put forth as meeting various parts of Nola's needs. Early on in the film when Nola is walking down a street, we are introduced to Jamie, who is shown pursuing her. The epitome of the “nice guy,” Jamie is configured as Nola's most balanced suitor, and the love interest around which the film primarily centers. Later, in a restaurant scene, we are introduced to one of Nola's other love interests, Greer. Handsome and elitist, Greer admonishes Nola for her choice friends, and is candid in his admission that if she weren't “so fine” he wouldn't entertain her. His condescension is often met by Nola's cool indifference in return. Both Nola and Greer seem to merely tolerate each other's company, and are only depicted as compatible during their sexual encounters. Finally, we are introduced to the character played by Lee himself, Mars Blackmon—a light-hearted, precariously employed bike messenger. What Mars lacks in stature and occupational and maturity he compensates for with humor and overall conviviality. He is often depicted as playfully beseeching Nola with his signature “please baby baby please baby baby please.”³⁶

What is perhaps more memorable than Mars's antics and token sayings, however, is his attire. While an unscrutinized assessment of Mars's attire might easily attribute his sartorial choices to the practicalities and prevailing aesthetics of his job as a bike courier, it is clear that his vestments coupled with his behavior are linked to an avid sports fandom and related but distinct sneaker fandom. For example, in one part of the film Mars exclaims, “Fifty dollar sneakers and I ain't got no job” presumably a promulgation of the value that these objects have in his life.³⁷ Throughout the film Blackmon is typically outfitted in a satin New York Mets Baseball jacket, a bike messenger cap with the upturned brim and “Brooklyn” scripted across the under-brim, tank tops, fanny pack, and perhaps most notably his Nike Air Jordan 1's. The film is black and white which makes it difficult to discern which colorways of the storied sneaker Mars wore in the film, however, what is certain is that the sneaker is an object central to how both of the film's other characters, as well as the audience understand Mars. Even Greer remarks at one point, “he doesn't even tie his sneakers,” evidence of broader points of discord between Mars and

³⁶ Spike Lee, *She's Gotta Have It*, 1986.

³⁷ Ibid.

Greer that are rooted less in aesthetic and more in economics, and ideas about respectability.³⁸ Mars does seem to have an intimate relationship with his sneakers as is evinced by one scene within the film, where Mars, during sex, removes all of his clothing, except his sneakers. This scene is important to note, as it evokes notions of fetishization, and the ways that a fan's commitment to his object is often articulated through the terms of a sexual encounter. Mars serves not only as the film's comedic relief, but his humor coupled with his folk sensibilities is a combination of qualities that worked to endear him to audiences beyond the scope of the film. Indeed, in 1987, Nike, through what could be understood as a type of corporate fanfic, transported Mars across texts, into the first of what would be a long line of commercials for Air Jordan.

In fan fiction a character from a particular text is taken from that text and introduced into a new independent text with related but alternative subplots and themes while still maintaining the same legibility as the character from the initial text. In the case of fan fic, it is the fans, the consumers, that take ownership of the text and make meaning, often very explicitly, of a given text ultimately troubling the false binary that often exists between these two positionalities. Mars Blackmon's use by Nike can be considered a type of large scale corporate-created fanfic, as he became a fixture of their early marketing around sneakers, and through the character's own fandom, served to both reflect and galvanize the growing consumer fervor of the Nike Air Jordan line in the late eighties. Mars' own fandom was exemplified by his feature in a 1989 Nike commercial for the Air Jordan IV model.

In one commercial the slight and fanatical Mars is paired with a towering and stoic Jordan. Set in a nondescript gym, Mars narrates while Jordan, silent, proceeds to showcase his athletic prowess—effortlessly dribbling, jumping, and dunking. The commercial cuts back-and-forth between Jordan dunking and Mars holding the sneakers and saying “these you can have” while cutting back to scenes of Jordan dunking, and stating “this you cannot do.”³⁹ Ultimately, while consumers cannot replicate the impressive athletic prowess and skill of Jordan as exemplified by his , they can have access to his shoe.

In perhaps the most memorable of the Nike Air Jordan commercial line featuring Blackmon, he lists a series of Michael Jordan's impressive physical accomplishments as well as features and asks “Is it the shoes?,” a query to which, despite Jordan's response of “No, Mars,” Blackmon offers his own explanation, “It's gotta be the shoes.”⁴⁰ The commercial finally ends with white lettering flashing across the black screen stating, “Mr. Jordan's opinions do not necessarily reflect those of Nike Inc.”⁴¹ Mars Blackmon as character, ideology and marketing tool was and persists as one of the most fecund popular cultural objects through which to explicate the relationship between sneakers, black masculinity, and fandom—all of which are ineluctably linked through commodification. As Dylan Miner asserts, “it is not Jordan's blackness that makes him a superstar, but instead it is his sneakers, something that, unlike race, may be consumed.”⁴² While there is a marked difference between the materiality of the sneakers and that of the actual black body, specifically Michael Jordan's in this case, I want to offer that

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Beta Max, “1989 Nike Air Jordan Commercial with Mars Blackmon,” *YouTube*, December 7, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8nl0w2Eyj_k.

⁴⁰ Adam Antium, “Michael Jordan Spike Lee Nike,” *YouTube*, March 2, 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BhHONpmlxPc>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Miner, “Provocations on Sneakers,” 90.

consumption is not always so crude. In other words the distinction that Miner makes between consuming the sneaker because they can't consumer Jordan, is actually somewhat misleading. The ways in which human beings can be consumed is either through literal cannibalism or objectification. In terms of the latter, the commodification of Jordan (as well as other athletes) has been taken up extensively in both academic as well as popular discourse. Despite Miner's contention, it seems that sneakers are not consumed instead of Jordan, but are consumed *as* Jordan. The consumption of Jordans is the consumption of Jordan, and all of the more general racialized and gendered (among other things) abstractions that he has come to mean. Jordans, again, are an important for understanding how blackness and certainly is consumed, in a disembodied way, through our engagement with objects. In the case of the early marketing of Jordans, Mars Blackmon's fandom of Jordan both reflected as well as enabled the popularity of these objects, and Jordan's consumption.

The partnership between Lee and Nuke emerged in quite an unspectacular manner. After seeing the film *She's Gotta Have It*, Jim Riswold and Bill Davenport, both employees of advertising Firm Wieden+Kennedy decided that Mars, given his organic love for Jordan sneaker as depicted in the film, could be the fresh advertising angle the company needed (Blackmon is clearly the fan object of Nike). The Jordan Mars commercials, which became some of the company's most popular and well known commercials marked an important shift in the way that Nike produced ads. Up until the point the company had primarily produced ads centered around athletes, usually engaged in the physical aspect of their given sport. While these commercials were successful in eliciting consumer interest, the Jordan Mars commercials "were the first time they showed a human side of the athlete, and used humor, and had some fun with popular culture."⁴³In a retrospective interview reflecting back on the origins of the Mars and Jordan partnership Riswold states "And I think that opened up the access point for Nike to not just necessarily be for serious athletes, but for anybody, for fans, because there's no bigger fan than Mars Blackmon. I mean, not only did he love his Air Jordans, the product, he loved the man, so every year we'd usually do two spots, we did about 8 years' worth of 'em, and one spot was about Mars' affection for Air Jordan the man, and the second spot was about his affection for Air Jordan the shoe."⁴⁴

In many ways Mars Blackmon, showcased not only a fandom, but the multitude of layers to fandom—the consumption of a black male fan participating in a fandom that is centered around an object worn by another black man that also functions as a symbol of that man.

Mars, as a representation, served to not only to diversify how fans are depicted within popular culture, but he also troubled the conventional characteristics typically associated with male fans. For example, Mars Blackmon embodied both a geekdom as well as a cool that muddles the often bifurcated relationship between the two that still persists within popular media representation and the traditional fandom literature. The implications of this are significant on their own merit, but also for readings and depictions of male fans, and black male fans specifically that are much more dynamic.

Furthermore, while Mar's embodies a traditional fandom for an object (sneakers), his fandom also includes more dynamic elements. Mars is a fan of the shoes and fan of Jordan, but in ways that don't necessarily conflate the two. While, ostensibly, Mars being both a fan of the

⁴³ Weiden+Kennedy, "Throwback Thursday: Jim Riswold on Mars Blackmon and Air Jordan | Wieden+Kennedy," February 26, 2015, <http://blog.wk.com/2015/02/26/throwback-thursday-jim-riswold-on-mars-blackmon-and-air-jordan/>.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

sneakers and a fan of Jordan (and the ways that these are in some ways overlapping fandoms) might suggest that he, like others, is a participant in the “always the fan object phenomenon” he clearly troubles the limiting nature of this phenomenon through an intimate knowing and admiration of Jordan that is not mediated through the object.

Acknowledging the ways that Mars Blackmon is a fan of Michael Jordan is important, as it expands notions of how black male fandom (and black male fans and people) can be, and is represented. While the sneakers are clearly the object through and around which this fandom is constructed it is clear, in the case of Mars that his fandom is also for Jordan himself. Indeed the double-pronged fandom that Mars possessed was central to how Nike constructed the commercials. Jordan/Blackmon commercials were produced in sets of two. More importantly, commercials were also produced in conjunction with certain career but also life changes for Jordan, that were less about the sneaker and more about life events for Jordan. As Riswold stated, “every time something happened in Michael’s life, either retiring, or going into baseball, we’d always resurrect Mars to comment on the situation, and then when Michael finally retired, there was nobody that could do a farewell spot to Jordan like Mars, so we brought him back, one more time.”⁴⁵

While, in the case of Mars and Jordan then, the notion of consuming and the ways that Black men are always the fan object never the fan is still present, it becomes complicated. The commercials showcased the interrelationship between Black men, with the presence of admiration, and without the constant specter of something that might be deemed deviant. This is also significant as it becomes a representation of black masculine actors allowed to openly emote in a more full range of ways. Indeed, the procurement and wear of sneakers, is a culturally sanctioned sight for male homosocial interaction, that licenses a range of behaviors in black male bodied actors. These behaviors—which can range from meticulous care, to careful curation—which have for a long time been markers of a type of stunted humanity, should actually be understood to provide evidence of it. The Nike commercials, however inadvertently, through their pairing of Mars and Jordan, showcase that fandom of sneakers, and Jordans in particular can be moored in a reverence for both the sneaker and Jordan as a player and person, and not necessarily the conflation of Jordan with sneaker object.

Ultimately, while Mars Blackmon has emerged as an endearing representation, other popular representations of black masculine sneaker consumption haven’t been extended the same possibility of benignness. For example, in 2011 upon the release of the Jordan Eleven “Concord” a series of news reports from cities all over the country reported incidences of long lines, unruly crowds, damaged property, and the intervention of local law enforcement. While there has been no dearth of reports regarding sneaker consumption, particularly around issues of violence (as discussed in the previous chapter) overwhelmingly, these media portrayals have failed to include the voice of the actual consumers.

I’m A Shoe Connoisseur: Self-Narratives of Black Male Sneaker Fans

In December of 2011 the Air Jordan 11 Concorde released to a firestorm of media-attention. News outlets from across the country including Seattle, Atlanta, Indianapolis, Baltimore and Richmond, CA, all reported disturbingly similar incidences of frenzied behavior ranging from trampling, to property damage, to theft, and gun shots fired.⁴⁶ News outlet KRIV

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ for more on release frenzy see: Kyle Vassalo, “Air Jordan 11 Concord Shoes: Release Ignites Nationwide Chaos and Violence | Bleacher Report,” December 23, 2011,

FOX 26 Houston, began a segment with the news caster asking, “for what would you stand in line for hours, even days... It’s gotta be the shoes (a reference to the famous Nike Mars Blackmon commercials).⁴⁷ The camera then cuts to an aerial view of a nondescript shopping center parking lot with a line of customers snaking around the side of the Greenspoint Mall (a place that has been colloquially referred to as “gunspoint mall”). As the news caster stands foregrounded with the line in the background two young men run towards the camera. The newscaster then asks the “Get Money Boys” to identify themselves. One of the young men introduces himself as Curtis Solomon, and then gesturing to the Jordan 11’s which are on his feet (and which he was presumably able to procure by being one of the first people in line) immediately states, “I’m a shoe connoisseur, I been getting shoes.”⁴⁸ Solomon’s self identifies as connoisseur is significant. Indeed, connoisseur is a very particular term usually reserved for cultural artifacts or practices that have been sanctioned as aspirational or part of “high culture.” While the as a connoisseur has entered into general parlance to describe more quotidian affinities, it is significant when in relationship to the ways that black male consumption or black consumption writ large has been marked by deviance and degradation. Solomon’s self-assertion as a shoe connoisseur is one account of the ways in which a particular black male understands himself as possessing taste, values, and judgement associated with sophistication, study, and specialized knowledge, and his fan object as being deserving and evincing of such. Solomon’s own self-identification may not be representative of all fan’s orientation to sneakers, but it does serve to complicate dominant narratives of black male sneaker consumption and fandom all the same.

Moreover, despite their participation or complicity within consumption through the purchasing of the shoes (Solomon is wearing the shoes that he presumably just purchased during the interview) the Get Money Boys are not without critique. The Get Money Boys further complicate dominant notions of black male sneaker consumption and notions of materialism. For example, Solomon responds to the commentator's assertion that someone is going to get hurt if Michael Jordan doesn't do something by stating, “What they need to do instead of letting us come up to these malls, Michael Jordan just need to have all the shoes at his house, and we go to his house and buy the shoes. We’re going to see if you like that Michael Jordan. C’mon talk to the people man,” a statement that, though perhaps said primarily in jest, does get at issues of corporate responsibility and what, at the very least, companies should provide for consumers—in this case, the ability to purchase the products safely.⁴⁹ Finally, the interview is punctuated by the second man (his name is never disclosed) stating “Michael Jordan needs to stop playing with all his brothers, his black brothers out here, he need to gon’ head and let all us be able to buy another pair of shoes... it’s a shame that little kids out here can’t get the shoes. I seen little kids out here crying cause they can’t get the shoes.”⁵⁰ He goes on to state, “It break our hearts out here, but you know what, the Get Money Boys, we do have the shoes so parents look us up,” eliciting a sort of wry smile from the newscaster before playfully responding, “okay guys, well

<http://bleacherreport.com/articles/995481-air-jordan-11-concord-shoes-release-ignites-nationwide-chaos-and-violence>.

⁴⁷ PCEntertainment2, “KRIV FOX 26 Houston Live Report on Air Jordan Shoes on 12/23/2011 Which Turns Ghetto Fast,” *YouTube*, December 23, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYs4tjuIAIw>.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

there you have it,” and the camera cuts back to the newscasters in the studio.⁵¹ The men’s commentary is rich, and their somewhat unsuspecting pivot back to partaking in capitalism after critiquing it speaks to the ways in which all of this is happening within the structures of capitalism.⁵²

The Get Money Boys highlight the ways in which some black men’s consumption of sneakers may be a concession to consumerism and materialism, while for others it may be a way, within the logics of capitalism that continues to circumscribe certain economic opportunities for black people, to be enterprising, to be producers. The ways in which the Get Money Boys and perhaps other black male fans become the producers and beneficiaries, is part of their own negotiation within the terms of a capitalist system. However, what the Get Money Boys do beyond representing these two different investments in sneakers is also upset these binaries, as the young men’s exhibition of both a “rock” (or wear) and “resell” mentality suggests. Furthermore, the Get Money Boys exemplify not only, as Woo argues, the ways in which all modes of fandom are linked to objects, but additionally, perhaps how they are also all linked to consumption.

In this relationship between objects, consumption and fandom are displayed in their most crude forms. For example, in one moment in the video the news camera cuts to the line, where a young man who has just procured the sneakers, presumably excited about his purchases, exclaims, “I’m invest in these, look at that,” and then licks the sole of the shoe.⁵³ While there is not a clear point of origin for the sneaker lick, because of its circulation in popular culture it cites, however unknowingly an earlier an infamous sneaker lick, that displayed by rapper Fat Joe. In a 2002 episode of the now defunct MTV *Cribs*, a glossier more contemporary version of the iconic televisual showcase of opulence, *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*,” viewers are invited into the Paramus, New Jersey home of rapper Fat Joe. As the conventions of *Cribs* go, Joe takes us on a tour of his residence—which includes his living room, kitchen, home gym, bedroom, closets, and basement. While Joe’s Crib is assuredly comfortable by any conventional standard, Fat Joe’s *Cribs*, both the episode and his actual domicile, are relatively understated compared to the displays (both materially and performative) of excess that are often associated with the show—with one key exception. In one scene Joe showcases the contents of a relatively standard walk-in closet. On the right side of the closet is a shelf-full of what he refers to as “his blanco on blanco section” or a collection of visibly pristine all-white low top Air Force One sneakers about which he states, “we never rock the same pair twice,” and then casually and almost imperceptibly licks the bottom of one of the shoes before placing it back on the shelf. As the episode continues we are led into the basement, but not before he proclaims, “I’m a sneaker freak, they call me the sneaker king.”⁵⁴ Lining the walls of Joe’s basement are dozens more pairs of sneakers. While Joe remarks on a few pairs he ultimately focuses in on one specific pair stating, “this is where the plot thickens.”⁵⁵ He turns to pick up a pair of Air Jordan VII’s and casually exclaims, “you see these Barcelona number nine’s” (a reference to the 1992 Barcelona Olympics for which the specific white, red, blue and gold colorway was made the Air Jordan VII model, and number nine as the number worn by Michael Jordan in those games), and continues

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ *CribsWorldNews*, “MTV *Cribs* Fat Joe,” *YouTube*, December 5, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u-GUUNxUZfQ>.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

“you see never worn” and then proceeds run his tongue along the bottom of the shoe from heel to toe emphatically exclaiming again, “nobody got these!”⁵⁶

In a 2012 interview with online sneaker news outlet, sneakerwatch, Joe, when asked about the infamous sneaker lick proclaims it as, “The most classic sneaker moment in history” only conceding to RUN DMC’s iconic “My Adidas” moment where fans would pull off their shoes and hold them in the air during the songs performance.⁵⁷ In the follow-up interview Joe goes on to assert, “I don’t care if you Chinese, Japanese, Mexican, African— when you feel like you that nigga, you lick the bottom of that sneaker,” and goes on to retort, “it’s Classic, it proves you never wore ‘em. The best thing is when you can pull out a pair of sneakers that ain’t been out for three or four years and lick the bottom of it.”⁵⁸ While Joe’s promulgations about the cultural significance of the sneaker-lick is braggadocios, and perhaps absurd, the gesture’s continued circulation within popular culture.

Joe’s proclamation of the affective outcome of his collection, “i.e. feeling like that nigga” suggests collecting is deeply implicated by and in identity, but also that there is a particular racial valence to one’s procurement of these objects.⁵⁹ Ostensibly, an idea of “the man’ might do a similar type of work, however, instead “that nigga” is employed, ostensibly, due to its more universal appeal. Indeed Joe himself is an interesting example of this.⁶⁰ While Fat Joe is Cuban American, he has often promulgated his own nearness to blackness, his adjacency—an interesting move given that there are Black Cubans and other Afro-Latinos. However Joe’s is not rooted in this accepted cultural and social truth, but rather in more affective and spatial claims to blackness. For example, Joe has spoken about growing up as the only Latino in his neighborhood in the Bronx. In another interview Joe justifies that he, as well as other people that he deems appropriate such as a white female rapper from the Bay Area who was criticized for the gratuitous use of the word, V-Nasty) can say the N-word because “black and Latino is the same shit.”⁶¹

Joe’s assertions about growing up in certain predominately black spaces, and having familial ties with people who are racialized as black are important to consider, as both the spatial and the affective are significant to understanding experiences of blackness. However, what is curious in this particular case is that for Joe, it is a nearness to blackness as opposed to merely being black that he emphasizes. It would seem, then, that Joe knows and understands that this is a claim that, despite these spatial and affective propinquities, he can’t truthfully make. Ultimately, this suggests that there is some other, more significant, litmus test for Joe and for others, that contribute to one’s racial categorization (perhaps phenotype—Joe is light skinned with light eyes, and claimed that during his youth, his hair was blonde). It seems that in ways similar to space and affect the sneaker actually functions as an intermediary. The sneaker offers a certain type of somatic affordance, where Joe is able to be “that nigga” —an articulation of a certain type of masculine cool and intra-group knowledge regarding the outfitting of the body

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ djvlad, “Fat Joe Explains Licking The Bottom Of Your Sneaker (Sneaker Watch),” *YouTube*, April 9, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RIm7WmY01-g>.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Henna Kathiya, “Fat Joe Defends V-Nasty And White Girl Mob’s Use Of N-Word,” *MTV News*, November 22, 2011, <http://www.mtv.com/news/2496458/fat-joe-defends-v-nasty-white-girl-mob-using-n-word/>.

that draws upon codes of black masculinity. However, part of Joe's expression of this—not only his covetousness and collection of sneakers, but specifically the licking of the sneaker, troubles the stability of this. While, according to Joe, the lick was “classic” as “it proves you never wore ‘em,” it also brings in a variety of unwieldy and presumably unintended meanings.⁶² If the sneaker is an accoutrement that buttress one's masculinity, and indeed a sign of masculinity (and a certain type at that) in and of itself, then licking seems to conjure up or gesture fellatio.⁶³ Not only does the sneaker lick invoke fellatio but, in so doing, destabilizes the idea that seems to permeate much of sneaker culture fandom of a clear heterosexual masculine subject.

Clothing company CAPTL (pronounced capital) visually represented this relationship through a set of t-shirts. The shirts which read “Nikehead” and “sneakerhead” featured a blond woman holding the famous Nike swoosh sign, or, in the case of the “sneakerhead” version, a nondescript Nike Dunk shoe towards her mouth—an image that seems to have a double meaning. On the one hand, the image invokes consumption through the figuring of the woman in a way that is akin to literal ingestion of the object, while on the other the symbolism is more sexual with the swoosh and the sneaker both taking on type of phallic shape coupled with the inclusion of “head” in a way that more clearly anchors the suggested meaning of fellatio. Ultimately, the CAPTL shirts, uses the most recognizable codes of sex and power to reiterate the terms by which the sneaker already functions for many—fetish object.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to point to both the conventions and absences in fan discourse, specifically issues of race and gender, and hone in on what an engagement with black masculinity might offer to fandom, and relatedly how understanding the consumptive practices of some black men as a type of fan behavior can productively complicate dominant understandings of these subjects' relationship to these objects. Fandom offers us a different mode of understanding black male sneaker consumption against a broader cultural landscape that has already vilified black male consumption while simultaneously never achieving satiety in the ways that ways in which black masculinity is consumed. Indeed, this dearth of theorizations of black fandom and the continued privileging of media-text based fandom are particularly important as they serve as two in a series of moves that construct the black male body and black masculinity as always consumable, always fetishized—as always the fan object, never the fan.

Despite the problems and omissions within the established discourse, fan studies still outlines the terms for troubling dominant discourses of black masculine consumption of sneakers that has overwhelmingly demarcated the link between this community of fans and their particular fan-object as pathological. The naming of black male consumers (and those who become subsumed under this discourse) of sneakers as fans, can be an important move towards a more humanizing project for black consumers, who are overwhelmingly derided and vilified.

Moreover, addressing the seeming impossibility of certain subjects, through counter and alternative reading and naming practices, like black male fans, continues to create space and possibilities for examining how complicated relationship between subjects and objects can create the conditions for understanding a more full and accurate range of black masculine subjectivities. Indeed the troubling of the clear boundaries between objects and the body underscored by black male sneakers fandom, however troublesome, lends itself to similar examinations of black

⁶² djvlad, “Fat Joe Explains Licking The Bottom Of Your Sneaker (Sneaker Watch).”

⁶³ It is also worth mentioning the ways in which shoes and shoe size already circulate in popular culture as having an association with the phallus and penis-size.

masculinities —those might be submerged under more conventional understandings of the supremacy of the body in understanding black masculinities—like black female masculinity.

Chapter IV

“Respect M.E.,” Sneakers, Black Female Masculinity, and the Marketing of Mis-embodiment

In 2012 Nike released an online retrospective of its twenty most influential basketball sneakers. Several of the shoes on the list were signature sneakers, or models that were designed for and endorsed by a specific athlete. Of the signature sneakers on the list, only one was for a female athlete — the Nike Air Swoopes. Originally released in 1996, the Nike Air Swoopes was designed for WNBA standout and Olympic Gold winning women’s basketball player, Sheryl Swoopes. The Nike Air Swoopes was the company's first signature sneaker for a female athlete, and became one of the most iconic women’s sneakers of all time. However, despite the seeming popularity of the Swoopes as evinced by the retrospective, the women’s sneaker has been a site of cultural vexation. Like its male counterpart, the women’s sneaker’s origin in sport is inextricable from women’s participation in sport—a pursuit that has often been met with, at best ambivalence, at worst derision. Perhaps unsurprising, the objects created to outfit women’s physical pursuits has often reflected these same cultural attitudes and vicissitudes.

The women's sneaker, arguably more than any other major consumer good marketed specifically towards women, captures the complex and often contradictory workings and limitations of gendered fixity as they relate to the corporeal body. Even the qualification of “women’s” sneakers reveals the gendered default of the object as masculine, and the history of the women’s sneaker, in both design and function, is an object that highlights a larger cultural anxiety around athletic performance and performances of femininity. Within this history however, there arises a particularly fecund moment in the production and marketing of women’s sneakers. During the late nineties and early two thousands, there was a proliferation of women with sneaker endorsements. This upsurge is inextricably tied to two significant cultural conductors. First, in April of 1996 the National Basketball Association Board of Governors granted the approval of a professional women’s basketball league to begin play in 1997. Only months later, the 1996 Summer Olympics served as an inaugurating moment for women’s basketball in the United States on a grand scale. In those games, in which the U.S Women’s basketball team took home gold, the nation and the world were privy to the game in unprecedented ways. While there were previous professional women’s basketball leagues, including the short-lived Women’s Basketball League (1978-1981), the popularity and success of the U.S women’s basketball team during the Olympic games portended, literally, and figuratively, what was to come for the sport in terms of its national significance.

The Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) was founded in 1996. The league, which was imagined as the women’s corollary to the National Basketball Association, was one of the most significant professional women’s basketball leagues and arguably the most influential across all sports in bringing notoriety to women’s professional athletics on a national scale. Like their male counterparts, the women of the WNBA were poised to capitalize off of their on-court talents through endorsements. Securing these additional streams of income were often vital for the women in the WNBA as their salaries were far more modest than NBA players. And while these endorsements spanned a range of goods, the sneaker endorsement still persisted as one the most significant, both financially and symbolically, endorsements that a player could secure within the sport.

It is important to note that during the same time hip hop, already firmly established as a cultural force, was becoming even more a part of mass culture both nationally and globally and beginning to explicitly partner with brands. While artists had for a long time espoused their love

and devotion to a myriad of consumer objects—from apparel to watches, to alcohol and sneakers—it wouldn't be until the 1990's that we would see a broader cultural trend of artists using their cultural capital and partner with companies towards their own financial gain. Furthermore, by the mid-nineties, hip hop was seeing another significant shift, as the staunchly masculine genre of rap was becoming increasingly identified with female rappers including the likes of Lil Kim, Foxy Brown, Eve, Shawna, Mia X, and Gangsta Boo. At the confluence of these two significant changes within hip hop emerged one of the most successful and unique female artists of all time, Missy Elliott. While she is most widely known as a rapper, over the course of her career, Elliott that proven to be a talented singer, dancer, and producer. Her range of talents enabled her to amass a wide appeal and secure a number of endorsements, among which was her Missy Elliott's clothing and sneaker line through Adidas.

I explore issues of black female masculinity through an examination of the sneaker endorsements of WNBA standout Sheryl Swoopes, and rapper and entertainer Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliott. I take up the sneaker endorsement for a specific set of reasons. Firstly, the sneaker endorsement has come to serve as a barometer of achieved and anticipated success (both athletically and/or commercially) within one's field of play as well as within a consumer market. Secondly, sneaker endorsements reflect a certain degree of cultural legibility and popular purchase. Finally, I attempt to think through black female sneaker endorsements in relationship to my earlier concept of the racial life of things and examine how black female bodies in concert with objects can be the officiants of masculinity.

This chapter then, continues with the notion of the sneaker as an object of disembodiment, but does so with the additional consideration of mis-embodiment. It is important to note that my use of “mis-embodiment” is not to suggest that there is any incorrect way to embody gender, but rather to succinctly identify the ways that sneakers simultaneously attempt to index women and femininity in ways that have been complex and often highly contradictory. The black female body in relationship to sneakers does the work of codifying and/or disrupting black masculinities. Furthermore, this cultural phenomenon highlights (however inadvertently) an issue that remains marginal within investigations of race and popular representation: black female masculinity. More specifically, I query how masculinity, as a discursive and visual production is created and deployed through and around black female bodies. What have been the discourses and visual politics that have underscored their production, circulation, and consumption, and how do these queer pairings reinforce and re-imagine the racial and gendered logics that inform the marketing and advertising of blackness in relationship to sneakers?

Here, I attend to the limits of black masculinity as both an embodied cultural practice and critical discourse. I query how an engagement with black female masculinity reveals the investments and limitations heretofore of black masculinity studies—a field that continues to operate from what I argue is a compulsory corporeality or the notion that masculinity is exclusively the dominion of male bodies. Part of my task here, then, is to more fully imbricate the aforementioned subjects—agential and disciplinary—between and within each other to illuminate the ways in which theorizations of black female masculinity serves as an important theoretical contribution to the robust body of work on black masculinity, and also help to advance the projects of the fields of masculinity Studies, Gender and Women's Studies and Black Studies.

I begin by outlining a brief history of the women's sneaker as a cultural object to underscore the ways in which their materiality and marketing have always been marked by a type of anxiety around “proper” performances of gender—an anxiety that has resulted in the

castigation of a particular gender configuration—that of female masculinity. I then move to female masculinity as a critical concept. I assert that despite the robust body of literature on masculinity, certain masculinities have been subordinated within this tradition. I offer that black masculinity studies, a substantial and ever expanding field, grew adjunctive to masculinity studies broadly, and on its own terms worked to redress the omissions, silences, and occlusions that persist within mainstream masculinity studies. Nevertheless, much of the work that constitutes black masculinity studies has reproduced other forms of exclusion. The work of Black feminism and Queer Studies has served to, in part; redress some of the elisions in black masculinity studies, however I argue that these projects also operate from a type of compulsory corporeality.

I outline all of the aforementioned to offer my own theory of black female masculinity. I first turn specifically to the primary works that have pointedly theorized female masculinity. I then critically engage the difference that blackness makes. I turn my attention to black female masculinity and outline the specific arguments and contours of existing scholarship on the subject as well as contribute some of my own theoretical meditations to that body of work. I propose that black female masculinity can be on two distinct fronts 1) it refers to and offers a unique contribution as a broader heading for a set of black sexual and gendered identities and 2) can be understood to function more heuristically, as a modality through which to understand and analyze issues of black gender irresolution (both of which I will attend to in greater detail later) more broadly.

Finally, I return to my specific object—sneaker endorsements —and outline how this pedestrian cultural object exposes the ways in which race and gender, specifically black (female) masculinity are both reinforced and effaced by objects. I specifically begin with a brief overview of Sheryl Swoopes' storied career as a basketball player and her highly public personal life, as both contributed to her marketability as the first and arguably most important female athlete to garner a signature sneaker with Nike. I then explicate the ways in which Sheryl Swoopes' own queer cultural positioning are the very characteristics that enabled Nike to identify (and eventually fomented) her success as a celebrity sneaker endorser, but were also in the very terms by which her endorsement and the design of her shoe. I then identify and explicate another important endorsement within the genealogy of shoe deals —that of Melissa “Missy” Elliott.

Furthermore, I argue that Missy too, because of her talent as well as her positionality outside of the parameters of traditional feminine performance was able to garner an endorsement deal with Adidas —her Respect M.E. line. The endorsement was predicated on both the playing up and disavowal of femininity to be legible. Furthermore, Elliott's marketing persona like her musical one trafficked heavily in issues of irresolution. A concept that ultimately becomes fundamental for understanding black female masculinity as a set of specific gender subjectivities as well as a modality for which to understand black gendered subjectivity writ large.

A Brief History of the Women's Sneaker

In 1925 the Dominion Rubber Company released the Fleet Foot, one of the earliest recorded athletic shoes designed specifically for women.¹ The Fleet Foot featured a predominantly white colored upper with black accents along the shoe in a classic brogue detail, and perhaps, most curiously, a two inch rubber heel. To the contemporary consumer, the Fleet Foot would be almost unrecognizable as an athletic shoe. While the broguing on the shoe would have been customary of early athletic shoe models, the inclusion of the rubber heel—an

¹ Semmelhack, *Out of the Box*, 47.

intentional design choice used to signify the femininity of the wearer, illuminates the cultural anxieties that persisted in regards to women's physical exertion more generally, and their participation in sports specifically.

Forty-seventy years after the release of the Fleet Foot, and the passing of Title IX in 1972, which banned discrimination in federally funded programs (including college athletics), women's sneakers continued to both reflect and contribute to cultural attitudes around women's participation in sports. With these new legal mandates and cultural attitudes came shifts in the marketing of sporting goods, particularly the most pervasive good associated with athletic engagement, the sneaker.

One of the most significant examples of the increasing cultural interest in women's physical pursuits and concomitant shift in the design and marketing of women's athletic footwear occurred with the release of the Reebok Freestyle. The 1981 Reebok Freestyle is still, arguably, the most iconic women's sneaker of all time. The shoe's soft, almost moccasin-like leather, with the rounded toe most recognizably in its monochromatic white or pastel hues complete with two Velcro straps was a staple in eighties popular culture. Like the Fleet Foot almost sixty years earlier, the Freestyle (also known colloquially as the fifty-four eleven—a reference to the cost of the 49.99 retail cost of the shoe plus the cost of tax), through its specific association with aerobics (an space of physical exercise that became coded as feminine) both highlighted and contributed to the increasing demand and supply of models specifically designed and marketed towards women consumers.

At the height of the Freestyle's popularity in 1984, this single model accounted for approximately half of Reebok's total sales.² Part of Reebok's ability to transform itself from a fledgling shoe company to an industry titan in the early eighties was its identification and marketing towards women. Furthermore, unlike many of its competitors whose approach to marketing was to align with popular athletes and celebrities through endorsement deals, Reebok, sensing the growing interests in aerobics, partnered with instructors to get an insight into the apparel desires of the women in these classes, and then used this data to fulfill those needs.³ This unconventional approach proved to be wildly successful for the company as evidenced by sales as well as the ways in which the shoes were taken up culturally. For example, in 1990 the most iconic of all children's dolls and transmitter of cultural norms of feminine ideals (however problematically) —Barbie— released an "All American" model of the eponymous line. Dressed in the fashion of the time—an acid washed denim vest with matching shorts, neon pink half-shirt, with poly-colored neon leg warmers to match— All American Barbie also came specially equipped with a pair of Freestyles. The shoes were a critical part of the ensemble arguably as evinced by the message on the dolls packaging which stated "2 pairs of Reebok Hi-Top's for Barbie, Check it Out." Reebok Freestyles were an essential component in making legible Barbie's "All Americanness" at the time of the specific model's production. "Reebok Barbie" as the doll came to be known colloquially, served as both a reflection of doll makers' attempt to appeal to the contemporary style of young consumers as well as a testament to the popularity and cultural significance of the sneaker.

² George Babcock, "How the Reebok Freestyle Became the 5411," *Highsnobiety*, April 29, 2017, <http://www.highsnobiety.com/2017/04/29/reebok-freestyle-history-5411/>.

³ "Instead of relying on high-priced endorsements by sports stars, Reebok courted aerobics instructors, figuring—rightly—that students would follow their leaders." Tapping into a growing physical craze of the time with aerobics, Reebok actively pursued market.

The Freestyle's migration from the arena of aerobics out into the broader cultural landscape as both a non-aerobics functional article and fashion object marked one of the ways in which women's sneakers continued to serve as a figurative site and literal object for traversing the contested terrain of gender identity. For example, during the 1980 Transit Worker' strike in which thirty-three thousand members of the New York City Transit Worker's Authority attempted to push for increased wages, one of the country's largest transit systems came to a screeching eleven-day halt.⁴ During the strike the city saw a shift in its normal migration patterns, with an estimated 500,000 people staying in hotels in Manhattan. City police and volunteers were charged with the daunting task of directing the city's now exacerbated traffic challenges—including prohibitions from crossing the Brooklyn Bridge into Manhattan without at least three passengers. Perhaps what was most difficult was the enormous increase in pedestrian traffic in the form of walking.⁵ Indeed the city's mayor at the time, Ed Koch, is perhaps most famously remembered for walking across the Brooklyn Bridge along with thousands of pedestrians asking them, "How am I doing," a query that came to be the mayor's signature phrase.

For women in particular the strike highlighted on a grand scale the growing "suit and sneakers" phenomena or the increasing practice of women in traditionally corporate attire like business suits and skirts, wearing sneakers while commuting as a more comfortable alternative to heels that were typically part of business attire.⁶ Interestingly this phenomenon harkens to the Fleet Foot. Looking to merge these elements of convention and comfort more seamlessly, a number of companies began creating comfort heels. For example, shoe company, Easy Spirit with, its advertising jingle "Looks like a pump, feels like a sneaker" created products and hinged much of their brand identity on the working woman seeking form and function. For example, in a series of televisual ads throughout the late eighties and early nineties, Easy Spirit's signature low profile pumps commercials featured women playing basketball in the pumps (with the commercial also asserting that the footage was "an actual game played in the heel.)"⁷

One specific televisual ad featuring women playing basketball in the sneakers announced that "there really is a sneaker inside these little pump" followed by a final melodic assertion that "you can walk in style."⁸ The commercial in and of itself is worth mentioning, as the women who were properly outfitted in typical basketball attire, sans their footwear, ostensibly work to feminize the masculine domain of basketball. However in actuality this coupling of heels with basketball attire merely serves to reify the incongruence between femininity and the sport, as the women not only look but move awkwardly. The effort to convey the comfort of the shoes, then, also works to highlight a discord between performances of femininity and basketball.

The Easy Spirit highlighted the ways in which sneakers became synonymous with comfort and leisure (as opposed to work). Furthermore, the Easy Spirit commercial, curiously, cast the sneaker as not even a shoe at all but something categorically different, at least for women consumers. Consider that in the commercial the heels were described as having "sneaker

⁴ Sewell Chan, "25 Years Ago, Subways and Buses Stopped Running," *The New York Times*, April 4, 2005, sec. N. Y. / Region, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/04/nyregion/25-years-ago-subways-and-buses-stopped-running.html>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Retrocommercial.com, "Easy Spirit Color Playoffs Basketball Commercial (1991)," *YouTube*, August 7, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mp8gmtPljqw>.

⁸ Ibid.

inside these little pumps” — a curious assertion that suggest that sneakers aren’t shoes, in and of themselves, but rather a component of shoe that makes them more comfortable.⁹

The Fleet Foot, the Reebok Freestyle, and the Easy Spirit heel, though all unique objects that speak to specific moments within the history and evolution of women’s sneakers, serve both individually and collectively to underscore issues of slippage between form, function, and aesthetics with regards to women’s shoes. They collectively reveal how women negotiated and were positioned to navigate the competing demands of womanhood as subjects within a shifting cultural landscape marked by changes in women’s gender roles that became most pronounced through their increased entrance into the workforce, particularly corporate jobs as a result of the feminist movement and Title IV as well as the expansion of women’s athletic participation, with professional sports being the critical site at which these shifts in gender roles converge. Therefore, women’s shoes, and specifically women’s sneakers, become one site of material and popular culture that is productive for understanding broader issues of gender in all of its complexities and contradictions.

The history of the women’s sneaker, as its own unique category of footwear, highlights the significance of both women as subjects, and the sneaker as object, as, at once, situated within and adjunctive to, the broader history of the sneaker as cultural object. Furthermore, the women’s sneaker as a specific cadre of the sneaker reveals the object’s masculine default (i.e., sneakers only need to be qualified around gender with regards to women’s sneakers). Therefore, given the sneaker’s life as a racial object women’s sneakers are a vexatious and generative site for exploring the ways that black masculinities can be disembodied, and then reanimated through (and in turn animate) objects. Thinking through particular forms of dis-embodied black masculinity as is represented by the sneaker in relationship to other sites of non-conventionally embodied black masculinity, like black female masculinity might serve to further illuminate the particularities of how race and gender works across different types of objects, like sneakers. However, this examination must first be preceded by situating and outlining black female masculinity, in and of itself.

Troubling Subjects

There exists a conspicuous absence of candid and incisive discussions of black female masculinity, even as academic work on masculinity, and black masculinity specifically (both popular and academic), abounds. And while the ostensible counterpart of black female masculinity – black male femininity/ effeminacy – has been actively, virulently, and sometimes violently derided (often because of its conflation with homosexuality and therefore subjection to the homophobic vitriol), it is perhaps because of this that a fuller range of black male genders including black male femininities have received some (albeit still scant) academic treatment.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ despite this, there has been work that has explored non-masculine queer black manhood: Riggs, Marlon T. "Black macho revisited: Reflections of a SNAP! queen." In *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 25, no. 2, pp. 389-394. St. Louis University, 1991; Ferguson, Roderick. "Sissies at the picnic: the subjugated knowledges of a Black rural queer." *Feminist waves, feminist generations: Life stories from the academy* (2007): 188-196.; Johnson, E. Patrick. "The specter of the Black fag: Parody, Blackness, and hetero/homosexual b (r) others." *Journal of homosexuality* 45, no. 2-4 (2003): 217-234.; Riggs, Marlon. "Tongues untied." (2008).

Black female masculinity, however, remains overwhelmingly cloistered, unacknowledged, or unspeakable. The reasons for this sequestering are varied and complex. Similar to Foucault's contention regarding the nature of silence which he asserts is less "the absolute limit of discourse...than an element that functions alongside the things said" black female masculinity often functions as the unnamed presence—in the already robust and growing body of scholarship on black masculinity.¹¹

Black masculinity precedes the emergence of any establishment of an academic field. However, the body of work on the subject is expansive enough in both chronological and conceptual scope to be comfortably identified as such. Because the emergence of the field is not clear or linear, organizing the literature in more traditional ways is challenging. Therefore, I want to offer instead, the notion of thematics within this field to organize some of the primary concerns of this body of work.

Black Masculinity Studies: The Problem of Compulsory Corporeality

Masculinity— its making and meaning, particularly in the U.S., has been highly reliant upon and tethered to race and racial subjects. And yet, the ways in which race has explicitly lent itself to this project has remained unexplained. Maurice Wallace pointedly identifies this issues as he states, "while the high profile of race in the west has created out of the black male body a walking palimpsest of the fears and fascinations possessing our cultural imagination, the body of scholarship foregrounding race as a significant text or subtext of masculinity studies remains ironically and inexplicably scant."¹² Any examination of masculinity studies as a critical current in conversation with Black Studies and Gender and Women's Studies should first be situated in relationship to discussion of masculinity studies as a broader field. The emergence of masculinity studies as a field is often linked to the Men's Movement.¹³

While masculinity studies is invested in a series of projects, including the ways in which masculinities are the function of a multitude of factors from social class, psychology, and biological/physiological factors certain, masculinities have remained subordinated. The

¹¹ Some notable exceptions to this tendency to erasure include Keeling, Kara. "Looking for M—Queer Temporality, Black Political Possibility, and Poetry from the Future." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15, no. 4 (2009): 565-582; Keeling, Kara. "The witch's flight." *The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (2007); Richardson, M., 2014. Make me Wanna Holler: Meshell Ndegeocello, Black Queer Aesthetics, and Feminist Critiques. *Journal of lesbian studies*, 18(3), pp.237-251.; Richardson, Matt. "Good and Messy: Lesbian and Transgender Identities." *Feminist Studies* 39.2 (2013): 371-374; Lane-Steele, Laura. "Studs and protest-hypermasculinity: The tomboyism within Black lesbian female masculinity." *Journal of lesbian studies* 15, no. 4 (2011): 480-492; Moore, Mignon R. "Lipstick or timberlands? Meanings of gender presentation in black lesbian communities." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 32, no. 1 (2006): 113-139.; Richardson, Matt. *The Queer Limit of Black Memory: Black Lesbian Literature and Irresolution*. The Ohio State University Press, 2013.

¹² Maurice O. Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture, 1775–1995* (Duke University Press, 2002), 2,

¹³ for more on the Men's movement see Michael A Messner. *Politics of masculinities: Men in movements*. Altamira Press, 1997.; Michael S Kimmel, *The politics of manhood: Profeminist men respond to the mythopoetic men's movement (and the mythopoetic leaders answer)*. Temple University Press, 1995.;

relationship between masculinity studies and studies of black men and masculinities is extra-developmental. In other words, masculinity studies has its own unique development that while implicated with black masculinities, is ultimately oriented to naming black masculinity, when it is present, as a problem. Given this orientation, the independent development of black masculinity studies functions (albeit not necessarily intentionally) as a rejoinder to this field. I want to think of black masculinity studies as the aggregate sum of works that eschews the inherent foreclosure of varied black masculinities as represented by the problem of corporeality. Instead, these works *problematize* compulsory corporeality. How does the literature already reflect these projects, and where do scholarly omissions persist? I identify two of the most fecund scholarly discourses that have served to disrupt and expand scholarship on black men and masculinity—Black Feminist Theory and Black Queer Studies—and outline what these specific interventions have offered to theorizations of black masculinity. I identify this problematization as “troubling subjects.” By subjects I am referring to the agential bodies of black people and queer folks both as both distinct and mutually contained groups, as well as disciplinary modes—Black Studies and Gender and Women’s studies as disciplinary subjects. Black female masculinity functions as a lacuna within the academic discourses best equipped and most readied, ostensibly, to take up and benefit from its examination—black masculinity studies. A general evaluation of this field’s foundational arguments and predominant themes, as well as a pointed reading of its specific offerings towards a theory of black female masculinity is where I will now turn my attention.

Black Feminist Studies and Black Queer Studies

Michelle Wallace’s 1975 book, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* is one of the preeminent texts of black feminist thought that interrogates black masculinity. Black feminism’s contribution to black masculinity studies has been a critique of the patriarchal and heteronormative notions that often undergird it. Furthermore, these projects also foreground issues of gender as they relate to black men. In other words, they serve to make more salient the way that gender is applicable to both men and women. Often work that contributes to the greater corpus of black masculinity studies still emphasizes black men as raced, in exclusion, or failed recognition of black men as also gender.¹⁴

Indebted to the work of Black feminist theory that preceded it (beginning around the late early nineties) a number of critical voices—Marlon Ross, Marlon Riggs, Essex Hemphill, Rodrick Ferguson, Philip Bryan Harper, Robert Reid Pharr, and Dwight McBride, E. Patrick Johnson—of black queer men began to contest the compulsory heterosexuality of theorizations of black masculinity.¹⁵ This initial black queer studies intervention became self-referential. In

¹⁴ for more work that considers the question of black masculinity and gender at this time see Phillip Brian Harper, *Are we not men?: masculine anxiety and the problem of African-American identity*. Oxford University Press on Demand, 1998; Maurice O Wallace, *Constructing the Black masculine: Identity and ideality in African American men’s literature and culture, 1775–1995*. Duke University Press, 2002.; Blount, Marcellus, and George Cunningham, eds. *Representing Black Men*. Routledge, 2014.

¹⁵ work by these scholars includes: Sharon Patricia, and Cathy J. Cohen. *Black queer studies: A critical anthology*. Duke University Press, 2005; Riggs, Marlon T. "Black macho revisited: Reflections of a SNAP! queen." In *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 25, no. 2, pp. 389-394. St. Louis University, 1991.; McBride, Dwight A. "Can the queen speak? Racial essentialism, sexuality and the problem of authority." *Callaloo* 21, no. 2 (1998): 363-379.; Ferguson, Roderick, and A. Aberrations In Black. "Toward a Queer of Color Critique." *University of Minnesota: Minneapolis* (2003); Beam,

other words, queer studies revised this by troubling black masculinity and manhood conceptually not corporeally. Black masculinity ultimately became a project of expansion; one that troubles how and what types of *male* bodies had claims to masculine authenticity and the project of black masculine legibility, but still operated from a fundamental premise that male bodies were the sole proprietors of masculinities. The compulsory heterosexuality of black masculinity was troubled while the compulsory corporeality of male-bodies remained overwhelmingly intact.

I contend that academic work on black masculinity heretofore has overwhelmingly operated from what I identify as compulsory male corporeality, or the idea that black masculinity is solely moored in the black male body, and that this reflects and results in particular ideological investments, and omissions. The field is poised to take up these considerations in outlining a theory of black female masculinity. Just like the interventions of black feminism and queerness, I believe that an intentional analytical imbrication of queerness with black masculinity studies creates the conditions for making this discourse amenable to engaging a theory of black female masculinity.

Black masculinity studies and gender studies are configured as kindred discourses in their orientations to the master narrative of masculinity. Both have staunchly taken on responding and offering rejoinders to other disciplines often at the shared expense of particular types of subjects. Black masculinity studies has not properly accounted for the black female masculine subject. Gender and women's studies has overwhelmingly shared this same omission, but has offered a concept that can potentially serve to redress this erasure—performativity. Performativity, and gender performativity, specifically has been a central gender and women's studies, and this is where I turn my attention next.

Gender Troubled

Unlike black masculinity studies, certain nodes of gender studies have been much more intentional in their attempt to engage gender as that which is not already determined by or moored within particular bodies. Indeed, studies of female masculinity that trouble anatomical determinism reflects a larger disciplinary project that takes up gender and all of its attendant vestibules (bodies) as non-determined. This does not mean that the project doesn't take seriously gender as a construct and its structuring powers in everyday life. In other words, the current status of women's and gender studies does not take a reductive approach to gender as *merely* a construct, an attenuating move that diminishes the ways gender matters, but instead proffers gender as the result of a number of forces. The structuring power of gender is the very issue central to the project of Judith Butler's indispensable texts *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*. In *Gender Trouble* one of Butler's primary contributions is the concept of gender performativity, or that gender is performative, "that is constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed."¹⁶ Furthermore, Butler asserts "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is affirmatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results."¹⁷ In a later interview, Butler addressed the ways in which the concept of gender performativity outlined in *Gender Trouble* was subjected to a "bad" or erroneous reading

Joseph. *Brother to brother: New writings by Black gay men*. Edited by Essex Hemphill. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1991.

¹⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Tenth Anniversary (New York, NY.: Routledge, 2002), 33.

¹⁷ Ibid.

about which she states “The bad reading goes something like this: I can get up in the morning, look in my closet, and decide which gender I want to be today. I can take out a piece of clothing and change my gender, stylize it, and then that evening I can change it again and be something radically other.”¹⁸ Butler wants to reiterate that gender is performative, and also about power as she states, “Gender is the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine takes place along with interstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic, and performative that gender assumes.”¹⁹ The designation of gender as an apparatus is important as it highlights the workings of power that inform why black subjects committed and configured within more or less conventional gender dictates may feel reticent to acknowledge, and even eschew black female masculinity. Black people and black women in particular have been positioned as incoherently gendered.²⁰ It seems that, in part, the ways in which race and gender as mutually constitutive modalities, and the specific ways that they cohere and congeal around what is legible as blackness, lend themselves to this erasure. Consider for example, as many black feminist scholars, black queer theorists, and others have asserted, the accepted truism that blackness in its specious matter-of-factness, continues to connote maleness and masculinity. Furthermore, black women, as part of the intricate workings of racial oppression, have continued to be overwritten for economic and ideological reasons that cast them in a peculiar relation to both traditional and dominant (read *white*) feminine gender dictates and norms. In other words, black women, via the gendered charge that their racialization as black inherently imports, are always already interpolated in and through a particular masculine valence. This is important, as it can potentially obfuscate and occlude thoughtful considerations of black female masculinity that are not entirely moored in the aforementioned traditions.

This kind of gender queering is often designated as a type of defeminization that defaults to masculinity. However the broader occlusion of black women from dominant ideas of femininity, and black female masculinity, though related, are different. In many ways black female masculinity becomes the eschewed other that makes black feminist and queer black male masculinity cohere. Black female masculinity’s existence, or failure to, show-up in predominantly of black sexual and gendered politics is a type of aporia. Similar to Matt Richardson’s assertion that “the black becomes the aporia between sex and gender such that the two never meet in any fashion that would satisfy the dictates of normal heterosexuality” it is important to highlight that, as Spillers cogently asserts, that within the aporia that is blackness, there exists another — the reconciliation of blackness with feminine subjectivity.²¹

This contention is one that must be properly and fully unpacked. Gender for black subjects, specifically African Americans, has been a contentious site. An entire set of complex political, ideological, social, and cultural investments in dominant gendered schemas, even in the face of a myriad gendered outliers, attests to the incongruence, fallaciousness, and nefariousness that can lie in subscribing to these dominant forms and modes. In part this has been a classic move of the marginalized, adopting the ideologies of the larger power structures in an effort to make legible one’s humanity. Robyn Wiegman, clarifies this point and its specific implications for enslaved people as she states, “the possibilities of escaping the category of inhuman took

¹⁸ Liz Kotz, “The Body You Want,” in *Art Forum International*, vol. 81, 1992, <http://www.openibart.fr/item/display/10068/1028147>.

¹⁹ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 42.

²⁰ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.”

²¹ Matt Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory: Black Lesbian Literature and Irresolution* (The Ohio State University Press, 2013), 7, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/23956>.

shape under a bizarrely liberating figuration of gendered subjectivity—that to be *female* or to be *male* provided a rhetorical possibility for entering the determinations of modern subjectivity.”²² I would add that the attainment and designation of distinct sexual categories beyond what Hortense Spillers identifies as the flesh has more consequence for certain subjects.²³ For Black subjects, strict adherence to dominant gender has been one strategy employed to demonstrate their humanity in the face of structural and micro-encounters that attempt to deny it. To be masculine or feminine as opposed to male or female became the markers of black subjecthood. This move is complicated. On the one hand it becomes a strategy through which to claim one’s humanity, however, when the stakes of gender become so high and are so heavily and even lethally policed, and adherence to gender can become merely an appendage of the larger constricting gender apparatus. Perhaps then, it is in the wide range of gender difference that actually does the actual work of illuminating black subjecthood. As Matt Richardson states, “for Black people to claim gender at all is brave given the array of violence’s enacted physically and epistemologically to strip us from gendered being. Thus to claim such an assemblage of creative interpretations of the self is also dangerous in its dizzying audacity and flagrant noncompliance with the terms of our dehumanization.”²⁴ Therefore, to name and understand black female masculinity as a form of alterity, as both identity and modality, in the name of blackness, is an expression and espousal of black humanity.

Female Masculinity

In his watershed work on female masculinity, J. Halberstam queries “if masculinity is not the social, cultural, and indeed political expression of maleness, what is it?”²⁵ While the emergence of masculinity studies is a testament to the continued relevance of Halberstam’s question, curiously, masculinity studies has overwhelmingly operated from a number of tacit assumptions that have stymied the complete burgeoning of its own project. In regards to this fundamental query regarding masculinity, Halberstam offers female masculinity as an object of study and asserts that “female masculinities are framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing.”²⁶ Halberstam outlines what he identifies as “heroic masculinities” or those which we can readily identify (despite the difficulty in defining them), and which are predicated on the “subordination of alternative masculinities.”²⁷ Halberstam goes on to assert that thinking about female masculinity through a foregrounding of what Eve Sedgwick terms “nonce taxonomies” or “classifications of desire, physicality, and subjectivity that attempt to intervene in hegemonic processes of naming and defining.”²⁸

Furthermore, it should be noted that nonce taxonomies are just as important in what they fail to name. As Halberstam asserts, “Nonce taxonomies indicate a not-knowing already

²² Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 11.

²³ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.”

²⁴ Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory*, 9.

²⁵ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 1.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

embedded in recognition.”²⁹ Furthermore, using Sedgwick, Halberstam proffers that “nonce taxonomies are categories we use daily to make sense of our worlds, but that work so well that we actually fail to recognize them.”³⁰ The application of nonce taxonomies across subjects has limits. For example, in the case of black subjects a more precise understanding and application of nonce taxonomies, based on Sedgwick and Halberstam, might more accurately mean a not knowing already embedded in that which goes *without* recognition. And furthermore, nonce taxonomies as they have been outlined, may fail to account for black subjects, in that they also may not consider the reading practices that, one must possess in order apprehend and arrive at certain category—practices that don’t always translate across intersecting modes of identity.

Furthermore, like Halberstam, Bobby Jean Noble, in *Masculinities Without Men*, offers a set of typologies of female masculinity that codify and confound the terms of identity by stating “the drag king, butch, female-to-male (FTM) transman (both operative and non-operative), transgender man, stone butch – simultaneously constituted by irreducible contradictions between (the) constructions of “bodies” misread in a certain way as female and yet masculine.”³¹ Both Halberstam and Noble’s conceptions of female masculinity are articulated through typology and modality. While typology might seem to limit the ways in which female masculinity can move beyond the limits of the corpus, modality troubles this by underscoring the irreducibility of masculinity to a set characteristics strictly affixed to the male body; an idea that is by now, at least within academic discourse, an established fact. And yet despite this truism, for certain subjects, the fallacious corporeal entrenchment of masculinity to male bodies persists. Helping to clarify the seeming impasse of embodied forms of female masculinity with his own conceptual assertion of the ruses of the body, Noble outlines four axioms of gender studies that prove helpful in clarify his thinking through female masculinity:

First, according to Noble, “sometimes masculinity has nothing to do with men. Similarly, female masculinity and/or butch identity in women is largely, but not exclusively, lesbian. Second, masculinity and femininity are, in many respects orthogonal to each other (i.e. they are not opposite ends of the same axis, but rather constitute different social and psychic axes.”³² Third, Noble asserts, “because some people are more gendered than others, masculinity and femininity are ‘threshold effects’ where quantitative increments in somatic signifiers of gender along one axis can suddenly appear as qualitative differences on the other.”³³ Noble outline’s his final axiom as “a dynamic of self-recognition mediates between bodies and gender performance.”³⁴

Drawing upon the work of Halberstam and Noble I set to outline a very preliminary theory of black female masculinity, a vitally important undertaking within the areas of Black Studies, gender studies, and black masculinity studies, given, that as Matt Richardson asserts, “it has been over a decade since the publication of Judith Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity* (1998)

²⁹ Judith Halberstam, “F2M: The Making of Female Masculinity,” in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 126, https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=aBRUjxPk_YUC&oi=fnd&pg=PA125&dq=f2m+the+making+of+female+masculinity&ots=F0EovIBQi8&sig=1HSx1pUUbpyos3sM4gQg0jII_II.

³⁰ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 8.

³¹ Jean Bobby Noble, *Masculinities without Men?: Female Masculinity in Twentieth-Century Fictions* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), xi.

³² *Ibid.*, xii.

³³ *Ibid.*, xii–xiii.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, xiii.

and yet there has been very little theorization of Black female masculinity.”³⁵ I begin by outlining black female masculinity as identity as this, at once, accounts for the archetypal modes of female masculinity, while also complicating and expanding how these types, for black subjects, take on different configurations. Moreover, I want to offer that black female masculinity can be instructive in thinking through Blackness and gender broadly, and in this regard, can function as a type of modality.

Black Female Masculinity as Identity

In *Masculinities Without Men* Noble states “Female masculinity references a range of subject positions – drag king, butch, female-to-male (FTM) transman (both operative and non-operative), transgender man, stone butch – simultaneously constituted by irreducible contradictions between (the)constructions of “bodies” misread in a certain way as female and yet masculine. No one of these practices is reducible to the other as exemplary of female masculinity.”³⁶ And yet, despite Noble’s contention that none of the aforementioned identities exemplifies female masculinity, he does remark upon the particular significance of butch identity in the pantheon of female masculine figurations. For Noble, in terms of legibility, both literal and conceptual, butch identity is the exemplary female masculinity— that which, whether through extolment (in terms of academic treatment) or derision, takes up space in ways reflective of its meaning. Perhaps because of its readied and erroneous conflation with lesbianism, is the most culturally legible female masculine identity.

Black female masculinity, like female masculinity generally, is often erroneously understood as synonymous with or indexing same- sex desire (and more specifically within this, a desire for feminine subjects or an assumed butch-femme erotic pairing). This subject most readily assumes a self-identity, and/or presentation of self, that could be loosely understood as a form of black butchness (in the myriad of configurations this identity presents). Part of the challenge then, is identifying what animates these very disparate masculinities in a way that marks their similarities even as they differ; an issue that becomes further complicated when female bodies, womanhood, and even femininities, don’t operate (at least not in the same ways), as that which is disavowed to make masculinity legible.

Actin Mannish: Towards a Theory of Black Female Masculinity

The black vernacular appellation of “mannish” offers a means through which to think through the theoretical implications of black female masculinity.³⁷ While a simple dictionary definition of “mannish” explains the term as a derivative of “man” or that which means “of or relating to men.” For African Americans, “mannish” is a term often levied at young men who are seen as acting untoward or sexually forward, or concerning themselves with things that are deemed for adults. This behaving beyond the dictates and knowledge of childhood/adolescence of not quite a man, is an act of transgression that has productive implications for thinking

³⁵ Matt Richardson, “Make Me Wanna Holler: Meshell Ndegeocello, Black Queer Aesthetics, and Feminist Critiques,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 18, no. 3 (2014): 237.

³⁶ Noble, *Masculinities without Men?*, xi.

³⁷ Alice Walker outlines a useful model for thinking through the resonances between gender performance and black vernacular sayings towards the end of novel theorization of black gender here: Walker, Alice. “In search of our mothers’ gardens.” *Making Sense of Women’s Lives: An Introduction to Women’s Studies* (1974).

through black female masculinity. Indeed, the idea of the “mannish” lesbian, particularly for black female masculine people, may not only refer to “quasi man-ness,” but also the particular sexual undertones and subsequent anxieties that these identities often conjure.

The black bulldagger becomes the archetypal figure of black female masculinity in all of its anxieties realized. And while butch identity carries a particular generational, classed, and racial connotation, it is more often than not, applicable across these identity categories. Bulldagger, however, is a staunchly black queer identity.

In her essay “The Myth of the Black Bulldagger” Diane Bogus details the unique racial valence of the term bulldagger. According to Bogus the term derived from the 1922 film, “The Bulldogger,” an obscure western that she describes as “the one and only movie of its Black kind” about a black cowboy who is credited with inventing steer-wrestling or “bulldogging.”³⁸ Bogus goes on to assert that the term bulldogger became popularized among certain communities to refer to “any man’s prowess, especially if he was a bullsh about women”³⁹ Within certain lesbian communities the term was altered further still as these communities “created similes using “like a bulldogger” to describe how fiercely, adroitly, or strongly a task was performed.”⁴⁰

While the etymology of the term reveals its early usage as neutral or even affirmative amongst particular communities, the term’s later and most rigid association is pejorative, “it means ridicule; it means you act like a man, that you go for bad, that you’re some kind of freak, and that you hate men.”⁴¹ Women who are nominalized as bulldaggers are often described as deviating from a core state that removed them from womanhood altogether. Indeed, comments like “She is a hellish ‘It,’ a supernatural ‘he’ or at the very least, an ‘unnachel woman” exemplify these attitudes.⁴²

The bulldagger, in its particular racialized and gendered as well as implied sexual connotations becomes the identity sine qua non, across which the various anxieties regarding black female masculinity, and perhaps black queer gender identity all come to bear.⁴³ Whether a black female masculine person is same-sex desiring or not, female masculinity often imports the specter of same sex desire, because of the ways in which sexuality, however erroneously, is often levied to do the work of making gender queerness legible. An issue that becomes further complicated in relationship to black bodies. This reduction both contributes to, but also bespeaks another issue that persists around gendered and sexual difference—the problem of naming. The history of black and queer subjectivity has often been accompanied by a shifting and slippery relationship with nomenclature.

Issues of nomenclature are incontestably significant, particularly for subjects whose ability to self-name has historically been an integral component of their marginalization and

³⁸ Diane A. Bogus, “The Myth and Tradition of the Black Bulldagger,” *Burana, Roxxie and Due*, 1994, 29–36.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 34–35.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Bogus, “The Myth and Tradition of the Black Bulldagger,” 34.

⁴³ it is worth mentioning that the term “stud” is more widely used in the contemporary moment. The term also connotes a black masculine female bodied person (not every black female masculine person identifies with the term). Furthermore, though it is not a one-to-one replacement for bulldagger, as that term has fallen out of parlance, stud and has become a term/identity that has become increasingly identified as the archetypal figure of a black female masculine person that is also sexually queer.

dehumanization. Specific modes of naming, such as identity are often burdened with the extra weight of speaking to one's positionality in ways coterminous to the body within time and space. As Stuart Hall so incisively asserts, "Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narratives of the past."⁴⁴

Therefore, while on the one hand black self-naming is a recuperative and agential practice, it also can, at the same time, work to confound the very terms of personhood in excess or askance of the appellation that it works to designate. In this regard, I proceed with these terms — female, masculine, queer, lesbian— with an understanding and an anticipation of their inability to accommodate or name once-and-for-all the black queer subjectivities that are continually propagating. Therefore, in alignment with the approaches of Halberstam and Noble, I outline a set of taxonomies as well as axiom of black female masculinity with the understanding that these nominalizations cannot begin to encompass "the dizzying array of identities" of black queer people.⁴⁵

I argue that Black female masculinity can be understood in terms of three important axioms: The first axiom is that Black female masculinity is related to but not the same as the black women's exclusion or perceived as incongruent with dominant gender norms regarding femininity. As was noted, black women's historical exclusion from access to the full range of dominant gender roles and performances has been an oft-discussed issue that has elicited a wide array of responses and strategies. While it is important to note that a lack of femininity does not automatically or necessarily default to masculinity, the eschewal of femininity is for many, still the readied way in which gender identity is understood.

The second axiom is that black female masculinity is often, though not always exclusively, about same sex desire. This contention cannot be set forth, without acknowledging how Black women have historically been denied access to many of the most culturally legible, non-bodily modes of feminine performance. The role of broader cultural forms such as sports and music in gendering, re-gendering, un- or differently gendering particular subjects is a point that will be taken up in greater length in discussions of hip hop and sports. Often the most readily identifiable and identified black female masculine subjects are sexually queer. However, black female sexual queerness does not necessarily equate to female masculinity. Indeed, it is important to acknowledge that oftentimes feminine queer black female subjects can fall out of discussions of black female sexual queerness and this can further obfuscate their visibility. Relatedly, black gender queerness that is female masculine does not equate to sexual queerness. Black female masculine subjects that are heterosexual exist. We need more complicated reading practices which also requires more inclusive orientations to the full range of gendered and sexual modes of black being.

The final axiom is that black female masculinity is also a broader heading for a range of gender/sexual identities and types as were outlined amongst generalized (white) female masculinity, like butch, lesbian, but it also encompasses a set of racially and geographically inflected identities, a point that Matt Richardson underscores as he states:

There is both an expansiveness and particularity to such locally created understandings of gender. The terms "dom," "stud," "aggressive," and "butch" refer to female masculinity.

⁴⁴ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 1990, <http://sites.middlebury.edu/nydiasporaworkshop/files/2011/04/D-OA-HallStuart-CulturalIdentityandDiaspora.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory*, 9.

However, these terms have cultural and regional specificity and some inventiveness with respect to pushing the boundaries of masculinity. For example, in the New York area "aggressive" is a nuanced identity that is multi-dimensional. In addition to connoting masculinity, it can be used by people who embrace femininity a central component to their gender identity.¹ "Stem" (or the combination of "stud" and "femme") is a Southern African American term for someone who identifies as masculine and feminine.⁴⁶

Along with the aforementioned identities outlined it is important to note that Black female masculinity can commonly subsume a range of gendered and sexual identities including butch, stud, ag (Aggressive), stem, boi's, trans and cis identified female bodied people, while also bearing in mind that at the level of the individual one's association with these terms, even in the ways that they may be more fraught than a simple or exclusive association with black female masculinity.

Black Female Masculinity as Modality

Female masculinity exposes the condition and paradox of the sex/gender system. While female masculinity does the work of de-essentializing femininity from female bodies, its implications for racial subjects, specifically black people, are much more vexed. Blackness, in and of itself, is a category that is inextricably linked to and understood through gendered terms; terms that rely upon but are askance to dominant norms around masculinity and femininity. Hortense Spillers in her famous "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" speaks about the queerness of blackness as she states, the "New-World, diasporic plight marked a *theft of the body* —a willful and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severance of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire. Under these conditions, we lose at least *gender difference in the outcome*, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender related, gender-specific."⁴⁷ This ungendering has resounding implications within the contemporary moment where blackness serves just as much as a marker of gendered difference as it does a racial category.

Black female masculine subjectivity potentially concretizes the gendered import of blackness, and can help to illuminate issues of entanglement and irresolution regarding black gender more broadly. C. Riley Snorton's incisive contribution regarding the "down-low," a commonly used term to describe the clandestine same sex-sexual practices among men, provides a useful model here. Snorton expands the term beyond its usual meaning stating that the "down low can be thought of as revelatory of the condition for black sexual representation. Black sexuality then is figured within a 'glass closet,' a space I define as marked by hypervisibility and confinement, spectacle, and speculation."⁴⁸

Taking a cue from Snorton, I want to contend that black female masculinity might offer an overarching category that accommodates a number of sexual and gender differences like those previously mentioned, and can also be thought of as a modality through which to think through black gender irresolution. As Snorton asserts, it is important to understand the ignorance, speculation, or avoidance as a political move in and of itself, a strategy employed to

⁴⁶ Matt Richardson, "Good and Messy: Lesbian and Transgender Identities," *Feminist Studies* 39, no. 2 (2013): 372.

⁴⁷ Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 67.

⁴⁸ C. Riley Snorton, *Nobody Is Supposed to Know: Black Sexuality on the down Low* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 4.

accommodate black gender-outliers as well as the larger cultural dictates around gender in a way that allows for relatively non-reactive co-existence. Snorton's concept of "the glass closet" which he describes as a condition of black sexuality "marked by hyper-visibility and confinement, speculation, and spectacle" is helpful in thinking through the contradictions and opacities of black female masculinity as modality.⁴⁹

Part of the work of black female masculinity is to bring to the fore a number of irresolutions around blackness and gender in unique ways— which is to say that black female masculinity is not an identity, but rather a modality— one under which particular identities can most certainly be more neatly subsumed (butch identity for example) It's also a way to think about the productive asymmetries and irresolutions of racial and gendered modes that often persist, particularly when intra-imbricated (like black masculinity) and taken as hyper-constituted. Akin to what scholar Matt Richardson terms "the limits of queer memory," black masculine women have and continue to be marginalized, within the historical archive as well as in the realm of popular culture. Furthermore, the moments of their appearance are often conflated with a type of sexual queerness as is seen in the case of many of the blues women. Some of these women were sexually queer, and others were not. This type of mis-reading is the basis for a presupposition of black female masculinity as a modality for thinking about a particular type of black gendered irresolution writ large. Popular culture, particularly music and sports, and the way these sites reflect the more private inner lives of individuals and communities, are especially fruitful, in examining black female masculinity in terms of the glass closet.

Blues Women and Basketball Players: Black Female Masculinity in Popular Culture

The ways in which black masculinity has been constructed in popular music (especially hip hop) and sports, respectively, has been copiously documented. Assuredly, the resonances between these two sites lends itself to this, as Ken McLeod asserts, "The relationship between music and sports has consistently shaped our understanding of gender identity in general and masculinity in particular."⁵⁰ And while McLeod and others have pointed out the symmetries between sports and athletics which include things like their shared emphasis on performance and play, curiously, there has been little attempt to consider non-male masculinity in this analysis.

Black female masculinity has always been a part of popular culture. However, similar to what Snorton outlines, theirs has been a representation marked by both ocular fixation and invisibility. Two of the most significant popular sites associated with black masculinity continue to be professional sports (specifically basketball), and hip-hop —the very same sites that are often the space of a particular hyper legible and even problematic modes of black male masculinity, These spaces, I would argue, are fecund in their constructions and representations of black female masculinity as well. However, both of these cultural sites of black female masculinity seem indebted to the tradition of the blues and blues women.

In his important work on Black queer women and the archive, Matt Richardson offers the notion of "blues queerness," or a specific type of racialized sexual and gendered mode of being tethered to black female queerness. In accord with Richardson, Halberstam too takes up the blues as a tradition of black female masculinity and notes that a "tradition" of black female masculinity exists but appears much more sequestered. Halberstam states that "Black butch women in the 1920s and 1930s, at a time when much male impersonation was presumed to have died out,

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ken McLeod, "The Construction of Masculinity in African American Music and Sports," *American Music* 27, no. 2 (2009): 204.

produced their own forms of black masculinity within blues performances and possibly generated a long tradition of black female masculinity.”⁵¹

Blues women of the 20’s and 30’s exemplify again the spectacle and invisibility of black female masculinity. Indeed as Angela Davis outlines, “blues women openly challenged the gender politics implicit in traditional cultural representations of marriage and heterosexual love relationships.”⁵² In their music, as well as through their identities and self-comportment, Black blues women were often the architects of their own identities and negotiated their reception within the constraints within and through the cultural dictates of gendered and sexual propriety. Furthermore, while the implications of their subversion and contestation may have had resonances beyond their interpersonal networks, it is also important to note that for many of these women it was clear that these performances were also a source of their own personal delight, a type of self-generated pleasure. Ultimately, the Blues women are important in understanding the ways in which identity, particularly for black gender queer people, always involves subversion, and incorporation of dominant modes.

One particularly illustrative example of this is one of the most notorious Blues women — Gladys Bentley. Born in Philadelphia, PA in 1907, Bentley’s was a childhood that has been described as troubled, primarily due to her gender non-conformity. From a young age Bentley is described as feeling more comfortable in clothing typically associated with male children— a source of angst for her Trinidadian immigrant parents who purportedly took her to a number of doctors to “fix her.” Bentley moved to Harlem, New York at the age of sixteen where she reportedly found comfort in “the sporting life.”⁵³ It seems that music and entertainment became one space where Bentley was able to openly express the full range of her gendered and sexual self. Indeed Bentley, who earned the moniker, “The Brown Bomber of Sophisticated Songs” became one of the most recognizable and successful blues singers of her time.⁵⁴ Bentley was known as much for her performances which were laden with sexual innuendo (and sometimes much more explicitly sexual material), during which the singer often donned her iconic top hat and tuxedo, as she was for her raw musical talent.

It seems that despite the struggles she endured throughout the course of her life with regard to her gender and sexuality that the entertainment industry provided her a certain degree of respite perhaps not available in the same way to those in other profession. As an entertainer Bentley was “able: to earn a decent living, limit contact with men, and work within a predominantly female social world.”⁵⁵ However, despite the ways in which Bentley’s gender and sexuality was an open part of her very popular performances, there continued to be constituencies that admonished her. For example, in the April 7, 1934 edition of the *Chicago Defender* Bentley is described as a “masculine-garbed, smut-singing entertainer.”⁵⁶ Moreover, it

⁵¹ Judith Halberstam, “Mackdaddy, Superfly, Rapper: Gender, Race, and Masculinity in the Drag King Scene,” *Social Text*, no. 52/53 (1997): 114.

⁵² Angela Yvonne Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 41, <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=oF4NZLPVTuYC&oi=fnd&pg=PR9&dq=angela+davis+blues+women&ots=4Crp6DK9Pd&sig=SRQcbtsGyIQdioDfUAjPBazncp8>.

⁵³ Anne Driscoll, “Bentley, Gladys (12 Aug. 1907–18 Jan. 1960), Blues Singer and Pianist,” *Hutchins Center*, accessed September 13, 2017, <http://hutchinscenter.fas.harvard.edu/bentley-gladys-12-aug-1907%E2%80%9318-jan-1960-blues-singer-and-pianist>.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ “New York Police’s War on Cafe Ends,” *Chicago Defender*, April 7, 1934.

seems that Bentley herself struggled with the meaning and moral implications of her own gender and sexual queerness. In the August 1952 issue of *Ebony* Magazine, Bentley published a self-authored piece entitled “I am A Woman Again” which, was accompanied by the subtitle “fabulous singer tells how she found happiness in love after medical treatment to correct her a strange affliction.”⁵⁷ From the outset of the article then, it is clear that black female same-sex desire was often understood as a type of biologically based perversion of sex that manifested in same sex desire and a masculine identity. Bentley further corroborates these ideas of moral deficiency rooted in bodily difference as she explains, “For many years I lived in a personal hell. Like a great number of lost souls, I inhabited that half-shadow no man’s land which exists between the boundaries of the sexes.”⁵⁸

The aforementioned print culture descriptions of Bentley are remarkable for two reasons. One, they reveal that at a certain moment at least, black female masculinity, while perhaps still vilified was part of popular discourse to the degree that popular publications (*Ebony* and *Jet* magazine—two giants of the black print industry) were explicitly engaging these issues. Furthermore, these examples highlight that while Bentley was assuredly a unique example, her life also served to highlight some of the experiences of a larger queer black community—on the one hand revealing derision and self-loathing and on the other highlighting a current of unapologetic self-possession that were all authentic to the experiences of those who pressed at the seams of social and racial dictates around gender during the time.

Films like the 2015 HBO original *Bessie* attest to the ways that the blues and blues women continue to resonate in the contemporary moment, and serve as a generative and progenitive site for popular engagements with black gender irresolution at large and black female masculinity specifically. I would argue that contemporary cultural spaces of hip hop and professional women’s basketball, are the cultural progeny of the blues women; and yet are met with as much cultural ambivalence, and even derision and silence as their antecedent.

Similar to blues women, Black women’s participation in sport, specifically basketball, has become the space, sine qua non, in which contemporary anxieties around these performances of black female bodied gendered and sexual alterity are played out. The role of basketball as a racialized and gendered site within American culture, and black American culture, specifically, as well as an attendance to the ways in which women and sport continue to expose the unwieldiness of identity through both its ability and inability to discipline bodies and properly (or improperly) inculcate subjects around dominant ideas of gender.

One of the most egregious moments that highlights the confluence of women’s basketball and attitudes of racial and gendered difference is clear in Don Imus’s infamous 2002 “nappy headed hoes” comments cast at the Rutgers women’s basketball team. The comments and ensuing controversy were reliant upon larger cultural attitudes and rhetoric that deride and vilify black womanhood. Furthermore, the controversy reveals how basketball, blackness, and masculinity often function as proxies for one another. For example, while the Rutgers women’s basketball team included members who were not Black, all of the women on the team become subsumed under blackness presumably, in part, because basketball is already a cultural site that is coded with blackness.

While the controversy around Imus’ comments became almost exclusively centered on the “nappy headed hoes” portion of his remark, the entirety of Imus’s comments, in conjunction with those of his co-host, Bernard McGuirk, is important. Commenting on the highlights from

⁵⁷ Gladys Bentley, “I Am a Woman Again,” *Ebony* 7 (1952): 92–98.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

the NCAA Women's Basketball Championship game between Tennessee and Rutgers Imus begins, "those are some rough looking girls at Rutgers they all got tattoos."⁵⁹ His co-host McGuirk remarks "Those are some hard core hoes" to which Imus offers, "Those are some nappy headed hoes."⁶⁰ Continuing on Imus remarks, "The girls from Tennessee look cute." The men continue to exchange disparaging comments about the team, and finally end with the claim that the women, "look exactly like the Toronto raptors," a comment about which the two men share a chuckle.⁶¹

While the primary critique, and rightfully so of Imus's comments that resulted in his termination from CBS lie in the racist and sexist implication of his nominalization of the Rutgers team as "nappy headed hoes," his comments are not merely a remark on the aesthetics of the team. The Rutgers team were castigated for an improper gender performance. Both Imus and McGuirk's utterances reflect a series of ideologies, assumptions, and elisions that clearly suggest that there is derision rooted in a that is improperly feminine, and made legible, in large, part through the language of racial difference.

The designation of the Tennessee team as simply "cute," does not necessarily preclude that same possibility for the Rutgers women. However, Imus levies these designations not solely an evaluation of relative attractiveness or beauty, but also as a measure of femininity that, through the emphasis on the teams tattoos in conjunction with their "hardness" or "nappy headedness" positions the women outside of normative and valued modes of femininity. Furthermore, in this case the comments work to not only situate the women outside of femininity but as Quick's assertion that they "look like the Toronto Raptors" or the "Grizzlies" (a reference to the NBA's Memphis Grizzlies) actually is a move to liken them to men and masculinity.⁶²

While Imus's comments were egregious, in many ways his derision represents a more extreme example of the sentiment shared by many viewers and even people associated with the league, about women's basketball. Indeed, there has been a circulating cultural discourse around the "image problem" of the WNBA. In a 2015 interview one of the women's basketball's most heralded players and greatest ambassadors, Sheryl Swoopes, made a series of controversial remarks regarding two of the league's most high-profile emerging talents—Brittney Griner and Skylar Diggins. About Griner Swoopes remarked, "People already have an idea of what the WNBA is about and what it's like, so then when they see [the Brittney Griner/Glory Johnson] type of drama, then it becomes a 'See, I told you so.'"⁶³ By contrast Swoopes asserts "Skylar's good for this league. She's ... not only is she pretty, actually I think she's beautiful, but she can play, you know what I mean? ... But Skylar has got to start doing more for the league."⁶⁴ While Swoopes doesn't explicitly point to Griner's sexuality as an issue, her comment that "people already have an idea on what the WNBA is about" seems to imply that part of Griner's is less about her divorce and annulment but also the ways in which Griner as the emerging face of the

⁵⁹ thejakester1, *Imus Calls Girls Nappy Headed Hoes & Jjiggaboos!?*, 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmF8iIeOVEo>.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Kate Fagan, "What Sheryl Swoopes Got Wrong About Today's WNBA," *espnW*, (October 8, 2015), <http://www.espn.com/espnw/news-commentary/article/13835681/what-sheryl-swoopes-got-wrong-today-wnba>.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

league, exudes a conspicuous gender and sexual queerness that seemingly substantiates critiques of the WNBA's image problem that have been circulating in popular discourse for some time.⁶⁵ Furthermore, her clear emphasis on Skylar Diggins's beauty, and presumably her conventional feminine attractiveness, a subtext, of derision behind public images of queer sexuality and gender that Brittney Griner as one of the most successful and well-known WNBA players has come to exemplify and that overdetermines the entire league. Griner, one of the most talented and high profile women's basketball players to emerge in recent years, has been subjected to criticism.

Swoopes' comments are all the more curious given that, in many ways—from their shared Texas Roots, the NCAA championship, to a controversy surrounding a same sex relationship as well as a partnership with Nike, more than any other player Griner's life seems to mirror Swoopes. Indeed, Griner's ability to garner a groundbreaking endorsement deal with Nike in 2013 as the first openly gay person to have an endorsement deal with the company is part of a phenomenon of women's sports endorsements on which Swoopes is an exemplar. Not only is Griner's basketball and endorsement legacy indebted to Swoopes, but her career trajectory, both on court and beyond, mimics her predecessors. For example, Swoopes signature sneaker deal remains the bar for sneaker deals within Women's basketball and across women's sports. Though not in terms as explicit as Griner's, Swoopes' endorsement and Air Swoopes was also hinged upon the disruption and inculcation of gender and racial codes—codes that invoked black female masculinity.

Along with Swoopes, rapper and entertainer Missy Elliott, offers a version of black female masculinity marked by a type of aesthetic and corporeal excess,. Elliott's, however, is rooted primarily in issues of gender and sexual irresolution. The remainder of this chapter takes up the relationship between black female masculinity and racial objects and the interplay between the two specifically as they are represented through the cultural arenas of sports and music through an examination of Sheryl Swoopes and Missy Elliott's respective performances and sneaker endorsements.

“She was not a girly, girl”: Sheryl Swoopes and the Nike Air Swoopes

In 2013, Nike Inc. made headlines with its signing of Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) player Brittney Griner, the first openly gay athlete to have an endorsement deal with the company.⁶⁶ While the great preponderance of popular attention around the deal was moored in the endorsement as ostensibly evincing and contributing to a climate of acceptance and inclusion of gendered and sexuality difference within both professional sports, the deal was also significant for its specific terms: it was reported that Griner would model men's apparel.

While Brittney Griner's 2013 endorsement with Nike wasn't specifically for sneakers it was significant in that it was the first endorsement deal by the company of an openly queer athlete. Furthermore, Griner's position as one of the most heralded but also controversial athletes to emerge in recent history for women's basketball (and perhaps one of the most across women's sports) contributed to her cultural significance. In the contemporary moment Griner has emerged as the popular culture exemplar of Black female masculinity. It is the “naturalness” or

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Jasmine Watkins, “Brittney Griner Will Model Men's Clothing for Nike,” *FORTHEWIN*, June 5, 2013, <http://ftw.usatoday.com/2013/06/brittney-griner-will-model-mens-clothing-for-nike>.

“authenticity” of these masculine gender performances amongst Griner and other women athletes that lend themselves to their ability to garner sports apparel deals. However, unlike other female athlete endorsements that may attempt to reconcile how female athletes often trouble notions of femininity, Griner’s deal, which stipulates that she is free to model men’s clothes, seems to embrace the masculinity that is already scripted onto her persona and body. Effective athletic apparel endorsements are predicated on the ability of the athlete to transmit certain ‘truths’ about the product’s assistance of bodily performances. Griner’s endorsement deal reveals how sports apparel indexes codes of gender that already persist within the dominant society around paradoxically troubling and instantiating masculinity. Although Griner’s endorsement was incontestably groundbreaking, in many ways it resembled a famous endorsement that preceded it—that of women’s basketball icon Sheryl Swoopes.

The Nike Air Swoopes, remains arguably, the most significant for a female athlete. Like most signature sneakers, The Nike Air Swoopes was designed with the intention of capturing the unique characteristics of its endorser, to simultaneously bolster Swoopes’ athleticism as well as capitalize on it. Therefore, in order to understand the design logic that was embedded into the materiality of the sneaker, it is imperative to understand Sheryl Swoopes.

A number of factors would work to contribute to the success and significance of the Nike Air Swoopes, not the least of which was Swoopes’ own impressive roster of accomplishments. Sheryl Swoopes had a storied career beginning at her time at Texas Tech where, in 1993, she would go on to win a National Championship Title, and set a college basketball record (for both men and women) for points scored in a Championship Game with, forty-seven.⁶⁷ Unlike with men’s basketball, women basketball players would usually have to go overseas. Swoopes’ and her contemporaries, however, were able to pursue dreams of professional sports careers at home. The establishment of the WNBA in the wake of an impressive Olympic run where US women’s basketball would go on to win three gold medals was a boon for the inaugural season. The inaugural season tag was, “We Got Next” —a turn of phrase often associated with pickup basketball to assert one’s intention to play .

Swoopes’ career was a storied one. In addition to her litany of accomplishments as a collegiate athlete, she would eventually go on to win four WNBA Championships, and three WNBA MVP Awards. Swoopes’ stellar play, likened her to her idol Michael Jordan, and eventually garnered for her the moniker, “Her Airness”: clearly a nominalization that is a derivative of Michael Jordan “His Airness.” Given Swoopes’ storied career, the comparisons to Jordan are seemingly unavoidable, however this association with Jordan is important as it illustrates not just Swoopes’ excellence as an athlete but also her potential marketability.

Episode 5 of ESPN’s *Nine for IX* , a documentary series framed after the network’s popular *30 for 30* series, entitled “Swoopes” (a choice that in and of itself signals the ways in which Swoopes is configured within a discourse of gender normativity in ways that Griner is not), highlights both the meteoric rise of Swoopes growing up as the youngest (and only girl) of three siblings in the rural town of Brownfield in West Texas to the most successful female basketball player of all time (another move that attempts to situate Swoopes within a discourse of heteronormativity in terms of sexuality even as she is positioned outside of it in terms of blackness). The documentary begins with austere visuals of a dusty sepia toned background with

⁶⁷ Gerry Callahan, “LITTLE SISTER DRIVEN TO PROVE HERSELF AGAINST HER OLDER BROTHERS AND OTHER BOYS, SHERYL SWOOPES BECAME QUEEN OF THE COURT,” *Sports Illustrated*, July 19, 1996, <https://www.si.com/vault/1996/07/19/216260/little-sister-driven-to-prove-herself-against-her-older-brothers-and-other-boys-sheryl-swoopes-became-queen-of-the-court#>.

a grass-less yard that sits in front of a very modest house, which Sheryl identifies as the only place she was allowed to play unattended. We are then introduced to Swoopes' older brother James who along with her other older brother she credits with introducing and cultivating her love and skill for the game of basketball. While her humble beginnings and athletic acumen are foregrounded in the doc, the narrative is interspersed by an account of her endorsement with Nike.

In one segment of the documentary, Phil Knight, founder of Nike, reflects back on the relationship between the company and Swoopes. Knight states "I think looking back, it was Sheryl Swoopes and the Nike endorsement deal were a big part of Women's basketball becoming a bigger part of American Culture."⁶⁸ Knight's later comments confirmed that by the time the WNBA was founded, the cultural purchase of his company was so expansive, specifically in relationship to basketball, that the partnership between this corporate sportswear giant and the best player in this new league assuredly garnered broader cultural attention for the sport.

Consider that when asked what her thoughts were of the Nike deal, Swoopes' facetiously and affably responds "It was the best idea Nike ever had."⁶⁹ Swoopes also goes on to give an account of what Nike meant to her as a youth, stating that Nikes were something that she coveted but could never afford as a child, so to be able to have her own signature shoe was momentous. In this regard for Swoopes, like for many youth, the actual attainment (or inability to) of the material sneaker became a marker of a certain social and athletic cache. However, in Swoopes' unique case this dynamic served to work in the opposite direction, as it would ultimately be her athletic cache, amongst other things, that would provide her with not only more standard measures of access to resources like education and financial means, but the greatest form of access in the form of a signature shoe. Furthermore, Swoopes understood the implications of her shoe deal for women's basketball players broadly as she states, "the most important thing is that my Nike deal has done so much for women's basketball. Now every player on the national team has a shoe contract. Can you imagine that having happened five years ago? It wouldn't have."⁷⁰

However, it was not only Swoopes' athletic talents but also her persona that made her marketable. In one article, then Vice President of Marketing, Liz Dolan, was quoted as saying "she has a cool name" when asked why Swoopes was given an endorsement deal.

Knight's own account of Swoopes' appeal is telling also.⁷¹ At another point in the "Swoopes" documentary Knight gives his account of why Swoopes in particular was someone the company was interested in endorsing. Knight states "She's a very attractive woman, she has a great smile a tremendous flair for the game. Her persona, her name it all went together and the Air Swoopes made perfect sense, didn't it?"⁷² Knight's characterization of Swoopes is telling, as, on the one hand he points to conventionality of her appeal located in her physical attractiveness, while on the other citing her athletic prowess is a gesture to the ways that like other female athletes, Swoopes' conventionally feminine attributes are often highlighted in order to soften the effects

⁶⁸ Hannah Storm, *ESPN Films - Nine for IX: Swoopes*, 2013, https://www.amazon.com/ESPN-Films-Nine-IX-Swoopes/dp/B00GM7WS96/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1505348975&sr=8-2&keywords=espn+nine+for+ix+swoopes.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Callahan, "LITTLE SISTER DRIVEN TO PROVE HERSELF AGAINST HER OLDER BROTHERS AND OTHER BOYS, SHERYL SWOOPES BECAME QUEEN OF THE COURT."

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Storm, *ESPN Films - Nine for IX: Swoopes*.

of her athletic prowess in ways that only gesture to gender difference. Indeed, as Phil Knight asserts, part of Swoopes' appeal is her ability to overwhelmingly perform black female athlete while avoiding much of the gendered and sexual queerness that that positionality often assumes. Consider that, throughout her career, certain tropes of the hardworking single-mother, tough but loving older brothers, and her role as a mother throughout her career helped to keep Swoopes firmly situated into a type of All-Americaness, despite the ways her athletic prowess and later her same-sex relationship positioned her outside of normative femininity. These seeming dualities of Swoopes, were integral to her ability to successfully garner a sneaker endorsement with Nike, and were ultimately reflected in the material conceptualization of the shoe, phenomena which mandate a closer examination of both the endorsement deal and the sneaker itself.

The Nike Air Swoopes model, like most signature shoes, went through a number of iterations over the course of Swoopes' career. The first model however is the most iconic, if only for the fact that it inaugurated a new moment within the lineage of women's sneakers, women's sports, and sneaker culture more broadly. The original Nike Air Swoopes' released in 1996 appeared in two colorways— red white and blue version, a USA colorway that harkened to the recent Olympics, as well as a more muted pair that was primarily black. In a 2012 Nike digital retrospective of some of its most iconic basketball sneakers, Marni Gerber, designer of the Nike Air Swoopes sneaker, explained the thinking behind the Air Swoopes, asserting that the shoes were designed to reflect Swoopes' own personality- which Gerber described as “not a girly girl.”⁷³ Furthermore, the retrospective highlights the design novelty of the Air Swoopes, particularly the shoe's design, and its aesthetic divergence from earlier and predominate women's sneakers. More specifically, the Air Swoopes was intentional about avoiding the “shrink and pink” mentality of the sneaker industries' broader approach to women's sneakers. “Shrink and pink” refers to a design strategy employed by sneaker designer and manufacturers where existing models (presumably for men) become designated and legible as “women's sneaker” merely by reducing the size and employing aesthetic markers like the color pink more commonly associated with femininity, while the object in its design logic and/or materiality remains largely unaltered.

The thinking behind the Air Swoopes' was hinged upon intentionally and attentively diverging from this trend. First, the features of the design of the Air Swoopes' which is described as merging “great traction with agility, a rugged black Durabuck, a distinctive midfoot stability strap that cradled the foot, a contrasting color blocking strategy for maximum visibility and Nike Air in the heel and forefoot” was employed with play in mind.⁷⁴ While many sneakers that are made for the intended purpose of physical activity are put to any number of uses by consumers, there is an entire category of sneakers, often designated “lifestyle” that are created for the distinct purpose of leisure wear and fashion. Indeed, many women's sneakers seemed to be subsumed under the “lifestyle” category. The Swoopes' shoe however was explicitly situated into a discourse of performance even as the shoe did go on to become popular for consumers who wore the shoes solely for style purposes.

It is important to point out however, that even as Nike made clear the functional components of the shoe, the designers also highlighted the non-functional elements of the sneaker. In describing the sneaker Nike described the Air Swoopes' as “an uncompromising

⁷³ “Nike Presents: 20 Designs That Changed the Game,” *Nike News*, August 13, 2012, <https://news.nike.com/news/nike-presents-20-designs-that-changed-the-game>.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*.

blend of support, performance and style.”⁷⁵ In many ways this description of the shoe is akin to Knight's description of Swoopes herself, in its emphasis on both the aesthetic and performance elements. And while this strategy doesn't necessarily diverge from the ways that other popular basketball sneakers might be understood—the ways in which these qualities are emphasized is notable.

First, the shoe is explicit in its divergence from the “shrink and pink” mentality illumines that seemingly femininity and function are incongruent while simultaneously relying upon femininity and function. Finally, the characterization of the shoes as an “uncompromising blend of support, performance, and style” is significant. The notion that a sneaker is uncompromising suggest that indeed there are ways to compromise. Presumably this compromise is a reference to the ways in which the functional elements of a sneaker like performance and support are often deemphasized when sneakers are stylish, and perhaps especially so in the case of women's sneakers. In this regard then, the Nike Air Swoopes is markedly different (or at least promoted as so) in that it manages to incorporate all of these elements with compromise.

While ostensibly these elements are neutral in relationship to identity categories, in fact they carry a series of meanings beyond the material. There is nothing about the specific functional and performance attributes of the shoe that , in and of itself suggests that the sneakers are a material manifestation of racial identity, it is the marketing of Swoopes, her ascribed/described personality traits, the gendered import of the site in which she is situated, that all work in concert to racialize and gender her shoes. It is clear that Nike both inadvertently and actively relied upon and constructs this narrative of female masculinity around Swoopes and the Air Swoopes. The efficacy of this strategy, indeed the desire and identification of consumptive role reversal was the primary triumph of the Air Swoopes—its ability to appeal to a market that is both imagined as and in actuality, overwhelming male.

The disruption of the homogeneity around gender requires a re-instantiation of masculinity, via Sheryl Swoopes and the ways that her mediated-self became scripted into the material form of the sneaker and ultimately how that mediated-self became scripted into a type of commercial cache as evidenced by Nike Inc.'s own characterization of the cultural implications of the Air Swoopes. In the Nike basketball retrospective, the fervor around the release of the Air Swoopes was described. The site states “Once the new league tipped off, males desperately hunted for the Nike Air Swoopes in a bigger size — a glorious moment of role reversal. As the Swoopes series evolved, implementing Zoom and Tuned Air along the way, gender became irrelevant in the desire for these shoes.”⁷⁶

The assertion that men's covetousness of the sneaker revealed how gender was now irrelevant is misleading, as in actuality it instantiates the importance of gender. Both the marketing and the consumer fervor around the Nike Air Swoopes seemed to be fomented by a persistent and strident adherence to notions of masculinity. The Air Swoopes more aptly reveals how even in the marketing of a sneaker specifically designed for women, the subtext and indeed the object still maintains its attachments to masculinity. In this regard, the Air Swoopes doesn't complicate masculine gender so much as but rather reified with a difference the terms by which both producers and the consumers of sneakers are physically and ideologically constructed as masculine.

It is this promotion of disembodied corporeal qualities coupled with the already existing valence of the sneaker as a racial object that instantiated meaning for both Swoopes and the

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ “Nike Air Swoopes,” *Nike News*, July 29, 2012, <https://news.nike.com/news/nike-air-swoopes>.

sneaker. In other words, both Swoopes—her physicality, persona, etc.— and the sneaker are working together in an exchange loop to relay meaning to the other.

Respect M.E: Missy Misdemeanor Elliott and Aesthetic Excess

Similar to the Nike Air Swoopes, rapper, dancer, producer and overall musical renaissance woman Missy ‘Misdemeanor’ Elliott was one of the first and most important black female popular culture personalities to secure an endorsement deal that included apparel and shoes with a major sneaker company, Adidas.

While Missy’s sneaker was not a signature line, her endorsement was significant in paving the way for an entire cadre of female musicians including Teyana Taylor’s multiple sneaker collaborations with Adidas and Reebok, Rihanna’s deal with Puma and even tastemakers like Vashti Kola and her groundbreaking collaboration with Jordan Brand as the first woman to collaborate with the company on a sneaker design, in all having access to sneaker endorsements. Missy is an essential player in women artists parlaying their cultural purchase and individual style within music into a broader range of cultural arenas like fashion, and specifically sneakers. Similar to Swoopes, Missy’s unique characteristics anchor her endorsement. Therefore, it is critical to understand the emergence and positionality of Elliott within music to grasp the significance to sneakers and the particular meaning of her endorsement; in order to do so Missy needs to be situated within the broader context of the hip hop moment in which she emerged.

At the height of her career in the early 2000s Elliott was the highest-selling female rapper of all time with seven million records sold.⁷⁷ From the releases of her debut single and the visual of the video, “The Rain,” Elliott offered a performance style marked by spectacularity and play. The music video for the “The Rain,” which was shot by esteemed video director Hype Williams, who is known for his use of a fisheye lens (a technique that complemented and buttressed Elliott’s already exaggerated aesthetic) featured Elliott in a series of scenes— sitting alone atop grassy knoll, a streetscape in a jeep, a beach and most infamously donning a black trash bag suit with burgundy sunglasses.

Elliott served as a refreshing disruption to the dominant images of women within mainstream of hip-hop which were overwhelmingly tied, either through election or imposition, to a highly-scripted idea of black femininity marked by unapologetic and illicit sexuality as exemplified by a number of her contemporaries including Lil’ Kim and Foxy Brown. Missy diverged from these constructions sonically, lyrically (though perhaps not as divergent as is often argued) and physically.

Missy was aware of the significance of her physical corpulence to her personae was in terms of the viability of a music career in front of a camera as she stated “I wasn’t 5’6, size three, with a tiny waist.”⁷⁸ Indeed the over the top and often camp performance in her music both sonically and lyrically, were illustrative of her overall aesthetic.

The interplay between Eliot’s artistic and corporeal excess draws upon a long history of black female representation understood as excessive, a contention so resonant throughout popular discourse that it, as Nicole Fleetwood asserts, “has gained an aura of facticity.”⁷⁹ In her

⁷⁷ Ann M. Savage, *Women’s Rights: Reflections in Popular Culture* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2017), 57.

⁷⁸ Senay Topcuoglu, “Give Respect to Get Respect,” *Dexigner*, November 4, 2005, <https://www.dexigner.com/news/5775>.

⁷⁹ Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago, IL.: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 105.

work on black female excess Fleetwood offer's the concept of "excess flesh," a concept derived, in part, from the work of Hortense Spillers and Sharon Holland's theorization of the "flesh." In Fleetwood's application "Excess flesh is not necessarily a liberatory enactment. *It is a performative that doubles visibility: to see the codes of visibility operating on the (hyper)visible body that is its object.* Excess flesh does not destabilize the dominant gaze or its system of visibility. Instead, it refracts the gaze back upon itself."⁸⁰ Fleetwood outlines the efficacy and also the limitations of enacting excess flesh as a strategy stating:

to enact excess flesh is to signal historical attempts to regulate black female bodies, to acknowledge black women's resistance of the persistence of visibility and to challenge debates among black activists and critics about what constitutes positive or productive representation of blackness, by refusing the binary of negative and positive that Michelle Wallace warns us against. Such a challenge is not necessarily intertwined with a representational corrective that articulates a 'true' or accurate framework for seeing the black female body. Yet it does demonstrate the impossibility of a totalizing gaze and highlights the limitations of regulatory systems.⁸¹

For Fleetwood one of the most fecund sights of excess flesh in a literal sense but also in enactments and performances of excess flesh is performance art but also black popular cultural production. Furthermore, Fleetwood is particularly interested in the role of black female artists within hip hop. Using the music video as a primary mode through which to trouble this dual excess, she cites the thematics and visual conventions of hip hop music videos including the infamous "video vixen," or, more pejoratively, video hoe that became the most potent sign of black female excess. Unlike artists who used their sexuality in ways that could be at once exploitative but also agential and could be known for a more holistic identity, video vixens (aside from a select few who achieved their own pseudo-celebrity status like Melissa Ford) were largely unknown, and cast to be unknowable. For Fleetwood, these technologies of black female bodily control are linked to and work in conjunction with more conventional technologies.

As a specific example, Fleetwood explicates the famed director Hype Williams and his signature style—one that was as over-the top, grand, and excessive. This style was achieved through the use of certain technical implements including the use of a fisheye lens (a technique that serves to distort or exaggerate) to identify what she refers to as "the technologies of excess."⁸² It is through this marriage of the technical, the aesthetic, and the corporeal that I apply the concept of excess flesh as an important tool through which to understand Missy Elliott's artistic persona and ultimately her marketability.

While rapper Lil Kim becomes the hip hop example through which Fleetwood makes her claims, because, according to the author, "Kim's excess flesh performances cite earlier excessive black female performances like Betty Davis and Millie Jackson, also push the boundaries of the more socially acceptable excessive performances of contemporary hip hop and R&B performers such as Beyoncé, Rihanna, and Ciara."⁸³ Additionally, in his work on Nicki Minaj and camp Uri McMillan offers the concept of "nicki-aesthetics" which he, citing Siobhan O'Connor, describes as "Nicki Minaj's excessive theatricality and neon-hued style, her

⁸⁰ Ibid., 112.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 132–33.

⁸³ Ibid., 127.

penchant for ‘anime facial expressions and Day-Glo accessories.’”⁸⁴ Expounding upon this theory further McMillan describes nicki-aesthetics as a “mélange of eccentric fashion and theatrical artifice is clear in numerous magazine spreads, music videos, and fashion advertisements.”⁸⁵ Given Elliott’s eccentricism and avant garde artistry within hip hop her conspicuous absence in broader discussion of issues of excess, play, and extravagance among female hip hop performers is baffling. Missy, I would argue epitomizes performances of black female excess.

It seems that Missy, as one of Kim’s contemporaries as well as an influencer on later artists like Nicki Minaj is absent in these discussions, in part, not because of the similarities in excessive performances between her and the aforementioned artists, but because she also exemplifies a type of bodily excess that makes her conspicuously different—one that is less reliant on, or perhaps less readily read as having the makers such as overt sexuality, of excess which contribute to a different type of challenge to the totalizing gaze of the regulatory system of black female representation.

Early in her career Elliott was pegged as a welcome deviation from an archetypal popular nineties female rap personae. Known for her signature closely cropped and immaculately coiffed finger-waved hairstyle, along with her body, Elliott’s excess (particularly mid-career) took the form of her aesthetic choices and attire that paid homage to the early years of hip-hop. The dress of this era was as functional as it was fashionable as the clothing which included bucket caps, track suits and sneakers—was most readily identified with the practice of break dancing. And while a number of sneaker brands were popular during this time (Puma, Pony, Etonic, etc.) Adidas stands as, arguably, the most iconic shoe brand of the emergent years of hip hop with which this aesthetic is typically associated. Furthermore, Elliott’s deviation from many of her contemporaries was not merely exemplified through her choices of body adornment, but also in her body itself.

From her emergence on the hip hop scene in with her debut album, *SupaDupaFly*, in 1997, Elliott was a disruption to both the aesthetic modes that marked women in hip hop. Along with her sound, Elliott’s short hefty frame, and style marked by a type of tomboyish excess, during an era in hip hop marked by more scantily clad dress and conventionally sexualized bodies, also contributed to Elliott’s actual and perceived difference. This corporeal difference is closely tied to the material difference exemplified by her endorsement. Similar to the ways in which Nike Inc. and subsequently the Nike Air Swoopes highlighted the marketability of gender difference, Missy Elliott’s partnership with Adidas signaled another moment of the corporate cache of black female masculinity and was part of the longest and perhaps most iconic pairing of what is now recognized and deeply entrenched relationship between sneaker culture and hip hop. Elliott’s then is a particular type of permutation of this notion of the black female body as always already excessive. A bodily excess that indexes a gendered difference. Her endorsement deal with Adidas reveals the double- move of amplifying and attempting to mitigate this excess, and gestures to the gender irresolution upon which it is founded, and indeed propagates.

Although Elliott was reported to have inked a deal with Reebok in 2001 the partnership was short-lived.⁸⁶ In 2004 Elliott’s long-time love of sneakers and Adidas coalesced into her

⁸⁴ Uri McMillan, “Nicki-Aesthetics: The Camp Performance of Nicki Minaj,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 24, no. 1 (2014): 80.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Lorraine Ali and Jennifer Ordonez, “The Marketing of Missy,” *Newsweek* 142, no. 23 (December 8, 2003): 100–100.

very own clothing line, Respect M.E. Respect M.E (a clear play on the rapper's initials). According to a 2005 article from women's fashion trade journal *Women's Wear Daily*, "Respect M.E. was launched with great fanfare last April, when Elliott unveiled the looks at a news conference in New York. The initial products that hit stores last fall featured baggy tracksuits and flashy sneakers in bold colors and camouflage prints, as well as a selection of bags and accessories."⁸⁷

While the initial release of the line was reportedly met by disappointing sales in the United States, Respect M.E managed to garner a respectable amount of consumer success globally with reported sales of thirty million (US).⁸⁸ Of the lines diverse set of products Puress reported that the "top sellers and the most popular items have been footwear such as low-top leather sneakers available in different colors."⁸⁹ However, these global figures still a need for revamping the line with the Fall 2005 collection characterized as having "sophisticated styling with fitted silhouettes, sleeker designs and subtle color palettes with more brown and black."⁹⁰ Again, Puress goes on to state the Adidas "toned down the collection's branding" and that the new collection would be "less about building the logo and more about developing silhouettes. The new collection is more feminine, more sexy and more creative."⁹¹ Interestingly this seeming logic of the revamp seems to depart from the very core characteristics upon which the collection was conceived.

While the meaning behind the company's desire to achieve a more creative product is unclear, its emphasis on revamping the collection to more "sexy" and "feminine" seems to starkly contrast the baggier tomboyish, b-boy (or girl aesthetic). The seeming essence of the line then, which is informed by Elliott's own love of golden-era hip hop age aesthetic, the 2005 revamp attempts to mitigate, perhaps in ways that might mirror the vicissitudes of Elliott's own style characterized by a type glam, coupled with the early days of hip hop aesthetic.

It is also interesting to note that Adidas spokespeople identify the sneakers as being the most popular in the fledgling line. However, this emphasis on a sexier, more feminine, aesthetic as a way to garner more consumer interest in the line seems to compromise the core characteristics of the most popular product, but also the larger ethos of the Respect M.E Adidas line.

Ultimately this specific instance highlights how the sneaker has proven itself difficult to reconcile with femininity without compromising itself as such (i.e. maintaining its legibility as a sneaker) and presents an ongoing quandary for sneaker companies. In this way, the sneaker mimics the dynamism and also irresolution around gender that Elliott exemplifies, arguably, more than any other mainstream black female hip hop performer. The spectacularity of Missy's artistic persona coupled with a certain speculation around her personal life that piques consumer interests, fomented her marketing appeal. Cloaked in a veil of speculation and irresolution around sexuality that is read across her gender, and it ultimately informs the ways she is marketable. In the second single off of her 2002 album, *Under Construction*, "Gossip Folks,"

⁸⁷ Melanie Kletter, "Adidas, Elliott: A Fresh Respect," *WWD: Women's Wear Daily* 190, no. 20 (July 28, 2005): 10–10.

⁸⁸ Missy Elliott Respect M.E. clothing line is an insistence on being recognized as a player in hip hop as well as the world of fashion. Furthermore,, the name, Respect M.E. clearly harkens to a musical foremother, Aretha Franklin.

⁸⁹ Kletter, "Adidas, Elliott."

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

Missy addressed issues of rumor and speculation, particularly around her unconfirmed sexuality. The song begins with a number of unidentifiable female voices, presumably those of the “gossip folks” speculating about Elliott’s intimate partnering as they state “I heard the bitch was married to Tim and started fucking with Trina”⁹² Speculation and rumor then become the frames through which Missy Elliott’s already queer persona become instantiated. For Elliott, it is not so much a self-professed queer identity but rather the irresolution around her sexual identity coupled with her aesthetic and corporeal excess that casts her into the mode of female masculinity. And for Swoopes and Elliott, it is not so much that either are particularly masculine in and of themselves, though both are configured outside of more dominant modes of feminine gender. Rather, it is a type of black female masculinity that is levied to connote a type of gender difference upon which the logics of both of their respective endorsement deals are founded. Furthermore, it is both informed by and reveals the ways in which a whole economy of forces, from identity markers to performance all work to contribute to both subjects’ and objects’ racial and gendered being.

Concluding Thought

The sneaker as a cultural object with ties to masculinity has been clearly established.⁹³ However, as the earliest moments of sneaker history reveal, issues of gender, and more specifically, how to reconcile the masculine valence of the sneaker with more diverse consumers like women, reveals both these logics, and their limits. Furthermore, as I argue throughout the chapters in this project, the imbrication of race, specifically blackness, to the gendered charge of the sneaker as in the case of the women’s sneaker that has gained increasing purchase as a distinct object category in the post- Jordan moment of the late nineties into the early two thousands further complicates this phenomenon. Sheryl Swoopes’ and Melissa “Missy Misdemeanor” Elliott emerged in this moment as exemplars of the ways in which broader cultural arenas like basketball and hip hop that, like the sneaker, are already inscribed with masculinity, have become increasingly populated by women.

The female sneaker endorsement then, mandates a revisitation of issues of subjecthood and objecthood that animated each chapter heretofore, albeit towards a slightly different end. These endorsements and their queer terms levy black female masculinity to make themselves legible and illegible at the same time in such a way that exposes the tenuousness and the rigidity of the primary categories that ground the larger project: objecthood, subjecthood, masculinity, blackness. The female sneaker endorsement and the black female masculinity that underscores it then invites us to, at once, bring to our established reading practices a critical familiarity with the categories of object, subject, blackness, and masculinity, while also wrestling with the limits of the concepts we readily employ. These readings frustrate the very categories that we must employ to make our unknowing legible, and reveal the complex meanings that continue to congeal around this object as one that is both racially animate and that animates racial performances.

⁹² Missy Elliott, “Missy Elliott - Gossip Folks,” YouTube, (October 26, 2009), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYKI8tAELXY>.

⁹³ Miner, “Provocations on Sneakers.”

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