UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Making Moves:
The Performance of Black Bodies
and the Function of Aesthetics in American Basketball

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Theater and Performance Studies

by

Danielle Alexandria Davis Howard

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Making Moves:

The Performance of Black Bodies

and the Function of Aesthetics in American Basketball

by

Danielle Alexandria Davis Howard

Doctor of Philosophy in Theater and Performance Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2021

Professor Michelle Liu Carriger, Chair

Making Moves is a meditation on how Black performance is imagined in and through American basketball. The elite world of sports capitalizes on the athleticism of Black men while also attempting to control them. This dissertation interprets over the span of 100 years specific virtuosic and improvisational movements performed by basketball players as acts of radicalism oriented towards a kinetic knowledge of freedom. By adopting basketball as an embodied art that utilizes improvisation, costumes, an ensemble and stage, the project highlight ways in which sport and the performing arts intersect. It particularly foregrounds the crossover—various configurations of handling the basketball to keep it away from the opponent—performed by

specific players as a Black imperative through its aesthetic structures akin to African American aesthetic structures found in the jazz tradition. The project is significant in two major ways: first, research on athletic Black bodies expands and enhances the discourse on blackness that pervades American popular culture; second, the project supports the fight for the abolition of forms of oppression.

Basketball possesses lyrical combinations of movements that lend themselves to further performance analysis, and Black male bodies primarily constitute professional basketball team rosters. Furthermore, sport platforms, such as NBA arenas and facilities, recently became polling and voting centers for the recent 2020 election, further delineating the basketball court as a political space. Chapter 1 of the dissertation interprets the imagined basketball world of Uncle Drew in his 2012 Pepsi Max commercials and 2018 film. The next chapter analyzes *Separate and Equal*, an Off-Broadway 2018 theatrical production about the relationship between white and Black teens who play a forbidden game of basketball in 1950s Jim Crow Alabama. Subsequently, Chapter 3 features the all-Black New York Renaissance Professional Basketball Team who played basketball on the floor of Harlem's Renaissance Ballroom and won the first national professional basketball tournament in 1939. Black male virtuosity throughout each chapter reveals embodied histories resistant to subjugation.

The dissertation of Danielle Alexandria Davis Howard is approved.

Ellen C. Scott

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University of California, Los Angeles

2021

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I would not be the writer I am today without my wise mother instilling in me at a young age the power and artistry of composing words, and my father instilling in me the discipline of the mind and body. I vividly remember my mom encouraging me to wake up earlier than necessary before elementary and middle school in order to correct my vocabulary sentences and essays when my adolescent brain thought they were good enough. I also recall my dad teaching me hard work and consistency by example. Always a phone call away, my parents laid a foundation for me to aspire for excellence in everything I do. I say thank you to my big brother William for whom I have been artistically inspired by my entire life and my little sister Aleah who grounds me in her compassion and esteem of my accomplishments. To my family in California, I am grateful for your presence in my life. Pierre Howard, thanks for doing life with me. Your unwavering interest in my project carried me when I was stressed about the development of my ideas. Thank you for reading every word, handling everyday life duties while I remained focused on writing, and being a consistent source of love and support.

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Introduction

When it's played the way it's spozed to be played, basketball happens in the air; flying, floating, elevated above the floor, levitating the way oppressed peoples of this earth imagine themselves in their dreams.

--John Edgar Wideman, author of *Brothers and Keepers*

Making Moves: Black Performance and the Function of Aesthetics in American Basketball examines Black virtuosic bodies who danced around, over, and through racial inequality. With an emphasis on Black male virtuosity displayed in basketball performance, I theorize the ways in which the histories of resistance and resiliency of African American culture is encoded in basketball movement. Particularly, I reveal a connection between Uncle Drew — the fictitious "ankle breaker" seen in several eponymous Pepsi Max commercials and a 2018 film — and the all-Black professional New York Renaissance Basketball team that emerged within the social and cultural movement known as the Harlem Renaissance. Playing basketball in the epicenter of Black entertainment, Black basketball players over the last 100 years use their bodies in order to orient themselves toward a kinetic knowledge of freedom and secure a cultural legacy of encumbered Black bodies who perpetually would not be still.

The project is significant in two major ways. First, the project supports the fight for the abolition of oppression. Second, research on athletic Black bodies expands and enhances the discourse on blackness that pervades American popular culture. Jason King and Samantha N. Sheppard tether blackness to mobility, informed by

diasporic Black people's improvisational, kinetic, and kinesthetic movement in quotidian and cinematic performances.[1] I focus on basketball because the sport possesses lyrical combinations of movements that lend themselves to further performance analysis, and Black male bodies primarily constitute professional basketball team rosters. King acutely asserts that "Blackness performs the direction of indirection, the mobility that is immobility, the re-orientation that is disorientation."[2] I take up these claims in this dissertation via the steps, pivots, and crossovers germane to basketball performance. The sport of basketball maintains an extensive movement vocabulary through which black male basketball players within each chapter reveals the form and function of blackness and embodied histories as resistant to subjugation. The elite world of sports capitalizes on the athleticism of Black men while also attempting to control them. In recent years, Fox News commenter Laura Ingraham commanded NBA basketball star Lebron James to "shut up and dribble" on national television and NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick filed a lawsuit against the NFL claiming he was being Blackballed from joining another NFL team as a result of his political statements on the field, as opposed to his athletic performance. [3] One of Kaepernick's political

[1] See Jason King, "Which Way Is Down? Improvisations on Black Mobility," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory 14*, no.1 (2004), 28; Samantha N. Sheppard, *Sporting Blackness: Race, Embodiment, and Critical Muscle Memory on Screen*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), 9.

[2] Jason, King, "Which Way is Down? Improvisations on Black Mobility," 28.

[3] Emily Sullivan, "Laura Ingraham to Shut Up and Dribble; He Went to the Hoop," *NPR*, (National Public Radio, February 19, 2018), https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/02/19/587097707/laura-ingraham-told-lebron-james-to-shutup-and-dribble-he-went-to-the-hoop; Jack Moore, "At least the NFL Isn't Pretending It's Not Blackballing Colin Kaepernick," *The Guardian*, (The Guardian News and Media, April 13, 2018),

statements was the act of kneeling during the national anthem in 2016 as a protest to the police brutality against Black Americans after the police shootings of Terence Crutcher and Keith Lamont Scott in September of that year. Both James and Kaepernick are interpellated into an ideological apparatus that attempts to reinforce the boundaries in which professional Black athletes are to remain. *Making Moves: Black Performance and the Function of Aesthetics in American Basketball* unearths how these boundaries are transgressed through movement.

The questions that guide my investigation include: What are the consequences of embodied expression through Black male bodies in the United States? How can corporeal movements found in basketball playing (e.g., dribbling, crossovers, dunking) that I link to aesthetic forms serve as theory for identifying the strategies Black bodies engage to combat racial inequality and overcome constraints? What kind of power is present in this kind of embodied expression?

The sport of basketball was invented in 1891 by Canadian-American physical education teacher and chaplain James Naismith in Massachusetts, where the goal of a team was to successfully throw one ball into a peach basket more times than the other team. Though the word "dribble" was not in Naismith's original rules, this method by which a player travels on the court with the ball became a tactic for obstructing an immovable defense soon after— evinced by the YMCA

https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2018/apr/13/kaepernick-reid-Blackballed-nfl-kneeling-anthem.

outlawing the dribble in 1898.[4] The dribble or the act of dribbling is when a player performs a controlled dispossession and repossession of the ball. The player appears to intentionally fumble or drop the ball away from herself in order to escape defender(s) as she travels toward her team's basket. The craftiness of dribbling was further developed through professional basketball leagues that later led to the modern basketball era with the establishment of the Basketball Association of America (BAA) on June 6, 1946, changing its name to the National Basketball Association in 1949. Under the BAA title, the association drafted its first non-white American player for the 1947-1948 season, a male player of Japanese descent named Wataru Misaka from Utah. Shortly after, the NBA drafted its first Black players in 1950: Charles "Chuck" Cooper, Nat "Sweetwater" Clifton, and Earl Lloyd— hailing from Pennsylvania, Arkansas, and Virginia respectively.

Professional basketball players have to demonstrate sustained intensity and audacity in the execution of shots, footwork, defense, crossovers, and combinations in order to overcome opponents while maintaining elegant and oftentimes spectacular mobility. Sport sets the conditions to allow the seemingly disparate qualities of ferocity and gracefulness to emerge collectively in one body. In particular, the crossover—a combination of dribbling, pivots, and short stops moves— unsettles opponents and misdirects their attention. I see crossovers as improvisational incidences that radically reformulate the structure of opposition in an attempt to achieve the end goal: to

[4] FreeDarko High Council, *The Undisputed Guide to Pro Basketball History*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010), 16.

win the match between self and opponent and score for the team (or ensemble). Crossovers are indirect yet risky moves toward power.

Moreover, Fred Moten views Black performance as a performance of resistance, an "ongoing improvisation of a kind of lyricism of the surplus—invagination, rupture, collision, augmentation." [5] He draws this conclusion from his examination of Aunt Hester's scream in Frederick Douglass's 1845 autobiography, the improvisatory jazz of John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, and others, and the theatricality of Adrian Piper's performance art. Within the discourse regarding the ontology of Black performance, Moten asserts in *Stolen Life* that the Black subject is a fugitive desiring to escape racialization, the "proper and proposed."[6] Meanwhile, Soyica Diggs Colbert identifies the relentless and reparative force embedded within Black performance traditions of dramatic literature. She asserts that the reproduction of the African-American theatrical body on stage reclaims historical narratives and relinquishes shame from the psychic realm of Black people caused by the damage of slavery and its aftermath.[7] Lastly, Harvey Young reads immobile Black bodies in his case studies ranging from daguerreotypes of enslaved Black people to Muhammad Ali's protest of his 1967 U.S. army draft as deliberate performances of stillness that repurpose the societal images of Black bodies often obfuscated and misrepresented through history by concerted effort.[8] Moten, Colbert

[5]Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 26.

[6] Fred Moten, *Stolen Life*, (Durham: Duke University Press), 103.

[7] Soyica Diggs Colbert, *The African American Theatrical Body: Reception, Performance, and the Stage*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

and Young assert that Black bodies within the United States repetitively repair, reclaim and refashion their history through performance; my work adds to this discourse regarding movements towards power as well as unconventional modes of evading subjugation and achieving victory.

Basketball is an American-born, multibillion dollar enterprise. Though the sport can initially appear as a trivial matter to take up as a scholarly project in the humanities, underneath this quintessential source of entertainment is a previous history where basketball, social dance and jazz shared the same spaces. Examining sport as performance is undervalued in discourse surrounding aesthetics and the performing arts. Sport is often examined through the disciplines of history, science, psychology and sociology, but what can the methodological lens of performance offer? Further, within African American studies, Black athletes are often written about in biographical fashion, highlighting both their statistical achievements in their sport and their iconic presence within popular culture. My project places the corporeal bodies and orature of Black athletes at the forefront and discovers the ways in which moving, racialized bodies over a span of 100 years participate in history-making and embodied knowledge. As 'sport as performance' is a burgeoning subfield within performance studies, I intend to not only apply performance theory to sport but also apply sport to performance studies by adopting basketball performance as an embodied art that utilizes

[8] Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience*: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010)

improvisation, costumes, an ensemble and stage. In this juxtaposition— also examined by Tara Magdalinski, Shannon L. Walsh, Karl B. Raitz, and Robert E. Reinhart— I do not intend to oversimplify the mechanics and nuances of either arena, but instead hope to highlight ways in which basketball performance and the performing arts intersect.[9]

The Crossover as Improvisational Choreography

Shut Up and Dribble, a documentary series produced by Lebron James and Maverick Carter that premiered on the Showtime network on November 3, 2018, addresses the changing roles of NBA athletes in the current cultural and political environment. Inspired by the divisive statement "Shut up and dribble" uttered to Lebron James by Fox News commentator Laura Ingraham, the creators of the series frame the conversation around the general expectation that professional basketball players are only supposed to play the game of basketball, nothing more. These four words, "Shut up and dribble," serve two purposes. As a performative utterance, it attempts to administer an ideology that Black basketball players possess a diminutive position in a multibillion dollar industry. The players are relegated to what *New York Times* columnist William C. Rhoden identifies as "forty million-dollar slaves on the periphery of true power."[10] Secondly, as

[9] See Tara Magdalinski, *Sport, Technology, and the Body: The Nature of Performance*, (New York: Routledge, 2009); Karl B. Raitz, ed., *The Theater of Sport*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995); Shannon L. Walsh, ed., *Sporting Performances: Politics in Play*, (New York: Routledge, 2020); Robert E. Reinhart, *Players All: Performances in Contemporary Sport*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); Peter Kuling, ed., Theatre and Sports [special issue], *Canadian Theatre Review 169* (Winter 2017).

[10] William C. Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall and Redemption of the Black Athlete*, (New York: Random House, 2006).

the title of the series, viewers are explicitly challenged to engage the series as more than entertainment. They are to become informed of the affective consequences of these four words, the structure of power involved in professional American basketball, and ways players are displaying resistance. The statement conflates basketball prowess and silence as congruent, insinuating that dribbling is inherently apolitical or the one who dribbles as a profession should not have or act on his opinion. This implication certainly motivates my investigation of the potential that sport techniques combined into patterns of movement possess as political acts for racialized individuals.

Cultural historian Johan Huizinga influentially delineated the concept of play as "a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious,' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it."[11] Yet, as a sector of culture and commerce, the lucrative and highly elite world of professional sports fails to follow Huizinga's notion of play. Instead, it explicitly invokes, as former sports journalist William C. Rhoden and cultural theorist Nicole R. Fleetwood suggests, the legacies and practices of chattel slavery. "From the ritual of the draft by which many athletes enter professional team sports to the periodic trade and the declining value of the aging body, the fundamental roots of racial capital are interwoven into the seemingly

[11] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1949), 13.

meritocratic and voluntary markets of athletics," Fleetwood writes. [12] My dissertation examines how the dribbling of racialized athletes counteracts the legacies of slavery intertwined with the NBA draft. Dribbling can extend beyond mere diversion and become a serious endeavor that depicts a player's intense personal fight to move across the court or circulate space without restraint.

Moreover, I analyze how Black performance is imagined in and through American basketball spaces. In doing so, I do not aim to essentialize basketball performance as performance of blackness. Instead, I explore the complicated relationship between the Black body as both flesh-and-blood and as an abstraction within a basketball space. In reference to space, I draw from Katherine McKittrick's *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartography of Struggle* to conceptualize space as the physical and imaginative interactions between manifestations of white domination and the geographies of Black people, which include their knowledges, negotiations, and experiences.[13] The abstracted Black body refers to Harvey Young's notion of the Black body as a site of blackness "mapped upon and internalized within Black people" based on popular connotations of blackness. He asserts that this second body, as an "abstracted and imagined figure, shadows or doubles the real one."[14] I am interested in

[12] Nicole R. Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 81.

[13] Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartography of Struggle*, (Minneapolis: University Minnesota Press, 2006), x.

[14] Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience*: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 7.

how players use their bodies to revolutionize the modern game of professional basketball and self-determine during the perpetual time of civil unrest from the 1920s to present day. Saidiya Hartman and Fred Moten situate blackness in a history of subjection where the one who is subjected (the object or commodity) performs resistance. Both Hartman and Moten, for example, examine the scene of Aunt Hester's beating depicted by Frederick Douglass in his 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* from different angles. As Hartman psychoanalyzes Douglass's depiction of the "terrible spectacle" that introduced him to the violence inherent in making a slave in nineteenth century America and investigates the conditions of the primal scene, Moten investigates the speech of Douglass's recitations of Aunt Hester's beatings and the transference of this animative material heritage in Black performance. He asserts, "…the emergence from political, economic and sexual objection of the radical materiality and syntax that animates Black performances indicates freedom drive that is expressed always and everywhere through their graphic (re)production." [15] Within the reproduction of Aunt Hester's scene of subjection, Aunt Hester's scream elicits an impulse that I link to the liberatory possibilities apparent in basketball contests throughout history in which Black athletes improvise in reaction to the constraints imposed upon them. Black performance, blackness and Black history are inextricably linked by freedom impulse—contingent on

[15] Fred Moten, *In the Break*, 7.

the aesthetic, political, sexual and racial forces that animate objects and bodies.

The performances of crossovers in predominately white spaces orient the player towards a kinetic knowledge of freedom in a control-based system.[16] As André Lepecki's astute application of Hannah Arendt's meditations on politics to the figure of a dancer offers: to move freely is to move politically.[17] In other words, I am invested in the choreopolitics of basketball playing that exhibits players who "invent, activate, seek, or experiment with a movement whose only sense (meaning and direction) is the experimental exercise of freedom."[18] Deceptive ball tactics generated in crossovers showcase a spectacle of irrepressibility within a largely televised, controlled basketball arena under constant surveillance by stakeholders, sportswriters, and fans.

Particularly, I identify the crossover performed by specific male basketball players as a Black imperative through its aesthetic structures akin to African American aesthetic structures found in dance and jazz music. I find the crossover performed by Black bodies

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[16] Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations 1972-1990*, Trans. Martin Joughin, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995). Deleuze articulates that in a "control-based system, nothing is left alone for long." His premonition is evinced in the 21st century by the appearance of surveillance cameras in major cities around the world as well as personal computers and cell phones having the capability to track movement when connected to internet. These hegemonic impositions as well as others via technology place at risk people's ability to circulate space in their time and at their own volition. Surveillance, discriminatory data sharing and digital scrutiny affect most frequently oppressed and exploited populations and privilege whiteness. See Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); Ruha Benjamin, *Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

[17] André Lepecki, "Choreopolice and Choreopolitics: or, the task of the dancer," *TDR (The Drama Review)* 57: No. 4 (2013): 14.

[18] André Lepecki," Choreopolice and Choreopolitics," 20.

caught up in what Paul Taylor calls a "race-aesthetic nexus," where "Racial formations are aesthetic phenomena and aesthetic practices are racialized structures."[19] Though similarities between jazz and basketball have been mentioned occasionally in media and by basketball players who happen to also be jazz aficionados, my project critically engages the aesthetic and political dimensions of Black life rooted in this association. Legendary American retired professional basketball player Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, for example, articulates in his autobiography, "There can be no doubt that Jazz has made me a better person than I would have been without it. The music inspires my passion to participate fully and richly in life…But jazz has also made me a better basketball player".[20] Jazz and basketball both rely on individuals within an ensemble to play within and outside of given standards, exciting the audience with the unexpected rhythmic changes and combinations. Vocabulary such as fast-breaks and original takes are used in both activities to illustrate opportunities for the emergence of singularity within totality. At the heart of their kinship is: improvisation.

Fred Moten's *In the Break* looks at the relationship between Black performance and the Black radical tradition. For Moten, the genealogy of Black performance in the United States is a performance of resistance, an "ongoing improvisation of a kind of lyricism of the

[19] Taylor, Paul C., *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics*, (Malden: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 21.

[20] Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, O*n the Shoulders of Giants: My Journey Through the Harlem Renaissance*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 253.

surplus—invagination, rupture, collision, augmentation."[21] Inspired by Amiri Baraka's essay about white Jazz musician Burton Greene in which Baraka argues that Jazz is exclusively an African American art form and relies on the presence of aesthetic and political methods that are singularly Black, Moten develops theory around various acoustic/sonic case studies that further investigate Baraka's claim. Moten surmises at the end of his intellectual journey that the underlying theme of the Black performances he explored is improvisation.

In focusing on the improvisatory jazz of Cecil Taylor, John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman and others, Fred Moten presents a ground-breaking argument regarding the aesthetics of Black radical tradition. His exploration of avant-garde Jazz musician Cecil Taylor's 1987 album *Chinampas* provides a particular framework from which to understand one person's improvisational methods within a structure greater. In Moten's case, this structure is song form. Moten argues that the placement of event within narrative is "The Event of the event, the rupture or caesura of the event that occurs within a paradoxical duration or contextualization or montagic-dialectical temporal mapping of the event."[22] It is within his exploration of Taylor's spoken word improvisation in and outside the structure from which Moten emerges with his theory, an improvisation of singularity. Taylor's phonic and acoustic utterances self-rupture singularity to produce something new, refusing to return to the source. About Taylor's work, he contends:

[21]Fred Moten, *In the Break*, 26.

[22]Fred Moten, *In the Break*, 54.

> Taylor is working through a metaphysics of structure, working through an assumption that equates the essence or structurality of structure with a center. What I am interested in in Taylor is precisely the refusal to attempt a return to the source: one that is not, on the one hand, forgetful of what is lost or of the fact of loss; one that is forgetive, on the other hand, in the Falstaffian sense of the word—nimble and full of fiery and delectable shapes, improvisatory and incantatory when what is structured in the mind is given over to the mouth, the birth, as (that which is, finally, way more even than) excellent wit.[23]

Moten identifies Taylor's ability to reconfigure himself with the boundaries of structure, of musical rules. Taylor's essence emerges from limitation and innovates something of "excellent wit" with his mouth. In basketball performance, the crossover is not simply dribbling the ball. It requires an opposing force, thus uses subversive tactics to "shake" the opponent and affect the audience's gaze. The act is rehearsed yet ephemeral and improvisational, making it a rich phenomenon of inquiry. Adding to Moten who builds on Derrida, I am interested in the "fiery and delectable shapes" particular basketball players create with their hands and feet that generates a rupture or break within the structure of a basketball game as well as the racism they face off the court.

A professional basketball player must be aware of her own actions in relation to those of her teammates. In other words, five players on a court must work as an ensemble to properly execute what has been practiced. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar states:

[23] Fred Moten, *In the Break*, 55.

> When you play basketball, everything is timing, just as with a song. You must be able to instantly react to the choices your teammates make. You must be able to coordinate your actions with your teammates' and you must understand when you need to take over the action—when to solo—and when to back off. The timing of group activity is a major part of basketball, as it is with jazz. A team of basketball soloists, without the structure of a common goal may get TV endorsements for pimple cream, but it doesn't win championships.
>
> Many athletes listen to music while they train, whether its jogging, lifting weights or just stretching. The type of music depends upon what motivates the individual. For me, jazz not only motivated me, but also helped me perfect my footwork on the court. Unlike some other types of music, jazz has a unique combination of being explosive yet controlled, measured yet unpredictable. The exact virtues necessary for effective footwork while in high school. Before every Saturday practice, I would listen to Sonny Rollins for a little motivation. Then I'd hit the gym floor with his music in my head and in my feet.[24]

Mediations on embodiment and the geography of movement are central to my project. The basketball court becomes the stage, a theatrical space and cultural site. If you were you to witness crossovers by some of the most popular players in NBA history, you would see the agility and deception utilized by players to break away from their respective opponents within a limited time frame and tight space. Within a flash, the player with the ball observes how the opponent intends to steal the ball then will reveal and conceal the ball through nimble footwork. The offensive player and the defensive player dance in a duet fashion while staying within the rules of the game. These players

[24] Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, O*n the Shoulders of Giants*, 253.

express both their basketball skill and artistic ingenuity. I locate the ontology of the crossover primarily using Fred Moten's scholarship within *In the Break* where he identifies specific sonic events as encounters and invocations of the "knowledge of freedom." I see the crossover, a set of improvised movements, as a break event. It is unexpected and presents a flash of seemingly contradictory rhythmic ideas. Moten identifies phonic substances in his work that harbor a "knowledge of freedom in the absence of what we would recognize as the experience of freedom." Whereas Moten looks at both the voice and unidentifiable utterances as phonic substances that also resonate in photograph, I look at the corporeal body through space and unearth the ways a knowledge of freedom is enacted within dribbling combinations and gestures performed on the basketball court and reproduced in film and media campaigns.

The Politics of Blackness in Media and Popular Culture

Popular images of African Americans portrayed in vaudeville and minstrel shows circulated the twentieth century. The cliché themes of these plays were an exaggerated form, a reflection of the generally accepted attitudes of white America towards Black life. For the most part, they presented a comic and derisive caricature of an entire people. What was most striking about the negro stereotype as it was called was the way an image was portrayed in the reverse of what Americans considered to deserve respect and emulation. For example, a comic strip in the mid-July 1935 issue of the Black newspaper, *The Pittsburg Courier*, pointed out that a man with accentuated lips fell

asleep in the sun because he was too lazy to walk over to a tree to get under the shade.[25] Although these comics could be interpreted as Blacks giving into the stereotypes placed on them by whites at first glance, an equally valid interpretation of these cartoons is that they showcased a complicated discourse of blackness deeply engrained in the fabric of the Jim Crow era. Through racial humor, the cartoons were riffing upon the pervasive representations that surround Blacks in order to desensitize or weakening the sting of derogatory images fashioned out of racism, a strategy that Black comedians would greatly hone and profit from decades later.[26]

Within the twenty-first century, several recent moments and social narratives reify the sentiments behind the aforementioned documentary "Shut Up and Dribble" and underpin the interventions I make in my project. Stephen Curry, for instance, public refusal to go to the White House provokes President Donald Trump to publicly rescind the invitation to the Golden State Warriors in 2017 and to argue with Lebron James who supported Curry's decision over social media.[27]

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[25] Holloway, "Lazy Bones, Sleeping in the Sun--," *The Pittsburg Courier*, July 20, 1935, A3, ProQuest.

[26] *See* Robin R. Means Coleman, *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor*, (New York: Routledge, 2012). Her book examines the meanings African American viewers bring and take away from situational comedy programs that star Black actors and actresses. She presents controversial responses that illuminate the intricacy surrounding Black sitcoms that offers both negative and positive portrayals that progresses and sets back Black identity; *See also* See Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying: The Underground Tradition of African American Humor That Transformed American Culture*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995)and Donald Bogle, *Primetime Blues: African Americans on Network Television*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002).

[27] Tim Bontemps, "Lebron James, Steph Curry and Kevin Durant Agree: We Don't Want White House Invite," *The Washington Post*, (The Washington Post Company, June 5, 2018), https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/lebron-james-kevin-durant-and-steph-curry-agree-teams-dont-want-white-house-invite/2018/06/05/c7ddfd8c-68dc-11e8-9e38-24e693b38637_story.html?noredirect=on.

Curry's actions and Trump's counteractions evince the influence that extends beyond the sport into the realm of politics. President Trump also did not invite the 2017 WNBA champions, the Minnesota Lynx, to the White House. Even in the National Football League, football players incurred criticism from President Trump and penalization for refusing to stand during the national anthem in protest of police treatment of African Americans.[28] From January 1 to August 1 of 2020, police officers have murdered 164 Black men and women; many of their cases remain under investigation.[29] The Black Lives Matter movement has gained momentum and international attention in exposing the corrupt police system within the United States following the murder of George Floyd at the hands of police officers in May 2020. I situate my research within the perpetual dismissal of Black life and am motivated by the current visuality employed in popular entertainment regarding police brutality, racism, and psychological trauma. Recent popular entertainment addresses the vendetta against Black life in thriller films like *Get Out* (2017) and *The Hate U Give* (2018), both putting imagery to the physical and psychological trauma Black people incur from being oppressed within American society. [30] In *Get Out*, the white

[28] Associated Press, "NFL Anthem Dispute: NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell Fires Back at Trump," *NBC News*, (NBC Universal, September 23, 2017), https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/nfl-anthem-dispute-trump-says-protesting-players-should-be-fired-n804086.

[29] Li Cohen, "Police in the U.S. Killed 164 Black People in the First 8 Months of 2020. These Are Their Names. (Part I: January-April)," CBS News (CBS Interactive, September 10, 2020), https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/Black-people-killed-by-police-in-the-u-s-in-2020/.

[30] *See* Kohn, Eric, "Jordan Peel Challenges Golden Globes Classifying 'Get Out' As a Comedy: 'What Are You Laughing At?' Indiewire, (Penske Media Corporation, November 17, 2017), https://www.indiewire.com/2017/11/jordan-peele-response-get-out-golden-globes-comedy-1201897841/.

antagonists admire the physicality of the Black male protagonist and feel they could make the perfect specimen by combining their intellect and the Black character's body to make a supreme being. In *The Hate U Give*, the female protagonist witnesses the fatal shooting of her Black male best friend by a police officer. My dissertation is informed by these contemporary activist/social progress storylines, among others, and their didactic implications.

Blackness in the American context functions as an index (indicator, sign or measure) of racial relations within the United States based on intersections of discourse surrounding race, class and gender. As an embodied quality, blackness is a personal conceptualization by African Americans tied to an economic and social identity. Blackness has the potential to inspire agency in the face of limitations when one originates selfhood outside of hegemonic representations. Blackness as a disembodied quality, moreover, is abstracted and articulated through the American public's imagination generated by repetitive consumption of media and entertainment that falsely represents or misrecognizes actual Black individuals.

I now turn to a popular cinematic text, Jordan Peele's thriller film Get Out (2017), to define blackness in order to underscore the link between blackness and athletic performance in the contemporary, public imagination. A close reading of the premise and party scene within the film exemplifies the dynamic of blackness. A young Black man goes to meet the parents of his girlfriend, a white young woman, and finds himself in an unexpected and potentially fatal conundrum. He eventually learns that his girlfriend and her parents are in the

business of harvesting Black bodies to be sold to wealthy, predominantly white people whose bodies are either physically declining or disabled. In their basement, the father performs neurosurgery by transplanting the white brain into a Black body to achieve what they perceive as a "supreme being." The family business is based on commonly held stereotypes of Black bodies being physically superior and more skilled in mechanical arenas.[31] For this white family and their friends, they perceive blackness in a disembodied form in which they have constructed a fictitious representation of the Black protagonist that they sell to their white patrons during a silent auction unbeknownst initially to the protagonist. In the party scene in the backyard of the parent's house where upon the protagonist entering into the backyard, an older male of Asian descent asks, "Do you believe being African American to be an advantage or disadvantage." Evidently uncomfortable by the various eyes staring at him, the protagonist defers to a young Black gentleman looking to be in his twenties walking past him dressed in a tan blazer with a beige polo underneath. The male answers, "The Black experience for me has been, for the most part, very good. Although I find it difficult to go into detail as I hadn't had much desire to leave the house lately [he looks into the eyes of his middle-aged white female companion]."[32] Following his commentary, the protagonist attempts to discretely take

[31] See Eric Lott, Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class, 20th. Edition, (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2013) for a detailed study on the history of white Americans capitalizing on Black culture while simultaneously repressing it.

[32] *Get Out*, written/directed by Jordan Peele, (Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 2017), HBO.

a photo of this man with his phone for further investigation. When the photo is snapped (indicated by the clicking sound), the audience sees a close-up of the Black male in the blazer's face. His eyes are glazed over, and he appears to be in a momentary trance followed by blood dripping out of one of his nostrils and reverting to a panic. Here, the audience begins to see the problem of race unfold in a visceral way. The once calm and docile individual suddenly appears frightened and disoriented, as if he had momentarily been snapped out of a trance.

What emerges is a distinction between an internal blackness and a projected one, an embodied one as in the case of the protagonist who feels uncomfortable by the fetishization of his physical prowess and a disembodied one as in the case of the protagonist that he has just conversed with. The male in the blazer has no recollection or details of a Black experience because his Black self has been subsumed by the white brain transplanted into this individual's body. The protagonist begins to learn as the story unfolds just how dispensable his Black selfhood is to these wealthy, white folks who commodify Black bodies. The girlfriend, the audience and the protagonist later discover, has a history of luring love interests to her home under the guise of a romantic relationship and profits off of their pain by killing the soul of the individual and using their body as a material good to be exchanged. *Get Out* reminds the audience that W.E. B Du Bois's prophecy regarding the problem of the color-line grounded in a keen analysis and observation of the nation's acceleration toward making material

self-interest the priority of human existence still remains relevant today.[33]

The American public imagination fixates on certain images, particularly ones of Black athletes; these public images construct a relationship between race, representation and nation. Photo conceptualist artist Hank Willis Thomas, for instance, uses photography, film, sculpture and other media to comment on the racism and exploitation involved in American professional sports. Particularly, he addresses the ways stereotypes of race and gender are created and promoted through advertising and other forms of popular media. Some of his photos include: A Black man's chest scarred with Nike's famous "swoosh" logo, a basketball player dunking through a noose, and an Absolut Vodka bottle that resembles a slave ship. With Thomas' imagery, he puts into play ideas of not only race, but also cultural identity, ownership and commerce. Furthermore, I retain Thomas's imagery in thinking about NBA players' engagement with American media. I wonder how these cultural actors' performance on screen have political potential. Are there novel ways of engaging politically as an athlete? What are the implications of reading culture as politics?

Among the works of Fred Moten, Saidiya Hartman, Samantha Sheppard aforementioned, Nicole Fleetwood's *Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination*, Mark Anthony Neal's *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities,* Richard Iton's book *In Search of the Black*

[33] Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Race in the 21st Century*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 3; W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 13.

Fantastic: Politics & Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era and Philosopher Paul C. Taylor's *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Aesthetics* facilitate my thinking around the interplay of culture and poltics. The first two texts help me think more in-depth about the visibility and invisibility of individuals in popular culture through the construction and dissemination of still and moving images. The latter two texts help me further think about the relationship between culture (or aesthetics) and politics. In *Racial Icons*, Nicole Fleetwood examines the American public's engagement with images of political, social and cultural figures that saturate American media. Some of these individuals discussed include Trayvon Martin, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Diana Ross, Paul Robeson, Serena Williams and Lebron James. She draws on scholarship on art, race and visual culture to illustrate the ways in which photography can shape our understanding of race relations on a national scale. *Looking for Leroy*, on the other hand, examines Black male bodies that are legible to the American public and ones that are not. He argues that the 'legible' Black male body is often thought to be criminal or in need of policing and the illegible Black male body invokes some kind of queerness, a "radical rescripting of the accepted performances of a heteronormative Black masculinity."[34] Neal text underscores the performance and performativity of Black masculinities that will be critical to my investment in Black male athletes.

[34] Mark Anthony Neal, *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Bodies*, (New York and London: New York University Press, 2013), 4.

Political theorist Richard Iton's book *In Search of the Black Fantastic* troubles the narrow scope of political vision and thinking by offering a textured analysis of Black popular culture examples ranging from stand-up comedy to Rastafarianism that disrupt and/or deviate from modern articulations of the political. While political scientists consider politics as encompassing institutions of the state, cultural theorists cast a much wider net in their considerations of what is political. Through his juxtaposition of political and cultural events, Iton dynamically intervenes within this dialectic to unearth new ways of thinking about the role of Black expressive culture and alternative identifications. His work offers me a rich methodological approach in discussing race, democracy and popular culture.

Approaching the debate on aesthetics from another angle, Paul C. Taylor provides in *Black is Beautiful* an extensive philosophical treatment of the aesthetic dimensions of Black life. Inspired by scholars like Cornel West, Sylvia Wynter and Fred Moten who think philosophically about Black aesthetics, Taylor addresses the following questions: "First, to paraphrase cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall: What is the 'Black' in 'Black aesthetics'? Second, in the same spirit: what is the 'aesthetic' in 'Black aesthetics'? Third: what good is a philosophy of Black aesthetics? Fourth: why discuss any of these in terms of assembly?"[35] His juxtaposition of philosophical aesthetics and Black cultural theory as an entire book project offers

[35] Paul C. Taylor, *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Aesthetics*, (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 3.

a comprehensive articulation of Black aesthetics that is very useful to my endeavor to identify and articulate the Black aesthetics present in basketball performance. All four texts provide a solid foundation within popular culture and Black aesthetics, what is left to be explicated is how the intersection of Black bodies engaging in both jazz and sport contributes to a political vision.

In Chapter 1, I interpret the *Uncle Drew* productions collectively as myth performance, with an emphasis on bodily choreographies through the cinematic medium. Through African Diasporic drama and dance performances, literary scholar Dannabang Kuwabonga succinctly offers a definition of myth performance that I extend to my analysis of Uncle Drew's performances on screen. Myth performance encompasses praxis that invoke and engage in a recuperative historicity in order to aid Africans and descendants of African Diasporas in "confronting the contradictory presents and uncertainties about their own cultural and historical location and their full participation in a Europhonic dominated historiography of the Americas."[36] Through creative forces, Uncle Drew offers an interpretation that conveys how black basketball players have secured a collective, cultural future. The web-based series and film place multiple generations of Black basketball players in the same cinematic space who replicate each other's moves and construct an embodied history through spectacular movement. The septuagenarian and other Black players, I argue, "break ankles" as a

[36] Dannabang Kuwabong, "Introduction: Ritual Journeys, Dancing Histories, Enacting Bodies, and Spirits," in *Myth Performance in the African Diasporas: Ritual, Theatre, and Dance*, eds. Benita Brown, Dannabang Kuwabong, and Christopher Olsen, (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc, 2014),1-2.

ritual of self-reliance and reclamation of the prestige produced by their labor. Through cunning footwork and improvisation influenced by jazz aesthetics, Uncle Drew embodies histories inspired by real Black male athletes as a mode of resistance to Black male vilification in the United States. Through his folklore, he recreates U.S. American cultural in order to celebrate and perpetuate Black male virtuosity.

Chapter 2 analyzes the *Separate and Equal* 2018 theatrical production written and directed by Seth Pantich. The (basketball) play within the (theatrical) play reveals that the ephemeral reality of performance has a lasting effect on the social lives of the Black and white boys in 1950s Jim Crow Alabama thereafter. The boys learn that they both seem to struggle with the embodiment of their racial identity, not really sure how it should materialize. Through their dialogue of (mis)steps, pivots and grand leaps undergirded by the sound design of blues and jazz melodies and minimal staging, the teens engage the labor of racism while playing a forbidden game of basketball. With no actual ball in sight, the invisible thing scripts the dramatic performance and serves as an inventive theatrical strategy to accentuate the labor of dancing bodies and racial performance. Additionally, the presentation of the elderly character called Uncle who I relate to Uncle Drew strategically deceives the white authorities and recasts himself as a trickster figure that dissembles white supremacy. Together, both uncles delineate a legacy of Black elders invested in the uplift and empowerment of those who come after them.

Considering that Harlem is a fertile representational space for Black artistic and athletic innovation, Chapter 3 explores the all-Black New York Renaissance Professional Basketball Team also known as the Rens. The team played basketball on the floor of Harlem's Renaissance Ballroom during the 1920s and 1930s and developed within the Black social and cultural "Harlem Renaissance." The team won the first national professional basketball tournament in 1939, declaring to the United States that they were no longer America's 'Colored' Champions but instead America's Champions. I assert that the team's place of origin in Harlem and in a ballroom as well as their proximity to the sophisticated and experimental nature of the jazz tradition inspired their style of play and consecutive victories. As coach and manager, Robert "Bob" Douglas became known as "The Father of Black Professional Basketball." [37] He and the Rens represented the sensibilities of Harlem, constructions created for and by Black people for the renewal of their spirit and their social advancement.

By presenting the chapters in reverse chronological order, I illustrate how the contemporary manifestations of Black male virtuosity are a part of a creative legacy that exploded in Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s and continued into the twenty-first century. As an assemblage, each chapter examines the performance of key male figures playing basketball at particular moments in time. I examine the ways in which the development of the sport and rise of basketball's popularity as a major form of entertainment correlates to the

[37] The Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame: Robert Douglas, Accessed November 13, 2020, https://www.hoophall.com/hall-of-famers/robert-douglas/.

intellectual, cultural and political movements of Black Americans towards freedom, citizenship, and racial justice. My hope is that these chapters identify and nuance the ways resistance is performed and elucidate the possibilities and extent to which Black male virtuosity harnesses recuperative power for the players.

Chapter 1

Living up to Legends and the Lessons of Uncle Drew

Named Rookie of the Year at age nineteen after being selected by the Cleveland Cavaliers with the first overall pick in the 2011 NBA draft, Kyrie Irving is believed by many basketball analysts to be one of the best ball handlers in NBA history. Outside of his extraordinary exhibitions on the court as a point guard, several endorsement deals with companies like Nike and Pepsi have contributed to his increasing fame. Beginning a year after being drafted into the NBA, Irving created and played the role of a legendary athlete in his seventies with incomparable ball handling skills named Uncle Drew for Pepsi internet shorts that went viral. For Irving's early professional career, the fabrication of Uncle Drew helped the young NBA star secure recognition typically reserved for senior players.

The 2018 eponymous film and the 2012 web-based series *Uncle Drew* are marketed as sports comedy and involves a cast of current and former professional basketball players who assume roles of geriatric characters via makeup and prosthetics. Uncle Drew endeavors to get his old team back together. However, it is unclear in the web series the primary purpose of gathering all his old teammates. Within the film though, the storyline is that Drew (played by Kyrie Irving) gets his original team from the Rucker Park 1968 tournament back together to play in the present-day Rucker Tournament in Harlem. Uncle Drew's quest facilitates the reconciliation between him and his teammate Big Fella (played by Retired NBA player Shaquille O'Neal), motivates his teammate Boots to overcome his depression and leave the nursing home,

and encourages the young basketball coach Dax to believe in his coaching ability despite past failures and recent ridicule from another coach called Mookie who humiliated him on the basketball court several years ago when they were both boys in secondary school. The septuagenarian Uncle Drew is now an enduring part of Irving's embodied repertoire. Recording the song "Ridiculous" for the soundtrack of the film, Irving recasts himself as an artist with an affinity for music and comedy. During his promotion of the film, he stated, "My appreciation for film and actors has been [building] since I was a kid… I used to sing *Rent* songs all around my house and listen to it before games…I actually played Corbin Bleu's part [in *High School Musical* during senior year of high school] – I was…trying to break free of the mold of just being an athlete.[38] As a product of artistic and commercial interests, Kyrie Irving as Uncle Drew humorously animates basic human desires, especially of elite athletes, to mature without being completely stymied by an aging body, to perpetuate moments of triumph, and to exemplify a continuously perceived invincibility amid opposition.

Uncle Drew "schools young bloods" on what is of paramount importance in a relationship with the sport of basketball: the love of the game, which is greater than any schism among the teammates or the opponents. He asserts that love for the game is cultivated by repeatedly practicing the sport's fundamental skills no matter how

[38] Kelley L. Carter, "Kyrie Irving Talks Missing the Easter Conference Finals, Staying in Boston and his New Movie 'Uncle Drew,'" The Undefeated (ESPN, June 19,2018), https://theundefeated.com/features/kyrie-irving-uncle-drew-nba-playoffs-celtics-next-season/.

skilled one thinks he is. This discipline is what, in Uncle Drew's opinion, separates the amateurs from the real ballers. Irving's inspiration for Uncle Drew came from watching and speaking with his father Drederick Irving and older generation athletes who continue to possess a deep passion for playing the sport despite changes to their bodies as a result of increasing age.[39] Furthermore, Uncle Drew activates a shared culture of unclehood inspired by male elders that combines a love for the game with a responsibility to teach young Black males how to possess mastery of their mind and body during adversity. An uncle with the same commitment will appear in the next chapter, further delineating a legacy of Black men invested in the uplift and empowerment of those who come after them.

A Powerade commercial launched during 2018 March Madness exemplifies one method of transferring knowledge from the older to the younger generations as part of a long-established tradition of Black male virtuosity. Although fake like the *Uncle Drew* productions, its visual storytelling uncovers the embodied cultural memory encoded in extraordinary basketball players. During the commercial, A gray-haired Black man behind the counter of a convenience store speaks to a Black young person as he rings up a Powerade bottle. The older man utters, "Man if I'd had this kind of power back in my day, my crossover would have been something else. I'd broke everybody's ankles."[40] The scene

[39] Kelley L. Carter, "Kyrie Irving Talks Missing the Easter Conference Finals, Staying in Boston and his New Movie 'Uncle Drew.'" Drederick Irving was Boston University's all-time leading scorer (1984-1988) and played for the Bulleen Boomers of the South East Australian Basketball League (SEABL) from 1992-1994.

[40] Powerade, "Breaking Ankles," (Portland: Wieden and Kennedy, 2018), https://www.ispot.tv/ad/w3tY/powerade-back-in-my-day.

cuts to a visual representation of the cashier's rumination, which displays the older man presumably in his twenties crossing over his opponent during a basketball game with a large audience. The player's ball handling skills are so swift and decisive that the opponent falls on the ground. In other words, the player "breaks the ankles" of his opponent. After the opponent falls, a succession of athletes and bystanders fall down on the court. The viewer then sees a scene of a couple watching the crossover incident on the television in their living room two weeks later. They too topple over like the previous spectators. The crossover incident creates a synergy among players and spectators across time and space, further highlighting the significance of Black men's movement and orature to the continued excitement and high caliber playing achieved across generations. By seeing the basketball game from the perspective of the twenty-something athlete and witnessing the awe and kinesthetic responses of the spectators, the commercial conditions the viewer to see and place value on this man's exceptional skill not bound by time or space. Additionally, the cashier sharing with the teenager at his register how he would have unapologetically dominated his opponents on the basketball court with the "power" indirectly makes the young person aware of the "power" he possesses and provides him with a directive to embody that knowledge by displaying exceptional prowess in the game.

The *Uncle Drew* web series, in particular, conveys the importance of basketball legends and the wisdom they still possess to teach the "young bloods" the art of the game. Divided into five five-seven minute episodes called chapters, Uncle Drew communicates his

perspective on the meaning of basketball in each segment that is shot during a basketball game on an outdoor court in a different city of the United States. This kind of knowledge is transferred through shared experience of playing basketball with ballers of different neighborhoods. Uncle Drew's exchange with former NBA player and coach Bill Russell at the beginning of the "Chapter 2" episode of the web series is a prime example of what elder basketball players offer younger ones. Russell says to Uncle Drew, "This game is about feel. I remember in my best, there'd be nights when the whole world would slow down and get very quiet. I could hear the ball bounce, and nothing existed outside of this game…Drew, you're a real baller. You gotta get out there and put your team back together again. Go find them."[41] The two men shake hands before Uncle Drew departs. Russell's remark emphasizes the emotion or soul embedded in bouncing a basketball, and how the act of playing basketball is intimately linked to his everyday performance in the world. In *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner*, Geneva Smitherman articulates the soul as "the essence of life, feeling, passion, emotional depth—all of which are believed to be derived from struggle, suffering, and having participated in the Black experience."[42] Known for revolutionizing modern basketball with his new defensive concepts that were much more aggressive and rigorous, Bill Russell won eleven championship titles

[41] *Uncle Drew*, "Chapter 2 | Pepsi Max| Basketball," directed/written/performed by Kyrie Irving, published October 30, 2012 on YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MLyvkBifQ3w.

[42] Geneva Smitherman, *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), 211.

during his thirteen year NBA career (1956-1969) as a player for the Boston Celtics and two championship titles as the first Black NBA coach. Among other elite Black athletes of the Civil Rights era, he was active in the Black Power movement; endorsed Muhammad Ali's refusal to be drafted to the Vietnam War in 1967; and participated in the Negro Industrial and Economic Union, a program established by Football legend Jim Brown to stimulate capital investment in Black-owned businesses.[43] Uncle Drew's friendship with Bill Russell and Bill Russell's endorsement of him as a real baller further contextualizes Uncle Drew within a historical context and recasts Drew as semi-fictional. Though his basketball feats are mythologized, he is not lacking historical perspective or context as a character played by a real, famous player speaking with the real Russel, a very legendary player.

As both septuagenarians, though one real and one fake, sit side by side on the porch in front of a house over drinks, they share an experiential overlap indicated by their final handshake regarding their passion and dedication to the game of basketball and striving for excellence. Harvey Young's notion of critical memory provides specificity to collective memory with regards to the Black body throughout history being transformed into spectacle and specimen. Young acknowledges that critical memory facilitates the realization of related histories of being and becoming amongst Black people, which

[43] Jamiles Lartey, "The 'Ali Summit': a turning point in sports' fight against injustice," The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, October 23, 2017), https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2017/oct/23/colin-kaepernick-muhammad-ali-summit-sports-activism.

create "experiential overlap."[44] This interaction reifies Drew's symbolic significance to the embodied histories of basketball. By juxtaposing his social and historical position as a Black man in the United States to that of Bill Russell, he is instated as the griot of basketball responsible for passing the traditions of Black champions to the next generation through cunning footwork, improvisation, and passion for the game of basketball.

The very insertion of Uncle Drew into American history reveals an initial void. Certainly, Black men appear in historical, national narrative, but they are also defined and restricted by it. I am reminded of Suzan-Lori Park's *The America Play* in which the symbolism of 'The Great Hole of History' stresses the exclusion of Black voices and experiences from the canon of American history. The protagonist, the Foundling Father, identifies his experience of the hole. He participates in the creation of U.S. American cultural memory yet feels alienated from it. As temporal events proceed, he remains to spectate. He describes:

> FOUNDLING FATHER: The Lesser Known had a favorite hole. A chasm, really. Not a hole he had digged but one he visited […] A Big Hole. A theme park. With historical parades. The size of the hole itself was enough to impress any digger but it was the Historicity of the place the order and beauty of the pageants which marched by them the Greats on parade in front of them. [45]

[44] Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience*: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 7.

[45] Suzan-Lori Parks, *The America Play and Other Works*, (New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 1995): 162.

Throughout her works, Parks uses theatrical representation to recover the echoes of erased Black voices from the past. Kyrie Irving becoming Uncle Drew and creating a relationship with the real Bill Russell attempts a similar feat. Cinematic representation becomes a tool from which fiction uncovers a truth about reality. Through Uncle Drew, Irving foregrounds and embodies a mythological cultural memory by surrogating various histories of Black male basketball players.

Furthermore, the national public attaches valorizing and denigrating meaning to the circulating images of key Black political, social, and cultural figures, their iconicity often generated by journalists and social media commenters who perpetuate racial fantasies. Uncle Drew works towards and against the perceptions of the American public of Black elite athletes. On one hand, the younger Uncle Drew fulfills the stereotype of the inner city Black kid who rises to celebrity status as a result of others witnessing his skills on the basketball court. Despite Uncle Drew never playing in the National Basketball Association, he is rightfully recognized for his achievements in the 1960s by his body's silhouette supposedly being the logo (or signifier) of the Association. Uncle Drew also shares a cultural memory of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, which I will return to later. On the other hand, in his older years Uncle Drew exceeds everyone's expectations of a geriatric person and remains relevant by making it his responsibility to inform and encourage young players to prioritize passion and the fundamentals of basketball over self-interest, material gain and celebrity status. His display of what he identifies as a real baller would be an example even the young

Michael Jordan and young Kobe Bryant would have admired and tried to emulate. By introducing a fictious character as a key cultural figure into the national imagination that reveres sports, Irving and his creative team create an opportunity to re-narrativize history that centers the resiliency of Black male body across generations. In doing so, the story and visual production of Uncle Drew, as seen in the 2012 web-based episodes and the film, expose persistent notions of the national public about age, race, and gender. As a septuagenarian, Uncle Drew unapologetically brings forth an infrequent narrative of Black masculinity within media representations distinguished by artistry and steadfast engagement with his old teammates and the next generation of Black males.

Learning Virtuosity from Elders

In the 2018 film *Uncle Drew*, Drew is first seen seated in a chair next to a set of bleachers on an outdoor basketball court that overlook a pick-up basketball game. Uncle Drew, the septuagenarian, addresses no one in particular at first, but he speaks loud enough for the few spectators on the bleachers and the players to hear his opinion of their ball play—a crew of five men in athletic shirts and shorts. Drew is shown wearing a gray Nike sweatshirt and sweatpants signaled by the Nike Swoosh logo and eating nuts from a brown paper bag:

> UNCLE DREW: Dr. Naismith would be rolling in his grave if he knew what these bums is up to out here.
> PLAYER: You talk a lot of smack for a geriatric. It’s a shame you can’t back any of

it up.

UNCLE DREW: Who's to say I can't?

PLAYER: Alright then. What's the bet?

UNCLE DREW: If you win, I'll leave the park, and I'll never come back…But if I win, you and your crew start playing the game the way it's meant to be played.

PLAYER: How's that, in a peach basket? [men within the crew chuckle]

UNCLE DREW: It's like a perfectly orchestrated symphony. [Uncle Drew perceivably struggles a bit to get up from his seat with a few grunts]. Not any instrument is more important than another.

PLAYER: What's in it for you?

UNCLE DREW: Love, youngblood, only love.

PLAYER 2: What is this dude talking about? [Player 2, the tallest of the men, looks around trying to confirm with his crew that what Uncle Drew is saying is nonsensical]

UNCLE DREW: [presses his bag of nuts against the chest of player 2] Hold my nuts. [Players and spectators laugh. Uncle Drew precedes to compete in a one-on-one against the Player][46]

Uncle's Drew's opening line in the film establishes the significance of basketball's origin story that remains relevant in the present moment. He sees paying proper homage to Dr. Naismith is playing the game in a particular fashion. He establishes himself as an authority on the matter by calling the members of the crew "youngbloods." Uncle Drew in this scene participates in a social practice of "signifying" derived from African American culture involving a verbal strategy of indirection that exploits the gap between the denotative and figurative meanings of words. The basketball court, as a common

[46] *Uncle Drew*, directed by Charles Stone III, (Santa Monica, CA: Lionsgate Films, 2018), HBO.

practice, becomes a space of acceptable derision, where players use their words and gestures to tease and motivate their opponents to bring more of a challenge and/or improve their skills. The phrase "Hold my nuts" inspires great laughter from the onlookers in the film because they are aware of its double meaning. His command is both literal and an idiom in African American vernacular English that publicly renders the receiver, Player 2, inferior in contrast to the speaker. Player 1's love for the game is tested when he arrogantly challenges Uncle Drew to a one-on-one competition where whoever makes three baskets wins. At first, the twenty-something Black player makes two baskets before Uncle Drew does. Thinking basket number three will be an easy feat, he attempts to crossover and Uncle Drew steals the ball from him. The ball is turned over to Uncle Drew. As the two players reset, Uncle Drew dribbles while telling the player, "You want me to tell you your first mistake or your second? One, you got too cocky. It's a fine line between confidence and arrogance." Uncle Drew crossovers the player again causing him to stumble, and then dribbles the ball while backing up, encouraging the player to follow him. He continues, "And two, you're giving up your lead hip. You might as well unlock the door and have your wife show me where your china is."[47] The spectators show amazement as Uncle Drew continues to perform tricky ball maneuvers that require a keen attentiveness to the defensive player's weaknesses—conceit being one of them. The young man is publicly humbled as Uncle Drew scores two more times, winning the

[47] *Uncle Drew*, directed by Charles Stone III, (Santa Monica: Lionsgate Films, 2018), HBO.

competition. He looks at the young man and asserts, "I get buckets." Yes, he scores points, but Uncle Drew's statement also insinuates his role as a champion, that his determination and passion positions him to accomplish exactly what he set out to do. No impediment ultimately obstructs him from getting what he wants, a lesson he teaches by example.

Uncle Drew's age and dexterity contributes to his mythical status. He is able to maintain a consistent game across several decades in comparison to real professional basketball players whose athletic prowess noticeably declines in their late thirties. At the beginning of each web episode, we see a twenty-something Irving aged through prosthetic makeup approach a pick-up game with an elderly gait. Subsequently, with his accurate shooting and crafty maneuvers around opponents, Irving as Uncle Drew astonishes the spectators who initially doubted his ability because of his old age. In "Chapter 3" of the web series, Uncle Drew also showcases how to overcome the negative thoughts of aging with self-assurance and ingenuity inspired by jazz.

The episode begins with the sound of a steady groove on the percussion as we the audience hear Uncle Drew's voice saying, "Basketball isn't a game, it's an artform. You master the fundamentals so that you can forget them, so that you can improvise and just concentrate on what really matters…"[48] Uncle Drew walks into a jazz club in Chicago, Illinois, sits at one of the tables facing the stage,

[48] *Uncle Drew*, "Chapter 3 | Pepsi Max," directed/written/performed by Kyrie Irving, published October 28, 2013 on YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=spDdO_ZB-lE.

and drinks from a glass. The audience listens and sees the quartet on stage consisting of a trumpet player, bass player, keyboardist and drummer. As the music segment concludes, the trumpet player, an old friend of Uncle Drew called Lights (played by Nate Robinson), comes over to greet him and catch up. Uncle Drew informs Lights that he wants to put the team back together, and they need Lights to make that a possibility. Lights gladly accepts, but his wife Betty Lou does not agree with Lights' plan to play ball again as she reminds him that he just got a hip replacement and has a new purpose playing at the jazz club now. The scene cuts and now the viewer sees Uncle Drew driving with Lights in the passenger seat. When Lights begins to doubt whether he can play basketball as well as he used to, Uncle Drew persuades him that he can in saying, "You just gotta believe." They arrive at Seward Park outdoor basketball court in Chicago, and Uncle Drew tells Lights to "go get your rhythm back" while he parks the car. Lights approaches the court that has a game already going with spectators spread out around the entire perimeter of the court. Lights joins one of the teams and misses his first shot. Soon after, he gets the ball stolen from him. Drew attributes Lights' initial struggle to him not believing in his ability. He consequently tells the camera, "I am going to turn him into a believer." Uncle Drew utters, "Let me show you, Lights." He dribbles against his opponent behind his back, jerks to the left, then the right, spins around and tosses the ball around his back and goes up for a layup. The cameras cut, and we now see Lights going for a three-point shot. As he makes the shot, Uncle Drew exclaims, "Come on Lights, play that music!" Lights eventually gets

his rhythm back and performs spectacular crossovers and even dunks. In syncopated fashion, he handles the ball with such grace as he pressures the defender backwards and moves towards his basket to score. Because Lights is a senior, the defender does not expect so much intensity and momentum.

Jazz and basketball both rely on individuals within an ensemble to play within and outside of structure, exciting the audience with the unexpected rhythmic changes and combination. Vocabulary such as fast-breaks and original takes are used in both activities to illustrate opportunities for the emergence of singularity within a collective effort. At the heart of their kinship is improvisation and timing. Danielle Goldman's study on elite improvisors in concert dance can be applied to elite Black athletes, who also possess an enormous amount of expertise in their particular sport and engage in improvisational events within and outside of their respective athletic contests. She mentions that improvisation is "generally described as a spontaneous mode of creation that takes place without the aid of a manuscript or score." She continues, "According to this view, performance and composition occur simultaneously—on the spot—through a practice that values surprise, innovation, and the vicissitudes of process rather than the fixed glory of a finished product."[49] For example, in the film scene discussed earlier between Uncle Drew and the conceited player, Uncle Drew raises the stakes of the match with a bet and allows the player to score two of three points necessary in

[49] Danielle Goldman, *I Want to be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom, (*Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 2010), 5.

order to win the entire match. He then surprises the player and the crowd with his craft of handling the ball and his accurate shooting ability. Players must also be able to instantly react to the choices their teammates make. They must be able to coordinate their actions with those of their teammates with an understanding of when it is time to play solo and when to fade into the background. The timing of group activity is a major part of basketball, as it is with jazz.

After Lights begins to move with volume and gestures that possess amplitude (not only precision and elegance), Betty Lou shows up on the court wearing a Black trench coat and the looking for Lights. After hearing sneers from a few young guys telling her to "Shut up old lady," she removes her trench coat to reveal her sweat suit and gets in the game on Uncle Drew and Light's team. Like Drew, Betty Lou also believes that despite being older she still can ball with the youth. She showcases her spectacular ball handling skills and her ability to dunk during the game. The Black female subject is predominately portrayed in Uncle Drew's story through the character of Betty Lou. Played by WNBA player Maya Moore in this episode and retired WNBA player Lisa Leslie in the film *Uncle Drew*, Betty Lou showcases her exceptional basketball ability as part of Uncle Drew's team. In contrast to his other teammates, Betty Lou refers to Uncle Drew by his given first name, Andrew, in the episode instead of by his epithet. Betty Lou is not under Uncle Drew's tutelage in any way, she is a real baller. Black male leadership has historically depended on their partnerships with Black women. Maya Moore who has played in the WNBA since 2011 was the first female baller to be signed with the Air

Jordan franchise, and Lisa Leslie (WNBA 1997-2009) was the first female to dunk in a WNBA game. Their brief, but significant representation, gestures towards advancing the narratives of professional female basketball players within the American public. The presence of Black women also indexes a collective leadership model between Black women and Black men that decenters the Black male as the sole bearer of heroic leadership.

For athletes and dancers alike, aging is ever present in their work and affects the duration of their careers. As changes gradually happen in the body, seniors are bombarded with negative images from popular culture. Older adults are frequently portrayed in the media as out of touch, useless, feeble, incompetent, pitiful and irrelevant."[50] In a scene from the film, for instance, a young male dancer questions the attendance of Uncle Drew and his four teammates at a party commemorating the first day of the Rucker Tournament. He tells them, "You're pushing 80 [years]" and compares Uncle Drew's teammate called Boots (played by retired NBA player Nate Robinson) to Frederick Douglass.[51] These negative comments indicate that these seniors should not be welcome to the same public spaces as young people. As a result, Boots leads the team to the dance floor, and the crowd makes room for them to perform their old dance routine, which resembles fluid dance moves from the 1990s and earlier. The young male dancer and his crew challenge the seniors with their high impact hip-hop routine. Uncle

[50] Twyla Tharp, *Keep It Moving: Lessons for the Rest of Your Life*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019), 5.

[51] *Uncle Drew*, directed by Charles Stone III, (Santa Monica, CA: Lionsgate Films, 2018), HBO.

Drew and his teammates win the competition based on the cheers of the crowd when Big Fella does a break move and freeze to conclude the dance battle. Drew's red jumpsuit in this scene, in contrast to the muted blue and brown outfits of his crew, continues to make him the focal point and central influence. He and his squad counter the negative narrative, asserting themselves as relevant and very much in touch with what is important in the game of basketball and living a good life.

Moreover, the young dancer's comparison of Boots to the abolitionist and social reformer Frederick Douglas for the purpose of an insult reveals the ease in which the images of historical Black figures are undercut in the American public imagination. Nicole Fleetwood's book, *On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination,* examines how the American public receives and evaluates certain images of political, social and cultural figures (e.g., Trayvon Martin, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Diana Ross, Paul Robeson, Serena Williams and Lebron James) that saturate American media. By underscoring the significance of racial iconicity, specifically the Black icon as a diagnostic of the "sickness" of the nation, Fleetwood identifies that blackness is tethered to the American public's reception of key Black individuals and the meaning the national public attaches to these figures:

> While the icon carries the trace of godlikeness, to render a subject as Black within various histories and discursive traditions means literally and symbolically to denigrate, to Blacken, disparage, belittle. The verb *denigrate*, with its Latin origins and roots in light/dark metaphors, means not only "to

> Blacken" but also to "defame," "to discredit." To denigrate is a castigation in which darkness is associated with incivility, evil, mystery, and the subhuman. Racial iconicity hinges on a relationship between veneration and denigration and this twinning shapes the visual production and reception of Black American icons. The racial icon as both a venerated and denigrated figure serves a resonating function as a visual embodiment of American history and as proof of the supremacy of American democracy."[52]

Fleetwood defines "blackness" etymologically, elucidating the ways in which language as symbolic contours the key political, social, or cultural figure's image. In other words, blackness is a metric for which Black people's worth is determined, established by the recycling (converting waste into reusable material) of images associated with specific meanings. These meanings are influenced by the context of U.S. slavery and the enduring racial inequality. She further parses media within her study into subcategories with particular emphasis on visual culture, the presence of static and moving images that are broadcasted to and curated by the national public. Media is the channel for which the American public plays out its racial fantasies by insouciantly venerating and denigrating the visual production and reception of Black American icons.

Despite the overall comedy that encapsulates *Uncle Drew*, the film—in particular—places multiple generations of iconic Black ball players in the same cinematic space who replicate each other's moves and construct a history of the relationship between the generations.

[52] Fleetwood, Nicole, *On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 8.

Anthropologist and novelist Zora Neale Hurston observes that folklore's vast variety in African American expression particularly exhibits the "adaptability of the Black man: nothing is too old or too new, domestic or foreign, high or low, for his use."[53] My interest in Uncle Drew is the way his folklore indexes real stories and reconstructs U.S. American cultural memory in order to celebrate Black male virtuosity amid the history of Black male vilification in the United States.

Uncle Drew as Basketball Icon and Contemporary Folklore

The folklore of Uncle Drew draws from the racial iconicity of famous basketball players and uses it as a platform to assert this Black athlete as a basketball icon in that reality. Retired NBA players and streetball legends gathered in mockumentary fashion in the very beginning of the *Uncle Drew* film to collectively express that Uncle Drew like Kobe Bryant "changed the face of basketball."[54] They one by one describe him as "incredible," "scary good," "dominating," "dangerous," "the best of the best."[55] Real life basketball players identify Uncle Drew as a force. His basketball feats of the 1960's are

[53] Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," in *African American Literary Theory: A* Reader, ed. Winston Napier (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 36.

[54] *See* "Petition to Make Bryant the New NBA Logo Nears 2 Million Signatures," Reuters, (Reuters, January 28, 2020), https://www.reuters.com/article/us-basketball-nba-bryant-logo/petition-to-make-bryant-the-new-nba-logo-nears-2-million-signatures-idUSKBN1ZR2AT. Change.org said the petition, which has been signed by celebrities such as Snoop Dogg, Justin Bieber and Usher, is the fastest-growing on its website and the first petition of 2020 to top 1 million signatures anywhere in the globe.

[55] "Pee Wee" Kirkland (Rucker Park legend), Dikembe Mutombo (NBA 1991-2009), Steve Nash (NBA 1996-2014), Rick Barry (NBA 1965-1967; 1972-1980), Bill Walton (NBA 1974-1988), and George Gervin (NBA 1976-1986) in *Uncle Drew*, directed by Charles Stone III, (Santa Monica: Lionsgate Films, 2018), HBO.

the stuff of legends still talked about in the present day though the film articulates that he and his crew dropped out of the finals of the 1968 Rucker Park Tournament due to team conflict. Retired NBA player Jerry West, the model for the familiar 1969 NBA logo that depicts a white silhouette of a male athlete dribbling, denies in an introductory scene of the film that the silhouette is indeed his body. He instead claims, as if correcting a historical inaccuracy, that the icon of the National Basketball Association we see on television and basketball paraphernalia is actually a silhouette of Uncle Drew's body. The Association just "shaved off" his afro (Fig. 1.1). Although this recapitulation of history is supposed to evoke comical surprise from viewers as they realize that all this time what they thought was a generic body was actually modeled in the Uncle Drew's likeness, it also emphasizes the significance of Black male presence that gets eclipsed in predominately white spaces.

In reality, the logo still includes a white silhouette of a white man's body, and therefore reinforces the prevailing whiteness of the organization's leadership. Uncle Drew is subtlety inserted as a Black token to demystify this fact, but instead accentuates it. Though the logo legend is presented as a color-blind tale about Uncle Drew's basketball greatness, it unveils a haunting reality regarding race relations in the United States. Uncle Drew in this moment becomes a bystander in the narrative supposedly about him. His blackness precedes his basketball expertise. By Jerry West being the one to tell this new historical narrative, he reinforces his credibility as the

actual icon of the NBA logo and perpetuates the history of white men authorizing themselves to tell the stories of others.

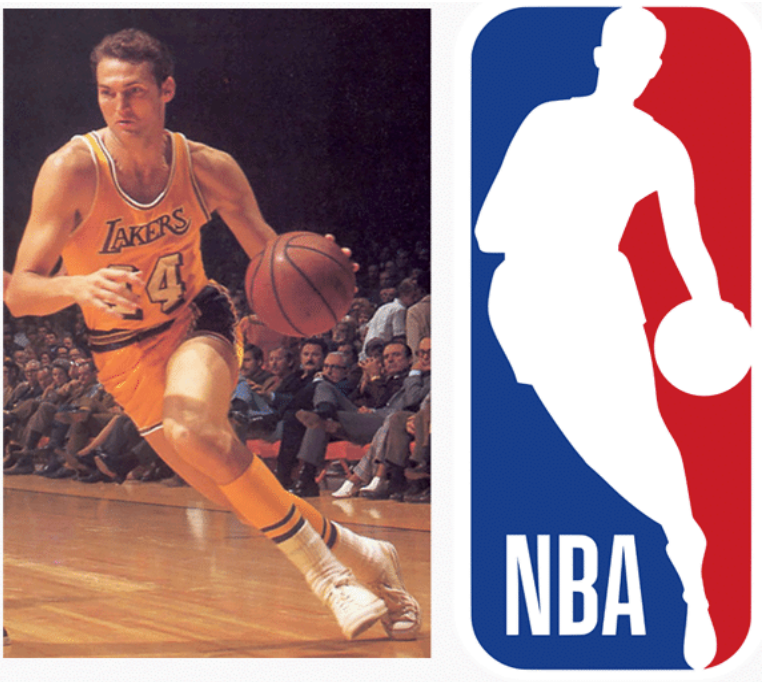


Figure 1.1. *NBA Logo (1969).* Photograph from "The history of the NBA logo –Who is on the NBA logo," *Turbologo Blog*, (Turbologo.ru, October 26, 2019), https://turbologo.com/articles/nba-logo/.

At the time Uncle Drew's body would have been used for the logo, the Black Panther Party had been recently formed and the Black Power Movement was in full effect. In direct response to the non-violent protests of inequality promoted during the Civil Rights Movement, both the Black Panthers and the agents of "Black Power" who emphasized Black nationalism and self-reliance galvanized African Africans to use violence as a legitimate form of self-defense against aggressive white Americans. Had Uncle Drew's afro, a signifier of African ancestry and blackness, been a part of his body's silhouette, his Black body would have been easily recognized by the American public. The face of the National Basketball Association would have an afro in a sense; a

seemingly apolitical enterprise in the American public imagination would find itself involuntarily involved in the discussions of civil rights and Black Power. Despite a Black male athlete's aggressive defense being welcomed on the basketball court to represent their team, the Black male body that possesses militancy and resistance in its lexicon could not represent the NBA as a symbol of quintessential basketball prowess. By shaving off Drew's afro, the NBA officials as sentinels of white interests cheated Uncle Drew, and by extension the Black male athlete, from the prestige earned through exceptionally adroit and consistent labor. In turn, they are subjugated to the "forty million-dollar slaves on the periphery of true power."[56] Furthermore, the Black male ball players like Uncle Drew, I argue, "breaks ankles" as a ritual of self-reliance and reclaiming the prestige produced by their labor. The athletes who handle the ball moves swiftly and unpredictably when crossing over their defenders and completely humbles players of the other team by knocking them "off their [the defenders] feet" (pun intended) or "break[ing] their ankles."

According to Rucker Park legend Dominic "The Glove" Willis within the film, Uncle Drew took on a player that went by the name "The Destroyer." Apparently, Drew overcame the opponent's defense and "beat him only with his left hand." Willis continues to indicate providing the audience with suspense, "And then, hold on. Wait for it. With his right hand, he was eating a ham sandwich." As Willis shares his story,

[56] William C. Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall and Redemption of the Black Athlete*, (New York: Random House, 2006).

the viewer sees a grainy image of NBA player Kyrie Irving playing the role of a young Uncle Drew with an afro going up for a layup on a court full of fans watching while sitting on top of a building. Then the camera zooms in on the ham sandwich in Uncle Drew's right hand.[57] Uncle Drew's choreography on the basketball court validates him as a basketball legend to the National Basketball Association and elevates his status in the American public imagination despite his limited appearances in streetball tournaments. His explosive and cunning maneuvers hold audiences captive and make a lasting impact as contemporary folklore. The productions of Uncle Drew index and preserve through fabricated oral history what the historical archive has not been able to collectively capture about the legacies of older generation athletes. They invite the viewer to retain an acute sensibility about the game of basketball by imparting an appreciation for complex emotional and aesthetic structures, such as relentless passion and intricate dribbling combinations filled with rhythmic and comic creativity.

The film's folklore situates Uncle Drew's basketball iconicity to parallel that of Michael Jordan's. Uncle Drew is presented as a masterful teacher, similar to the way Jordan incited the desire in young people to emulate him. Michael Eric Dyson articulates, "I understand Jordan in the broadest sense of the term to be a public pedagogue, a figure of estimable public moral authority whose career educates us about productive and disenabling forms of knowledge,

[57] Jerry West (1960-1974) and Dominic "The Glove" Willis (Rucker Park legend) in *Uncle Drew*, directed by Charles Stone III, (Santa Monica, CA: Lionsgate Films, 2018), HBO.

desire, interest, consumption, and culture."[58] As National Basketball Association games are collectively one of the most popular forms of American sports entertainment, the basketball court via media becomes a national platform to witness aesthetic experiences that maintain great influence over aspiring basketball players. Through his superior basketball talent and Nike marketing platform, Jordan created a cultural momentum during his basketball career (1984-2004) that established him as the greatest [basketball player] of all time (also known as the "G.O.A.T)," in NBA history and popular American culture. Jordan's Jumpman logo that appears on the majority of Jordan shoes and apparel is a staged silhouette of him appearing to leap for a slam dunk resembling the execution of a balletic *grande jeté*. Though the image came out of a photoshoot with *Life Magazine* leading up to the 1984 Olympic games, Nike's branding of Michael Jordan caused the image to heavily influence what quintessential basketball skill should look like in the public imagination. Despite Jordan's jumping style not being consistently executed in this manner, the Jumpman aesthetics represented premier basketball skill as virtuosic. The aesthetics also mythologized Jordan's dunks to possess "hang time," a misnomer that describes the ability to allegedly remain suspended in midair longer than other basketball players.[59] The 1992 Gatorade commercial "Like Mike" in conjunction with Nike's advertisement of Air Jordan shoes and

[58] Michael Eric Dyson, "Be Like Mike? Michael Jordan and the Pedagogy of Desire," in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture, Ed. Robert G. O'Meally*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 373.

[59] Michael Eric Dyson, 375.

apparel influenced young Americans to desire Jordan's likeness by replicating his fashion and movements on the basketball court.[60] Well after the ending of his basketball career, Jordan's legacy on the court characterized by his iconic movements remain.

Following in Jordan's footsteps before making his own, Kobe Bryant also endured the weight of racial iconicity, being subjected to both veneration and denigration throughout his basketball career as an elite Black athlete. *The New York Times* claims Bryant had "one of the most decorated careers in the history of the sport."[61] Drafted into the NBA in 1996 at age 17, he would lead the Los Angeles Lakers as their leading scorer to five championship titles over the span of his 20 seasons, retiring from his basketball career at age 37 in 2016. In the early 2000s, Bryant assumed the self-proclaimed alter-ego and epithet of "Black Mamba" on the basketball court to help him segregate his professional life from his personal life for which his public opinion decreased evinced by declining jersey sales and terminated endorsement contracts.[62] Bryant told ESPN, "The mamba can strike with 99% accuracy

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[60] Mike Foss, "Gatorade Brings 'Be Like Mike' Campaign Back from the '90s with 3 New Commercials," USA Today (Gannett Satellite Information Network, March 18, 2015), https://ftw.usatoday.com/2015/03/gatorade-is-bringing-back-iconic-be-like-mike-campaign-with-new-commercials).

[61] Andrew Keh, "Kobe Bryant Announces Retirement," *The New York Times*, November 29, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/30/sports/basketball/kobe-bryant-announces-retirement.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=second-column-region&region=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&_r=1.

[62] T.R. Reid, "Bryant Rape Case Ends in Dismissal/ Accuser Refuses to Testify—NBA Star Apologizes," *Washington Post*, Sept. 2, 2004, https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Bryant-rape-case-ends-in-dismissal-Accuser-2728673.php. Kobe Bryant was accused of sexually assaulting a 20-year old woman in 2003. He admitted to an adulterous sexual encounter but denied sexually assaulting the woman. Despite the criminal trial against Bryant being dismissed in 2004 after the prosecutors dropped the charges because the woman no longer wanted to testify against him, Bryant made a public apology read by his lawyer for his behavior the night of the encounter and for any consequences the woman suffered; Associated Press, "Fans

at maximum speed, in rapid succession. That's the kind of basketball precision I want to have."[63] Essentially, Kobe Bryant desired to embody the agility and quickness of the Black mamba, honing into instinct when maneuvering around the court and handling the basketball against the defense of his opponents. Considered the world's deadliest snake living in southern and eastern Africa, Black mambas often behave in a shy manner. When confronted, they swiftly seek to escape. With no means of escape or when being cornered, they will aggressively attack their perceived adversary with a venomous bite. The Black in Black mamba comes not from the skin color of these snakes, but instead from the blue-Black color inside their mouths when opened for hissing and striking.[64] Bryant reinvented his public image through the Black Mamba persona, distributing a series of commercials promoting his Nike Zoom Kobe sneakers.[65] Choosing to identify with a snake whose blackness was on the inside of his body speaks to the way Kobe desired to determine his blackness from his own inner work in contrast to the outside perceptions mapped upon his Black male body. His status as an exceptional athlete was respected among current and retired professional basketball players.

Shunning Kobe Bryant's Jersey," *Fox News*, (Fox News, January 7, 2005), https://www.foxnews.com/story/fans-shunning-kobe-bryants-jersey.

[63] Jerry Crowe, "Text Messages from Press Row," *Los Angeles Times*, May 23, 2008, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2008-may-23-sp-crowe23-story.html.

[64] "Black Mamba," National Geographic, (National Geographic Partners, LLC, Accessed March 24, 2020), https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/reptiles/b/Black-mamba/.

[65]"Kobe Bryant, Robert Rodriguez talk about Black Mamba Nike ads, Six Minute Film," *Lakers Now*, (Los Angeles Times, January 31, 2011), https://web.archive.org/web/20181023120135/http:/lakersblog.latimes.com/lakersblog/2011/01/kobe-bryant-and-robert-rodriguez-hype-ads-6-minute-film-at-nike-vault-1.html.

While blackness or being Blackened is a metric used in American mainstream media aforementioned, Jordan and Bryant exemplify that blackness is also a discursive space in which Black people contour their assorted narratives of self, an inner work innovated and projected outwardly that works with/against the arbiters of mainstream media. Both elite athletes present popular counternarratives of Black masculinity that disrupt stereotypical representations propagated by hegemonic desire. Uncle Drew displays just as much devotion and passion to the basketball game and uses his mythic presence to showcase *how* strong passion facilitates Black virtuosity. As an elder with years of experience negotiating shifting constraints as a Black man, the underlying comedic element of Uncle Drew besides he being a young man playing an old man is that he does not care what others think of him; he says and does what he wants when he wants. The characterization of Uncle Drew as a seasoned mentor like Jordan and a player of passion and precision like Bryant contests the circulation of one-dimensional, stereotypical representations of Black men in American media. The *Uncle Drew* productions capture a shared embodied history of Black male excellence— a narrative that is created against a majority culture that tends not to value this history.

Chapter 2

Separate, Yet Not Equal Still: Crossing Rhythms and Stepping Out of Bounds in Jim Crow Era

Separate and Equal, written and directed by Seth Panitch, explores the emotional and physical violence of segregation through a forbidden basketball game between Black and white teens in 1950s Jim Crow Alabama. The teens engage and confront one another through basketball movement combinations, modern dance sequences, and jazz rhythms. Basketball here serves as metaphor for social life itself where transgressing the regulations of play, set in motion by the ones in authority, have fatal consequences. Inspired by "compelling" personal recollections from the Oral History Project at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, *Separate and Equal* premiered at New York City's 59E59 Theater in September 2018.[66] University of Alabama professor Seth Pantich wrote and directed the production while his colleague Lawrence M. Jackson choreographed the movement sequences. I witnessed the play in person, and it consists of six basketball players initially divided into two trios. Each teen wears a pair of khaki colored pants with different degrees of darkness, a button down shirt, and off-white high-top sneakers. Calvin Richardson (Adrian Baidoo), Emmett George (James Holloway), and Nathan Holloway (Edwin Brown III) phenotypically read as Black while Edgar Roberts (Ross Birdsong), Jeff Forrest (Steven Bono Jr.) and Wesley Finch (Dylan Guy

[66] "Separate and Equal," 59e59.org (59E59 Theaters), April 24, 2020, https://www.59e59.org/shows/show-detail/separate-and-equal/. *Separate and Equal* was presented by The University of Alabama in partnership with the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and the Birmingham Metro NAACP.

Davis) phenotypically read as White. Supporting characters include Viola Richardson, Calvin's mother (Pamela Afesi); Annabelle Roberts (Barbara Wengerd) Edgar's mother; Two Snakes also known as Uncle (Will Badgett), Mr. Finch/Lt. Connor (Ted Barton); and Lt. Dixx (Jeremy Cox).

Within this chapter, I focus on how theater specifically centers and relies on bodily choreographies. I examine how *Separate and Equal* represents resilience encoded in movement and the embodied histories of Black male virtuosic bodies. The intimate, theatrical space I encountered in the 2018 production of *Separate and Equal* permitted me alongside other audience members to witness each other and the physical labor of the actors closely. From my seat, I could see the sweat of the actors' drip from their faces onto the Black floor. The actors' labor consists of layers: (1) keeping track of an imaginary ball, and (2) aesthetically maintaining the illusion of sportive play while (3) conveying the ills of twentieth-century segregation to predominately White middle to upper-class theatergoers living in the twenty-first century myth of a post-racial America.[67]

Several clues in the stage's setting lets the audience know that they are witnessing a basketball game in the Jim Crow South. Upon entrance into the Black box theatre, I first notice the two

[67] James T. Wootens, "Compact Set Up for 'Post-Racial' South," The New York Times, 5 October 1971. Wootens reports that 70 politicians and professors in the American South formed the Southern Growth Policies Board in 1971 on the basis that they believed their region had entered an era where race relations was no longer a major concern in comparison to population increase and economic development; Kalwant Bhopal refutes in *White Privilege: The Myth of a Post-Racial Society* (Bristol, UK: Polity Press, 2018) the logics of post-racialism that permeates public discourse and argues that neoliberal policy making has actually increased rather than decreased discrimination against non-white people.

approximately forty-inch television screens mounted on each side of the theatre. The left screen shows an image of a 1950s style water drinking fountain with a wooden sign that reads “Colored” displayed above it, while the right screen shows the same image of a 1950s water drinking fountain with a wooden sign that reads “White” displayed above it. My gaze then focuses on the arena stage seating with a rectangular performance space at its center that resembles a basketball court. On each sideline of the stage, demarcated by a thick white line, audience members resemble the spectators going to witness a game. At the center of this half-court line, there is a smaller circle surrounded by a bigger white circle. The half-court line goes through the center of both circles. These markings indicate the jump off, where two opponents reach for the ball to determine which team begins the entire game with ball in hand. On each shorter end of the court, there is one 2-D basketball hoop demarcated on the floor as two parallel straight thick lines that extend towards the half-court line. At the end these lines meet a circle, perceivably the same size as the big jump off circle (Figure 2.1).



Figure 2.1. *Separate and Equal Setting*. Photograph taken by author within Theater B of Theater 59E59.

The balletic choreography of passes, crossovers, and dunks that hybridizes sport and dance is a compelling offering in *Separate and Equal*. The boys are predominately in choreographed motion throughout the duration of the theatrical piece although there is no ball in sight. The stylized mirroring sequences accentuate the virtuosity and vitality present in well-executed sport techniques. While one offensive player has possession of the invisible ball, the defensive player cautiously mirrors every sudden movement and gesture, trying to seize the invisible ball from the fingers of the offensive player. The two other offensive players strive to remain open for a pass, attempting to escape the close proximity of their opponents as well. The player with the invisible ball performs successful crossovers by swiftly misdirecting the defender's attention and breaking away from the entanglement in enough time to either score himself or make a pass to his teammate who scores. What would appear to be typical basketball fundamentals are saturated with meaning.

Throughout the play, the boys play three rounds of basketball: (1) two separate games played on different sides of the court, (2) Black trio versus white trio full court game, and (3) an integrated teams full court game. There is no ball ever in sight during the play. Instead, the actors suggest the activity of the ball through gesture. The invisible ball influences the boys who are supposed to play separately to be in close proximity to one another. While the actors may be in charge of the ball in the theatrical space, their

characters' performances are mediated by the ball. The characters watch the ball as it passes through players' hands and runs in the direction it leads them, such as when the ball initially "rolled" to the other side of the court in an early scene of the play.

Though the actors appear to interact with an invisible object, the invisible basketball fails to be a theatrical prop defined as "a discrete, material, inanimate object that is visibly manipulated by an actor in the course of a performance."[68] In a practical sense, the director may have made this decision so that actors would not have to be skilled at ball handling or to avoid the ball's activity exerting its own script for the actors to follow. With an invisible ball, the six actors can play and score in their basketball game with apparent accuracy. A perfected game is set up so that the very 'animation' of the material object is taken out of play. Therefore, I engage Robin Bernstein's heuristic— "scriptive thing"[69]— where things prompt, structure or choreograph behavior to examine the basketball. The study of materiality is a longstanding field with contributions from people familiar in performance studies, such as German philosopher Martin Heidegger and French sociologist/cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard. The shift in material culture studies, however, has moved from previously inquiring how people make things to investigating how things make people. In other words, how inanimate objects "script"

[68] Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 11.

[69] Robin Bernstein, "Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race." *Social Text* 27, n.4 (Winter 2009): 69.

human behavior and/or mediate social relationships. As an invisible thing I conclude that the object scripts the dramatic performance and serves as an inventive theatrical strategy to accentuate the labor of dancing bodies and racial performance.

Without an actual ball on stage, the audience's attention is diverted from the ball asserting itself as a primary attraction and instead focused on the movement of the bodies within the basketball game. In other words, I argue that the absence of the basketball in this basketball game deemphasizes basketball as sport play and emphasizes youth working out racial strife as they play at the paramount sport being presented. Instead of the sound of the ball's bounce creating the pulse of the game, the audience hears the rhythm of the player's feet and the scuffs across the floor from their high-top sneakers throughout the duration of the performance. Whereas Bernstein's notion of scriptive thing stems from people's encounters in everyday life with material culture of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century (i.e. children's dolls, alphabet books, sewing patterns to theatre performances, songbooks, and school poetry contests), the theater is perhaps the only place where an invisible object can be a scriptive thing.

Uncle's Artful Transgression

The stage is dark as actors walk on. The music is soothing, beginning with a cascade of musical notes down the scale on the piano into moderate banjo strums. The sounds of the delta blues permeate the atmosphere. Three Black boys begin running around each other in a

deliberate, organized formation using gestures that imitate players of basketball. I hear a clap, then seconds later, another clap as one of the boys catches the invisible object after the boy in front of him pushes his hands forcefully from his chest. Typically, in a basketball game with a visible ball, a pass is when the ball is forcefully pushed from one's chest to another player. The other player completes the pass by extending his arms in front of him, catching the ball and pulling it close to his body. In this scene, however, actors insinuate the passing of the ball through the movement and the player on the receiving end motion as receiving the ball by extending his arms out towards the direction of his teammate and clap his hands once. The receiver calls out "ball" or "pass" to indicate he is open for a pass. The boys are enjoying themselves represented by the smiles on their faces. Two white police officers, Lieutenant Dixx and Lieutenant Connor who is called "Kidgloves," begin their approach to the sight of merriment and are intercepted by an elderly Black man called Uncle.

In the pages that follow, I first single out the character called Uncle as the catalyst for the Black teens' resistance. Like Uncle Drew in the previous chapter, Uncle in *Separate and Equal* transmits his transgressive strategies to the younger generation of Black males. He serves as the catalyst for the Black boys' remaining in motion on the court after being approached by the two white police officers. Frantz Fanon, a West Indian psychoanalyst and philosopher, offers a deconstructive theory of the racializing process based on the visual terms of the body in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* translated from French to English in 1967. He underscores his feelings as a Black male

subject in the oppressive environment of the White world. He conjectures that his Black skin on his male body is perceived as unsightly and inadequate by his white male counterpart, which consequently produces an inferiority complex in his mind and by extension the psyche of the Black subject. His composition of self that develops in the middle of a spatial and temporal world that is then apprehended by a racial epidermal schema because of the white person's reaction to his Black skin can be appropriated to the exploration of Black male subjectivity within *Separate and Equal*. I situate Uncle and the Black boys in Franz Fanon's theorization in order to foreground the relationship between racialization and Black male virtuosity. My analysis of Uncle contextualizes the import of the particular movements performed by Black bodies discussed in this chapter.

The fifth chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*, "The Fact of Blackness," begins with a speech event Fanon reflects upon. His reflections begin by recalling a comment by a child, "Look, a Negro!"[70] directed at him. The derogatory utterance, Fanon articulates, signals his entry into objecthood. His Black skin becomes a spectacle for the viewership of the white man. He refers to this statement as an "external stimulus," that was not uttered by a police officer or a judge or one deemed to possess social authority within an institutional context, but instead by a white child already infected with racist ideations. The child continues, "Mama, see the Negro! I'm

[70] Franz Fanon, "Fact of Blackness," *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by Charles Markmann, (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 112.

frightened!" Fanon reflects, "Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible. I could no longer laugh, because I already knew that there were legends, stories, history, and above all historicity, which I had learned about."[71] In a racist, performative statement alone, from a child indoctrinated into the system of racism and white supremacy, Fanon deconstructs a violent history of colonialism that continues to have a visceral impact on those who have been subject to its domination. Thus, the white gaze distinguishes the Black man as other, re-inscribing a myriad of negative associations onto his body that greatly impacts his consciousness. In other words, his Black skin is constantly exposed to the scrutiny of white eyes hidden behind white masks. They speak into the eyes of his soul while hiding their faces so that they may not stand eye to eye, on an equal ground. Furthermore, the white mask promotes distance between the colonized subject and the colonizer, ultimately to promote ethnocentrism and dehumanization.

The soul of a Black man is objectified for and by the white man. Fanon writes, "A man was expected to behave like a man. I was expected to behave like a Black man—or at least like a nigger. I shouted a greeting to the world, and the world slashed away my joy. I was told to stay in bounds, to go back where I belonged."[72] The colonized subject experiences (a kind of) self through the fabrication of who is

[71] Franz Fanon, "Fact of Blackness," 112.

[72] Franz Fanon, "Fact of Blackness," 114-115.

in the role of domination. In other words, a Black man performs "Blackness" as a reaction to the unpleasant performatives uttered by the colonizer. His outer appearance that encases his soul becomes the white man's artifact. For Fanon, there are real corporeal consequences of performative utterances, one in which he calls the racial epidermal schema. He reflects upon his reaction to the racist performative statement uttered by the white child:

> Then, assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema. In the train it was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person. In the train, I was given not one but two, three places. I had already stopped being amused It was not that I was finding febrile coordinates in the world. I existed triply: I occupied space. I moved toward the other…and the evanescent other, hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared. Nausea…I was responsible at the same time for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethic 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."[73]

In this quotation, Fanon speaks of a self that is split into three as a result of his skin color in relationship to the speaker of the statement. He illustrates his ambivalence as he moved between three places, how he viewed himself in relationship to solely himself, the child who spoke to him, and the larger projection of the other that has been opposed on him and the generations before. He, therefore being in all places at one time psychologically, feels the weight of

[73] Franz Fanon, "Fact of Blackness," 112.

all that has been imposed on him generationally. Though Fanon lists many stereotypes of the Negro that fall under the category of uncivilized and backwards, he chooses to isolate the statement "sho good eatin'" as a vital illustration. I suggest Fanon makes this choice as to illustrate the representation of blackness that most prevails and does the most damage to the Black psyche: the caricature of the Black man. "Sho good eatin" is a statement of lower-class Black vernacular that one might hear in a minstrel show from a white male pretending to be a Black man that he presents in an exaggerated fashion like in the nineteenth century persona Jim Crow. Therefore, above all the classifications of the Negro that have been inflicted, the parodying of the Black man reinstitutes the stereotypes and instigates the splitting of the self into three. He abides in the three following dimensions within his schema: (1) the Black man he believes he is, (2) the Black man who he is told to be and (3) the caricatured performance of the Black man he is told to be. Not only can the Black man not see the eyes of the white man, he is forced to see his true self as a phantom, only finding existence in distorted representations of blackness by white men playing Black men. Fanon's racial epidermal schema creates a dialectic between the body and the world in relation to racializing Black bodies.

Uncle finds himself caught up in this caricatured performance of the Black man he is expected to be by white law enforcement in the early scene of the play. However, Uncle refines and displays this performance for a transgressive purpose. He intends to impart transgenerational lesson to the Black boys. To the audience, Uncle

bears an embodied history of resistance. The police officers arrive in order to enforce ordinance 597 of Jim Crow law. "Negros", as labeled in the 1950s American South, are only allowed to use the basketball court on Sundays, while white folk have six days of the week to play and practice their prowess as basketball players. "Yes sir, thank you sir, afternoon sir," Uncle remarks as he keeps his head down when speaking to the police officer, mumbling and rambling as he salutes them in several statements. The younger Black fellow named Emmett accuses him of "actin' like a slave" with all that "shufflin' and grinnin'" in the sight of white law enforcement officers approaching them at the basketball court. Emmett inquires, "Where's it [Uncle's behavior] get ya'?" Uncle who is dressed in a tattered work jumpsuit and newsboy cap remarks to the young fellow: "Out of jail you dumb mutha fucka. Same as you [directed to Emmett], all that huffin' and puffin', where's that getting you anywhere but here? …Two snakes boy, two snakes… one with his head pointing north and the other head pointing south…both bite the [n-word], so the [n-word] know how to move out the way." Uncle makes an unfortunate predicament light-hearted as he elongates the vowels in 'move' and 'way' and immediately proceeds to step and way from side to side while singing the refrain from the American negro spiritual "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" to illustrate the way in which he maneuvers around a tough situation. What does one do in a 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' conundrum? He theoretically steps in the direction of the police officer by appearing docile and then steps in the opposite direction

by asserting his authority and wisdom towards Emmett and the boys, ultimately revealing the crossover and its significance.

Uncle's staccato steps and double speak resembles the characteristics of trickster figures that emerge from African American folklore in order to dissemble supremacy. By way of African American folklorist John W. Roberts, dance scholar Jacqui Malone asserts, "Much of what looks like mere entertainment to someone unfamiliar with Black idiomatic expression has spiritual significance for persons grounded in African American culture. Although their rituals do not necessarily have the specific religious meanings of rites that were practiced by their ancestors, Black Americans nonetheless *ritualize their lives* [emphasis hers]."[74] In particular, the trickster figure Esu -Llegba is a dissembler that embodies both the complimentary good and evil which can manifest at times as erratic and contradictory qualities. The god possesses "the potential to deflate human excesses and stupid drives, such as arrogance, megalomania, and pompousness, thereby forcing self-awareness and, ultimately, self-mastery."[75] Embodying the mythos of his African ancestry, Uncle implicitly channels Esu. The quest to thwart oppressors by channeling a higher power is germane to Black performance. I consider the structure of Uncle's performance (with the police officer) as a ritual process which elicits the dramatic and diplomatic potential of Esu-Llegba. Uncle dissembles by making his

[74] Jacqui Malone, Malone, Jacqui, *Steppin' on the Blues: The Visible Rhythm of African American Dance and Folklore, (*Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 27.

[75] Femi Euba,"Legba and the Politics of Metaphysics: The Trickster in Black Drama," in *Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the Black Diaspora*, edited by Paul Carter Harrison, Victor Leo Walker II, and Gus Edwards, (Philadelphia Temple University Press, 2002), 178.

oppressors think initially that their objective has been successfully been carried out.

Uncle intends to play the long game, willing to perceivably surrender his will momentarily in order to achieve something much greater in the end. He endeavors to transmit his customs and understanding of the body and spirt to the three Black teens under his influence. He tricks the police officers into thinking that he is indeed the subservient and aloof subject of the state they came to reinforce and as such goes for Mintah. Emmett's accusation confirms that Uncle's display in front of the officers was quite believable as he was initially fooled by Uncle's docile behavior despite being on the same team as him. Uncle precedes his display with the aforementioned proverb and song to inform the three young men of their mantle: to continue playing basketball on the court, anticipating the moves of the opponent. Though a calling to play basketball may seem trivial at first glance, Uncle encourages them to prevail in their disobedience to the law that may cost Uncle his life. He appears to appease the police officers and mask his transgression, exhibiting the performance of doubleness captured by W.E.B. Du Bois's influential formation of double consciousness. Du Bois contemplates, "One ever feels his twoness, --An American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."[76] In so many words, he instructs the boys 'to be on their toes,' to be ready to

[76] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1994), 4.

physically maneuver through spaces where they will definitely encounter venomous opposition.

Changing the Game: 'Colored Ball' to Basketball

The boys' movements reflect their engagement in their everyday lives: aesthetically scattered. The Black and white boys learn that they both seem to struggle with the embodiment of their racial identity, not really sure how it should materialize. How do youth embody the ideology of their progenitors? Early on, for instance, the audience witnesses a flashback of Viola Richardson admonishing her son Calvin Richardson while cleaning the Roberts's residence. We hear, "Stop calling him Edgar. Call him Mr. Edgar. You ain't never tell 'em they lied or they wrong or they anything they don't wanna hear."[77] Confused by his mother's logic, Calvin inquires, "Then what am I supposed to say?" His mom responds emphatically, "nothing." Here, we learn Calvin grew up playing with Edgar while Calvin's mother cleaned the house of Edgar's family. As the two boys come of age, they are separated by the white arbitrators of Jim Crow law, for which to Calvin seems irrational. As a kid, Calvin learned to tell the truth and decorum, and yet his mother now tells him to play along with contradictions of the white people that surround him. In another example towards the play's finale, new integrated teams are made, and Wesley ardently and repeatedly exclaims to his teammate Nathan, "Stop calling me Mr. Wesley!" I hear the distress in Wesley's voice despite

[77] *Separate and Equal* has not yet been published. All dialogue quoted in this chapter is taken from my notes after witnessing the live production in September 2018.

his usually jovial and goofy demeanor throughout the duration of the play. Watching these teens at play reminds the witness that not everything is static, routine and align with their parent's cultural logic. While the parents deliver their lines standing still, the boys dialogue in motion which illuminates their proclivity for imitation and embodied knowledge across racial boundaries.

Particularly, there are elegant combinations between Nathan (the tallest actor) who keeps having possession of the invisible ball and Jeff (the shortest actor) who is trying to steal the ball away for his team. What is supposed to be a duel between Nathan and Jeff, also appears as a duet. Towards the beginning of the play, Jeff exhibits his superiority complex when he *permits* the Black boys who were on the court first to remain when his crew shows up. He tells them, "You are going to play *colored ball* on the messed up, crummy side, and we're going to play *basketball* on this here nice white side." In making this distinction between an unknown sport and a recognizable American-invented sport, Jeff reinforces the Black boys' exclusion from American leisure and underscores the racial logic of the United States that denies non-White Americans access to the same privileges and advantages as white Americans. Moreover, when the teams play against each other, Nathan's and Jeff's bodies move in synchronization, limb for limb on the same rhythm as they traverse across the court. The other four other players move around them. In a sense, these moments between two players on opposing teams are like the staging of a monologue without words. The spotlight is on the two players of differing skin complexion and stature. Their bodies move as one though

their intentions are starkly different—one to score for his team, the other to turn over the possession. The duel/duet highlights a mutually shared exchange between a Black player and a white player on the basketball court, offering a refutation to the legitimacy of segregation motivated by White supremacist ideals that undergird Jim Crow laws. As Nathan stands higher from the ground than Jeff, this moving portrayal flips the dominant script held by 1950s white southerners who considered Black people inferior to them. In other words, these brief instances representationally set both races on an equal playing field, orienting them towards an openness they had not experienced before.

Furthermore, Nathan's achieves a few dunks that are represented with the efforts of other players. The players perform a choreographed lift that raises Nathan up at a diagonal toward the space where the imaginary hoop exists. In these apparently majestic moments, purple lighting shines on the trio. Dunks were not a part of the movement vocabulary in 1950s basketball. Though anachronistic to the plot, a twenty-first century audience easily recognizes the move. The presence of dunking in the 2018 production of *Separate and Equal* not only enhances the theatricality of the event, but more importantly conveys urgency in the objective of the oppressed racialized body to be elevated, to spectacularly breakaway from the original rules of the basketball play undergirded by the racial prejudices the players bring to the court. At one point, Jeff gets frustrated as he feels this movement is changing the rules of the game. However, Jeff's accusation

is technically unjustified given there is no stipulation made during the game that articulates dunks are not allowed.

Dunking in *Separate and Equal* signifies radical and improvisational action. Nathan's dunks are a *staged* improvisation that emphasized to the audience the Black body's ingenuity to riff off of constraints. By this, I mean that Nathan utilized his athleticism to create something new that pushed the limits of something old or standard. He was not breaking the rules, he was merely creating from the boundaries. I liken Nathan's athleticism to musical artistry in my interpretation of dunking in *Separate and Equal*. Similar to the way that jazz musicians play at the highest level of intensity through solo improvisation that can occur at various points within the total performance, dunks raise the stakes of the basketball performance. Musicologist Paul Berliner describes improvisation as "transforming the melody into patterns bearing little or no resemblance to the original model or using models altogether alternative to the melody as the basis for inventing new phrases."[78] Here, the melody, or the standard, of lay-ups and assists are transformed into a drive to the basket and a dunk (as a movement phrase) that halt the other players. Berliner provides examples of how and where in the music a musician might offer an improvised phrase. He articulates, "an individual improvises an introduction to the piece before the group's entrance, or a cadenza at the piece's conclusion, or a short 'break' passage, during which the other players suspend their performance."[79] Nathan

[78] Berliner, Paul E, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 70.

provoked a kinesthetic response from audience members by shifting their gaze upward as he is raised off the floor towards the hoop by the other players to complete the dunk. Like a jazz musician's "break" passage aurally, Nathan visually elucidates a "break" within the structure of the basketball game.

To choose several jazz melodies as the soundscape of the play was apt in articulating the unfolding dynamics between the six players on the court as they handled the invisible ball and essentially each other. Musicologist Paul E. Berliner writes:

> Yet jazz artists commonly perform without musical scores and without a specialized conductor to coordinate their performances. They may never have met before the event nor played together in any other setting. Contributing further to the mystique surrounding jazz is the transient and unique nature of jazz creations; each performance's evolving ideas, sustained momentarily by the airwaves, vanish as new developments overtake them, seemingly never to be repeated.[80]

The production of jazz, as Berliner indicates, is a transient confluence of musical ideas incited from a meeting of players doing activity with the common goal of creation within certain limitations without a director's enforcement. These limitations are perhaps the meter, the key and the kinds of chord progressions. The jazz players may have never met nor rehearsed together before, which illuminates a unique dynamic of familiarity through musical craft rather than through social life. For the duration of time, they become an

[79] Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, 70.

[80] Paul E. Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, 1.

ensemble. And, following their engagement, each person walks away having been a part of a musical experience that connects them to particular moments in time. The process of completing a pick-up game of basketball is not so different in the sense that players' dynamics on the court impact how they may relate to one another their social life off the court. The process of beginning the pick-up game in *Separate and Equal* imitates real life. While Nathan, Emmett and Calvin are passing, dribbling, shooting on one side of court, Edgar, Jeff and Wesley enter wanting to do the same activities on the other side of the court. Soon after, the boys agree to play a pick-up game of basketball to a set number of points. The common goal is to score 20 points. However, the team who scores 20 points first wins the game. The limitations include that the ball must stay within the parameters of the court, players must dribble the ball when traveling on the court and no foul play like biting, pushing, tripping of opponent. The individuals within each trio must depend on each other by treating each other as equal participants. To be a part of a team inherently challenges ego as one must share the spotlight with others.

Additionally, playing basketball is not a silent endeavor. Players are yelling to communicate with teammates as well as in order to trip up opponents. Smack talk runs rampant; jeering of the opponent can teeter on playful and downright mean. When the original trios integrate, each trio of both Black and white bodies must find common ground. Shared rules and civility must be extended to every member of the team. These boys encounter themselves on the court, and then have to grapple with whom they want to be when they leave the court after

producing sweat, laughter, silliness and empathy with the other boys. Like trios of jazz musicians who create musical melodies together, these boys create configurations with their basketball playing for a duration of time that requires every single member's presence. The game comes to impose a shared sociality on them. The Black players' virtuosity when playing what Jeff initially considers "colored ball" temporarily convinces him and his two white teammates to play against/with the Black boys. Through competition and risk, the Black boys convince the white boys that they too are playing basketball.

Likewise, the six boys' attentiveness to playing the same game well motivates them to actively listen to one another's voices during the competition. For instance, during a water break from playing, they deliver opposing perspectives of their social existence in the American South via song. The white trio appears to spontaneously break out singing the popular Confederate song "I Wish I was in Dixie" in front of the Black trio. The Black trio remains still and silent while the white trio sings. Immediately thereafter, the Black trio sings the negro spiritual "Hold On (Keep Your Hand on the Plow)" while the white trio remains still and silent. The Black trio's slower and solemn rendition of "Hold On" starkly contrasts the white trio's jovial rendition of "I Wish I was in Dixie." Similar to the mystique of collectively spontaneous, musical creations, their diverse sounds momentarily meet before vanishing. These songs serve as a point of connection between the trios prompts the integration of teams.

The (basketball) play within the (theatrical) play reveals that the ephemeral reality of performance has a lasting effect on the

social lives of the boys thereafter. We see this evidenced when we follow Wesley through his character development. In the beginning of the play, we learn of his personal insecurity regarding his heavy weight and drunken father who is also an upstanding Civil Rights attorney. We learn of his inability to stand on his own moral decisions in that there is a brief flashback scene where he recognizes the mistreatment of Black kids in his neighborhood but looks the other way. By the end of the play, the police again approach the basketball court and catches the boys playing ball together. One of the police officers immediately arrives to an inaccurate conclusion that the Black boys are trying to jump the white boys. Uncle is struck to the ground by an officer when he attempts to speak on the boys' behalf. On edge because their integrated game has been exposed and Uncle unexpectedly injured, the boys are eager to leave but before they can depart, commotion erupts, and a frivolous altercation ensues over a player's shirt left on the court. When officer Kidgloves misunderstands the dispute and suddenly pulls out his gun, Wesley instinctually steps in to defend his teammate Nathan. The delicate balance of bonding between the boys is abruptly interrupted by the police. To Wesley's surprise, his defense this time is fatal as he gets shot mistakenly by the police officer who abruptly reacted towards a perceived threat. He, the white body, did not expect the white police officer to shoot him. However, in an instant, the trigger was pulled and could not be retracted. Now on the floor, lay a dead Wesley and beaten up Uncle on the basketball court.

It is the immediate finality of Wesley's death that cuts through the play's progression like a musical note gone terribly wrong. Silence quickly permeates the atmosphere as the characters seem to recognize the devastation of Wesley's unearned death. He seemingly is "punished" for defending Nathan during a scuffle which is perceived out of context and misunderstood by a police officer. What begins to gradually turn into a good time amongst peers is brought back to the reality of Jim Crow law. The mimed gun is cocked and aimed at Nathan despite Nathan not posing a threat worthy of a bullet. This moment in the play resonates with the continuing reality of police brutality against countless Black bodies in the United States whose acts of submission are obstinately ignored by police officers. With the murder of George Floyd at the hands of police officers in 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement has gained momentum and international attention in exposing the corrupt police system within the United States. Officers of the law have associated blackness with criminality and have been absolved of accountability and punishment for murdering unarmed Black individuals. *Separate and Equal's* representation of twentieth century Jim Crow Alabama offers a purview into, as Christina Sharpe puts it, the "precarities of the ongoing disasters of the rupture of chattel slavery."[81]

The audience witnesses the story of misunderstanding unfold; they see the gun come up and point towards the Black male. They see who the gun is intended for and who steps in. They see the police officer

[81] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 5.

Kidgloves astonished as soon as he realizes that he has shot Wesley instead of his initial target. Oddly, Kidgloves does not live up to his given nickname. Instead of being in control of the situation and treating it with special consideration, he immediately and violently reacts. I do not think the officer intended to shoot anyone initially; the raising of his gun was to intimidate the Black boys and assert his authority. But, when one is holding a firearm and steeped in a hateful ideology protected by laws that spawn a false perception of individuals with a darker complexion, things can quickly spiral out of control. By the audience getting a front row seat to the drama, perhaps they see that the entirety of the situation is wrong. Death should have never been on the table as a possibility over a basketball game. And yet, *that* basketball game costs a boy his life. Regardless of the individual's race, this young male lost his life.

As his guilt seeps in, the police officer rehearsed and forcefully demanded that the white bystanders (the other white officer, Jeff and Edgar) support an alternate recounting of events that led up to Wesley's death. Kidgloves wants the bystanders to affirm that he was attacked by Nathan and the other Black boys and pulled out his gun in self-defense. As an audience member, the shooting scene ushered a shift in the atmosphere. It acutely resonates with the everyday scenes of violence circulated via media that showcase brutality towards Black people at the hands of the police. The responsibility as police officers to protect and serve is obfuscated by the racial prejudices etched into their psyche. The constant surveillance and racial discrimination of the Black body

enforced by officers (who serve as representatives of the state apparatus) produces an experiential overlap among Black people who witness in one way or another Black bodies throughout history being transformed into spectacle and specimen. Moreover, Fanon's racial epidermal schema sheds light on this embodied experience of blackness and contextualizes the caged reality the Black boys of *Separate and Equal* want to escape through basketball play.

The play's title, *Separate and Equal*, alludes to the phrasing "separate but equal" bolstered during the Jim Crow era emerging in 1890 and supported in legal doctrine within the United States Constitutional Law. The U.S. Supreme Court decision on the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* stated that racial segregation did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, an amendment that guaranteed protection to all people under the law. Considering the play was presented in partnership with the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and the Birmingham Metro NAACP, I expected *Separate and Equal* to explicitly advocate for social justice. Racial discrimination and police brutality remain active decades since the Jim Crow era, and there has been an influx of media coverage in the last few years of Black athletes in protest. Nevertheless, the theatrical production's command on racial relations is in its timing, and the balletic choreography that hybridizes sport and dance is a compelling offering. There is nothing equal about the treatment of Black people in this play in comparison to their white counterparts. Yet, cordiality, enjoyment, and empathy are fostered among the Black and white teens through the game of basketball.

Chapter 3

The Renaissance of Crossing Over: Harlem, Basketball, and Rituals of Black Performance

Early twentieth century Harlem was a fertile representational space for Black artistic and athletic innovation. Kittitian immigrant Robert "Bob" L. Douglas (1882-1979) founded one of the first Black professional basketball teams, and by incorporating music into the sporting events and establishing of the first naming rights deal in basketball, he and his team laid the foundation for American professional basketball as we know it today. Douglas owned and coached the Renaissance Big Five also known as the New York Renaissance or the Rens for short from 1923 to 1949, leading them to a 2,318-381 record (.859). Virtually unstoppable, the team won over eighty percent of their games throughout their twenty-six year existence, winning 88 games consecutively in their 1932-1933 season and the champion title at the first World Professional Basketball Tournament in 1939. Constructed by the Black-owned Sacro Realty Company as one of the most popular spots for Black social affairs and athletic contests, the Renaissance Ballroom and Casino in Harlem provided their ballroom for the team's basketball games.[82] Locally known as the Rennie, the entertainment complex was located at 150 W 138th Street, on the corner of Seventh Avenue in New York City, in the mid-1930s.[83] In turn for the

[82] During the 1930s there was also a brief trend of playing games on theater stages, with teams like the Brooklyn Jewels playing in the Brooklyn Paramount Theater, and the Kate Smith Celtics playing in Manhattan's Hippodrome. (FreeDarko High Council, *The Undisputed Guide to Pro Basketball History*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010), 18.

[83] Variants of the name include the Renaissance Theatre Building, Renaissance Casino & Theatre, and Renaissance Casino Ballroom.

ballroom being the Rens' home court, the team would become the namesake of the Ballroom and Casino in order to advertise the venue. Douglas took over as manager of the Renaissance Ballroom and Casino in 1932. The venue averaged about six dances every week in the year. The *Afro-American* claims, "It is through these contacts that Douglas bases his claim to know everybody in New York." The renowned Vernon Andrade and his orchestra, hired by Douglas, played frequently at the Rennie, and Andrade's musical arrangements greatly inspired the choreography of Lindy Hop pioneer Frank Manning and the sounds of famous bandleaders like Fletcher Henderson and Chick Webb. Douglas started many people on successful performance careers, such as Earl "Snakehips" Tucker (entertainer who popularized "snakehips" dance in 1920s Harlem), Chink Collins (tap dancer), Harlan Lattimore (singer), Ella Gordon (ballet and tap dancer), Peter Pan Kiddies (tap dancer) and Myron Carlton "Tiny" Bradshaw (jazz bandleader, singer, composer, pianist). [84]

To unearth the gems Harlem has to offer, one has to understand all of what Harlem endured and became through its associated images and symbols. "Harlem is a state of mind," declares Dewey Roscoe Jones in his 1932 article in *The Chicago Defender*. "People there have achieved social equality, yet there is a dance hall at 125th Street where the brother is still just a part of the outside scenery…Harlemites live in palaces on Sugar Hill and in hovels in the jungles. Harlem is heaven and it is hell, depending on the way you

[84] Wilbur Young, "Harlem Ballroom Manager Says He Knows Everybody in New York," *Afro-American*, January 9, 1937, ProQuest.

look at it," he continues."[85] Moreover, Langston Hughes prefaces the unpredictable shifts of Harlem within his book-length poem about the neighborhood called *A Montage of a Dream Deferred*, likening his pivots and turns in theme and style within his poem to the African American musical style of be-bop. He writes be-bop is "marked by conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and impudent interjections, broken rhythms, and passages sometimes in the manner of the jam session, sometimes the popular song, punctuated by the riffs, runs, and disc-tortions of the music of a community in transition."[86] Within this analogy, Hughes essentially considers it necessary to layer symbols introduced in his poetry upon symbols introduced in his comparison to music in order to describe Harlem. In other words, the intricate soul of Harlem or its culture is unearthed through music and dance. For the Black inhabitants of early twentieth century Harlem, the neighborhood however appeared as a series of contradictions; an atmosphere of light and shadows; of joy and sorrow; of transition. Yet, it was also a muse, a slow seduction to writers, musicians, performing artists and athletes. Despite other professional Black basketball teams briefly existing in cities such as Philadelphia, Pittsburg, Cleveland, and Chicago; the Renaissance Big Five was set apart by not only their premier skills and exceptional record but also by the city they lived in.

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[85] Dewey Roscoe Jones, "Harlem a City of Tin Gods; Visitors Under Magic Spell," *The Chicago Defender*, 19 November 1932, 10, ProQuest.

[86]Langston Hughes, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, edited by Arnold Rampersad (New York: Estate of Langston Hughes, 1995), 387. Though the poem suite was published in the '60s, this poem "A Dream Deferred" among others was written in the 1920s.

This chapter investigates how the New York Renaissance Team became a dynamic of American basketball culture and obtained legitimacy in the eyes of their Black and white opponents during the Jim Crow era of the 1920s and 1930s through their movement on the court. I assert that the team's place of origin in Harlem and a ballroom as well as their proximity to the sophisticated and experimental nature of jazz tradition inspired their style of play and consecutive victories. Like Langston Hughes's poem, I am invested in the pivots and turns the Rens perform that I link to the larger African American aesthetic structures. John Issacs (1915-2009), a former Rens player, declared, "Your feet have to dance. You can't play ball if you don't have dancing feet. If you have bad feet, you're not going anywhere."[87] John Issacs marries dancing and playing basketball in order to underscore that they are two sides of the same coin. Not only does he articulate what he perceives as fundamental to the game of basketball, but he also alludes to the cultural conditions from which this convergence emerged.

The Conditions of Harlem

Major African American institutions resided around W53rd street between Sixth and Seventh Avenues. These included: Black political and social clubs, Mt. Olivet Baptist church, St. Benedict's Catholic Church, offices of the major African American fraternal societies, two

[87] Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, *On the Shoulder of Giants: The Greatest Basketball Team You Never Heard Of*, directed by Deborah Morales, (Manhattan Beach, CA: Iconomy Multimedia, 2011), DVD.

hotels for African Americans, and small businesses. The intellectual and cultural center for Black New Yorkers in the first decades of the twentieth century, the Young Men Christian Association also known as the YMCA. held lectures, concerts, plays, liberal arts classes, and courses in industrial skills.[88] At the turn of the century, Manhattan was the central of Black vaudeville, with actors and actresses like Bert Williams, George Walker, Ada Overton Walker, and James Weldon Johnson. Many outstanding actors, artists and songwriters lived on W53rd street and gathered at James "Jimmie" Marshall Hotel to socialize and discuss problems of the race. It was, as James Weldon Johnson recalled, "an alluring and tempting world."[89] Most of these performers earned money that would have staggered the imaginations of most African Americans in the neighborhood working menial labor jobs.

It took an entire creative arts movement to illuminate the intricacies of the Harlem space—an unprecedented intersection of race, class and art-making in the United States. This Black creative movement of the early twentieth century goes by various names— the Harlem Renaissance, the New Negro Renaissance, the New Negro Movement, the Negro Renaissance, the Jazz Age—and has a few origin stories. Several scholars, particularly those invested in the study of literature, believe the movement began on March 21, 1924 with the convening of Black writers at the Civic Club. Despite not having a

[88] Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto, Negro New York, 1890-1930*, 2nd Edition, (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, [1971] 1996), 120.

[89] Richard Carlin and Kinshaha Holman Conwill, *Ain't Nothing Like the Real Thing: How the Apollo Theater Shaped American Entertainment*, (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2010.

singular ideological or stylistic standard, it was an explosion of cultural production. The movement, though anchored in Harlem, drew inspiration from and extended inspiration to Black communities across the country and beyond. Its resonances touched upon every aspect of the African American experience, including politics and social development, particularly from the 1920s and 1930s by way of literature, critical writing, music, theater, musical theater, and the visual arts.

For Black New Yorkers, the early years of 1900s marked not only a new century, but a transformation in the way of Black life. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, white Harlem witnessed an influx of Blacks, initially because of land speculation and later as a result of World War I and a decline in the southern agricultural economy. Black newspapers, like *The Chicago Defender* and *The Pittsburg Courier*, depended on Black migrants for support and consequently changed its ads critical to migration into promoting urban settlements. The *New York Amsterdam News*, for example, published articles and advertisements publicizing the opportunities available in the cities of the North and West along with first-person accounts of success. In one article titled, "How I Encouraged the Migration of the Negro," the writer Joseph Columbus Manning provides with great delight an anecdote regarding his contribution to Black migration to the North. In particular, he recounts his initial meeting with a young and industrious Black man in Alabama named Marcellus Owen who he encounters again a few years later in New York at the Pennsylvania Station. Referring to Marcellus as "my friend," Manning notes that the

Marcellus of their second encounter had grown to be a "large sized man" and appeared "New York accustomed and attuned." A man, for which Manning considered "formerly *of* Alexander City" had moved in order to *be*[come] a New Yorker [emphasis mine]. His semantics distinguish between the seemingly passive and impersonal existence of a Black man living in the South and the active and definitive presence he possesses in the North, particularly in New York. Manning also a quotation from Marcellus that reads, "I owe my being up here and making good wages to you Mr. Manning, for you put it into my mind to come North. I am sending fifty dollars a month back home to the old folk, and I feel like I am a man up here just like you use to tell me I would feel." [90] As a staunch campaigner for Black migration, Manning wanted to instill in his readers his earnest commitment to the advancement of Black people, pride in being a Black New Yorker, and desire to support Black migrants coming North as members of a larger community.

Despite Harlem being promoted as a land of opportunity, Harlem's profound influx of Black migration within two decades also contributed to the emergence of slum conditions. Historian Cary D. Wintz observes, "The word "Harlem" evoked strong and conflicting images among African Americans during the first half of the twentieth century. Was it the Negro metropolis, Black Manhattan, the political, cultural, and spiritual center of African America, a land of plenty, a

[90] Joseph Columbus Manning, "How I Encouraged the Migration of the Negro," *The New York Amsterdam News*, February 12, 1930, 20, ProQuest.

city of refuge, or a Black ghetto and emerging slum?" [91] Between 1910 and 1920, the city's Black population increased over fifty percent. "The best of Harlem was gone," an old white resident lamented in 1913, "and it will be all colored in ten years."[92] By the 1930s, the neighborhood contained substantial congestion, deplorable housing conditions, and underemployment. The average African American Harlemite did menial, unskilled jobs that paid low wages, work that was commonly regarded as negro jobs. From 1920-1930, the Black population increased 115% to 320,000 people, less than a quarter being New York natives. The quick settlement of a heterogenous Black population coincided with the reactive population change, the migrations of white from all areas of Manhattan to the other boroughs. Between 1920 and 1930, 118,000 whites left Harlem and 87,000 African Americans moved in. Many of the homes left were significantly deteriorated.[93]

Harlem acquired the reputation as an open city. Whatever you wanted in whatever quantity could be bought there, from spiritualists, African medicine men, storefront churches, vices and gambling. Harlem came to represent that dark side of America's largest city in more ways than one. Gambling and bootleggers found it profitable to try their trade in Harlem. Prostitution and the death rate were also significantly higher in comparison to the rest of New York city. Food

[91] Cary D. Wintz, "The Harlem Renaissance: What Was It, and Why Does It Matter," Humanities Texas, February 2015, https://www.humanitiestexas.org/news/articles/harlem-renaissance-what-was-it-and-why-does-it-matter.

[92] Osofsky, *Harlem*, 121.

[93] Aaron Silverman, "Black Mecca," Lecture, History of African Americans, Scripps College, Claremont, CA, February 14, 2012.

joints, barrel houses, and cabarets supplied Harlemites with moonshine, while drug stores, sweet shops, and delicatessens served as fronts for speakeasys. Since Black working mothers had little time to care for their children, poverty and family instability led to a high incidence of juvenile delinquency. It was no wonder that crime, poverty, and narcotic addictions became a serious problem, and Harlem became the center of the city's drug trade. For Harlem had become, in a way, a prison without bars, but it was also the metropolitan center of Black life throughout the world.

When business depression hit in 1930, "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" was the slogan that was used in an effort to organize Black Harlem and to stimulate economic reform in the Black community. A Race Loyalty Button, purple and white with a sphinx head, was worn by Harlemites that symbolized the philosophy behind the movement: to buy from Black businesses when possible, which would help create jobs for Blacks and boost Black business and pride in Black ancestry.[94] The campaign also sought to boycott stores in Harlem that refused to hire Blacks in white collar positions, a drive that began quietly in the 1920s and was slowly receiving attention. The effort grew in the 1930s when picketing took place, but Blacks were divided on the issue. Though more Blacks were eventually hired, Black unemployment in Harlem was 60% according to a January 1934 radio address by James J. Hoey,

[94] Floyd J. Calvin, "Harlem Business Men Ask 'Race Loyalty' Pledge: 'Don't Buy Where You Can't Work," will be Slogan Used in Fight' David Toles, President of Organization Says Millions of Dollars are Slipping Through Fingers of Business Race Men Yearly," *Pittsburg Courier*, March 7, 1931, 5, ProQuest.

U.S. Collector of Internal Revenue.[95] However, the real contribution of the movement proved to be political mobilization of Harlem. The Black community discovered strength and power in numbers.[96] It is important to situate the Rens within the conditions of Harlem and the Black community because it underscores the particular kinds of experiences players may have witnessed or incurred as Harlemites. A purview into the economic and social disparity of Harlem at this time also highlights the necessity of the Rens' basketball performances as a source of entertainment and distraction from these particular hardships.

For the Culture: The Rens and the Black Community

If you have ever been to a basketball game, one easily hears the cheers of the fans, the bouncing of the ball, and the scuff sounds of the player's feet as they shuffle, pivot, go and stop abruptly. John Isaac's statement mentioned earlier indicates a keen awareness of his own feet, and the feet of basketball players generally. He indicates, perhaps from realization, that feet have to dance. They have to commit to rhythm and stylized motions either rehearsed or improvised. Feet are very important to dancers and athletes. Feet ground the body, providing security and a launching pad for fast and furious or light and airborne movement. Tap, put simply, is an interplay of rhythms and

[95] "Sees NRA Code as Hindrance to Race: 'Last to be Hired-First Fired' Is Order of the Day," *The Chicago Defender*, 20 January 1934, 10, ProQuest.

[96] Cheryl Greenberg, *"Or Does It Explode?" Black Harlem in the Great Depression*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 116, 118, 136-138.

amplification of sound by the feet. [97] Dancing feet are ones always in preparation and anticipation of the next move. As these rhythms become more complicated due to syncopation, polyrhythm or double time, the footwork does as well. Contemporary tap dancer Savion Glover notes, "I know my feet, all of them. It's like my feet are the drums and my shoes are the sticks."[98] He essentially reveals that knowing one's feet is about knowing their utility, and the potentiality of rhythm they provide. The New York Renaissance basketball team also had a keen awareness of their feet as they were known for impeccable teamwork, excellent defensive and offensive footwork and lightening passes up and down the court that disoriented their opponents and hid the strategies of their unique plays.

Now, imagine the Renaissance Ballroom and Casino, the home of the Rens. A long, tall sign sticks out from the red brick building. There is a bar inside, and the large dance floor on the second story has a reflecting glass ball hanging right down over the middle. This place is the most famous ballroom in Harlem, at one time more popular for big name society dances than the Savoy Ballroom (at 596 Lenox Ave, between 140th and 141st Streets in Harlem). The lighting scheme spotlights the well-respected bandleader Vernon Andrade and his

[97]Sally R. Sommer, "Tap Dance" in *The International Encyclopedia of Dance*, eds. Selma Jeanne Cohen and Dance Perspectives Foundation, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) Although I use the term tap throughout this paper to refer to the dance form, the term was not used until the first few years of the 1900s. Before then, the dance was referred to as buck-and-wing, buck dancing or flat-footed dancing. It was recognized as step, clog, and jig dancing. It was not until after 1910 that the recognizable metal plates were attached to the bottoms of the heel and toe of the shoes. Previously, an average tap shoe was made of leather with a wooden sole either split at the ball of the foot or with a wooden piece set into the toe and heel.

[98] Savion Glover, *Savion!: My Life in Tap*, (New York: William Morrow and Company Inc., 2000), quoted in Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 108.

orchestra on a spacious, decorated stage playing a swing tune that has folks on the floor dancing the Lindy Hop, a combination of improvisations, breakaways, swing-outs and the Charleston's "instantly recognizable syncopated two-beat pattern characterized uptown by a dexterous sideways sliding of the feet and downtown by a skipping sideways movement."[99] Their feet—one foot at a time— leap off the floor in swift, staccato steps in conversation with the voluminous sound steadied by the percussive pulse of the drummer Jimmy Parker (who was also a professional boxer at the time). [100] The orchestra's big band sound is familiar as a regular act at the Rennie. The band's first set finishes, and the dance floor is cleared. Folks dressed in their evening attire, perhaps one can imagine some of them perspiring from their vigorous exercise, enthusiastically file into the "uniquely and handsomely designed" loges on the perimeter of the dance floor.[101] The lights shift to showcase the next act. Enters onto the dance floor the Robert Douglas and the Renaissance Big Five to compete against a local team. The reflecting glass ball hanging in the middle now illuminates the players. The crowd cheers as they witness the "lightning passes and dazzling floorwork" that characterizes the Rens' style of play.[102] After another big win for the Rens, the two portable

[99] Terry Monaghan, "Why Study the Lindy Hop?" *Dance Research Journal* 33: no. 2 (Winter 2001/2002): 125.

[100] Clyde E. B. Bernhardt, "19. Vernon Andrade and His Society Orchestra, 1934-1937" in *I Remember: Eighty Years of Black Entertainment, Big Bands and the Blues*" (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 117.

[101] "Remodeling of Renaissance Casino is Now Complete," *New York Amsterdam News*, Aug. 28, 1929, ProQuest.

[102] Francis, "All Teams Seem to Look Alike to 'Bob' Douglas and His Famous Renaissance Basketball Crew These Days," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 25, 1929, ProQues

baskets at either end of the court and the wooden chairs for spectators are removed. The time is about 11:00 P.M. The audience and even some of the players return to the floor from their seats to celebrate and dance to another set from the house band.

Although the Rens played games all over New York, the Midwest and even parts of the South, their origin story and rituals carried elsewhere were fostered within the Black community of Harlem. Considering the dancing and the basketball game as a single art-making event, or a variety show of sorts, a shared ethos emerged among spectators, dancers, ball players and musicians. They all played an active role in the execution of the entertainment. The ballroom space afforded opportunities for experimentation with sound, transitions, footwork and audience participation. David "Nickey" Walker, a witness of the Renaissance team play, claims: "You could smell the action. They say you could smell the sweat. Two guys going against each other in a confined area. You're right on top of the action."[103] Through rehearsed and improvisational steps as part of an ensemble cast, the players, musicians and athletes, executed mastery of their talent. The basketball game itself (when the game clock is running) is one act or layer within an entire evening performance that actually began when the lights dimmed and the music started to play.

Through the study of the use of jazz aesthetics in theater, Omi Osun Joni L. Jones illuminates characteristics of a performance genre called theatrical jazz for which I contend were being embodied in the most unlikely space, the dance floor/basketball court/music stage of

[103] David Walker quoted in Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, *On the Shoulder of Giants, 2011*, DVD.

the Rennie. This theatrical jazz aesthetic not only "leans heavily on elements of jazz including ensemble and individual virtuosity, improvisation, polyrhythms, 'the bridge,' and 'the break,' [but] it also references the modern dance idioms, the blues sensibilities, the performance art antecedents, and the ancestral calling …"[104] Methexis, or group sharing, is achieved in practices of theatrical jazz because the knowledge is transferred through apprenticeship and genuine relationships between artists that create communities around art-making grounded in Black diasporic spirituality, aesthetics, and values. The interconnection between African-derived spiritual practices and jazz in theatrical art-making has roots in generations of community artists that seek to engage the mind, body, and spirit in notions of Black theater grounded in ritual practice and the centrality of the collective. The intermingling of musical artists, dancers, and athletes transformed the Rennie into a creative space for young people to identify their individual virtuosity and hone it within the concentric circles of methexis that included the basketball team, the band, and the audience members from the Black community.

Douglas exhibited his commitment to the community through entrepreneurship, leadership, and mentorship. He was the mastermind behind getting professional Black basketball to the place it got. He was the mastermind in teaching his team how to be a team; how to work together, communicate, to pass on rhythm, and to train hard. In 1935, as both Renaissance Ballroom and Casino manager and basketball coach,

[104] Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, *Theatrical Jazz: Performance, Ase and the Power of the Present*, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2015), 4.

Bob Douglas promoted and mentored two amateur basketball teams, the Rens Cubs and the Rens Juniors, with the aim to bring Black youth off the streets, redirect their excessive energy, and thereby possibly reduce gang and criminal activity. The idea had been so successful that the athletic club called the Renaissance Co-Eds, for which the Rens Cubs and the Rens Juniors were under, had grown to over 1000 members. One game each month was scheduled.[105] The two amateur teams benefitted the community and served as a recruiting system for the Renaissance Five. John Issacs actually played for the Rens Juniors before joining the Renaissance Big Five. [106] He, therefore, was reared from the age of adolescence in the spirit and culture of the organization. Two years later after the establishment of the Rens Cubs and Rens Juniors, Frankie Richardson, the assistant to Bob Douglas, organized the Harlem Yankees amateur team which also served as a farm team for the Renaissance Big Five. While the Rens played on the road, the Harlem Yankees played weekly Sunday night games at the Renaissance Casino, and like the Renaissance Big Five (where they often dominated during the third and fourth quarters of the game) the Harlem Yankees established themselves as a competitive second half team (Fig. 3.1).[107] Through apprenticeship and consistent commitment, Douglas and his associates created a fertile ground for young Black

[105] *New York Amsterdam News*, January 19, 1935, 11.

[106] "Golden Quint Puts up Fine Game to Win, *New York Amsterdam News*, February 2, 1935, 11, ProQuest.

[107] "Rens Farm Club in Debut Sunday: Meet Bronx Pros on Sunday Night," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 27, 1937, 17. The Yankees defeated the Bronx Pros, 41-23. There was scheduled dancing before and after the game, 6-10 p.m. and after 11p.m. with 50 cents admission; "Harlem Yankees Meet Frat All-Stars Saturday: Yanks Trounce Union Hill, *New York Amsterdam News*, January 8, 1938, 14-15, ProQuest.

males and females to become agents within their community and work against the stereotypes generated by white supremacy. He brought to light what was already true about the potential basketball offers to bring a community together. Basketball served as a functional tool to reaffirm the value of Black life and the beliefs of Black people.

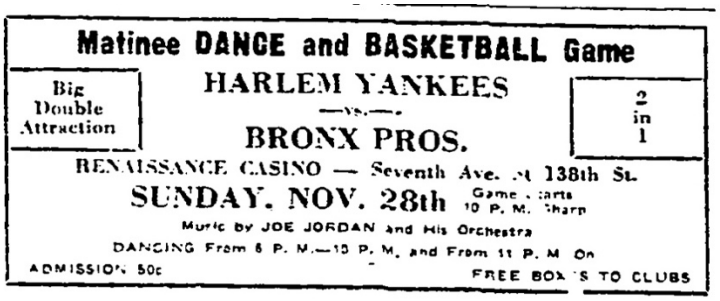


Figure 3.1. *Matinee Dance and Basketball Game*. Advertisement from *New York Amsterdam News*, November 27, 1937, 19, ProQuest.

Known in Black newspapers and around the community as Smiling Bob and even Uncle Bob, he defied the status quo of New York upper and middle class Blacks by coaching a professional basketball team.[108] Playing basketball for a living was untraditional; it had not yet achieved in the eyes of middle and upper class Blacks the status of a viable vocation. Instead, the affluent considered playing sports as leisure and associated organizing a team for profit or having to play basketball for money with working class individuals.[109] In other words, the one who received a salary for playing a sport, especially when it was not as popular as baseball or boxing, was considered of lower

[108] "Dan Burley's 'Confidentially Yours': Grand Old Man of Press Row Passes On, *New York Amsterdam News*, December 16, 1944, 1A and 8B.

[109] Susan Jane, "The New York Professional Black Basketball Team, 1923-1950" (dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 1996), 60.

economic status like stage performers in the early twentieth century. Nonetheless, Uncle Bob was a highly respected man in Harlem as well as in Black professional basketball. His credible reputation was even confirmed by survey. He came in second place with 53, 040 votes in The *New York Amsterdam News'* most-popular-person-in-Harlem contest; the realter Dundas Logan came in first place with 54, 970 votes. [110] The sportswriter for *The Pittsburgh Courier*, W. Rollo Wilson, even praised Bob, calling him "our friendly enemy, Smiling Bob Douglas" and saying "… If ever a man deserved the smiles of that benignant jade, Good Luck, it is Robert Douglas."[111]

Douglas also capitalized on Black media sources for the furthering of his community vision. Romeo Dougherty, editor of theater and sports for the *New York Amsterdam News*, was also one of Douglas's big supporters. Dougherty stated, "Douglas tried to remain out of basketball, but he was uncovered and brought back, and his many friends will wish him all the luck in the world. He has the best chance of his career of making good and we feel that he will take advantage of it."[112] By close friends, Dougherty was known as the "Sage of Union Hall Street" as he was an avid reader and often possessed a proclivity for philosophical and poetic commentary. His private library at his residence on Union Hall Street consisted of 2500 books,

[110] "Dundas Logan Wins Race: Most Popular Honors Go to Realter Here – Bob Douglas is Second As Simons Comes in Third in Race, *New York Amsterdam News*, February 9, 1935, 1, ProQuest. Douglas was also named most business-like.

[111] W. Rollo Wilson, "Eastern Snapshots," *The Pittsburg Courier*, November 3, 1923, 6, ProQuest.

[112] "'Smilin' Bob' Trots Out His New Renaissance Five and Makes Pro. Bow," *New York Amsterdam News*, October 24, 1923, 4, ProQuest.

including many rare works about Black people as well as Black newspapers and magazines. He also had his finger on the pulse of the happenings in Black theatrical and athletic expression in order to help artists and athletes be recognized by the public. Frances Dougherty, the wife of Romeo Dougherty, wrote several of the *New York Amsterdam News* articles about the Rens. Though only going by Frances with no surname in her articles, I acknowledge the Black female spectator that shaped the historical writing of the New York Renaissance's team's legacy.[113] The contributions of her and her husband not only demonstrated their investment in the Black community of artists, but it also raised the cachet of basketball performance to that of spectacular performance associated with theater and variety shows in the minds of readers who had yet witnessed the Rens play. Romeo and Frances Dougherty among a few other sportswriters developed the niche of Black sports writing, providing accounts of the Ren's triumphs and failures so that this all-Black professional men's basketball team's existence would not be omitted from American history.

Teamwork and passing set the Rens team apart from other professional basketball teams. At this time in basketball history, dribbling was not a principal device for ball movement and maneuvering around players in order to shoot the ball in the basket and score. Passing among teammates was, and still is, paramount in moving the

[113] "R.L. Dougherty, Veteran Sports Editor, Is Dead," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 16, 1944, 1A; "Romeo Dougherty, Noted Stage, Sports Scribe, Dies," *The Chicago Defender*, December 16, 1944, 9, ProQuest. These articles noted at Romeo Dougherty's passing that he was survived by his widow, Frances.

ball along the court. When an offensive player found themselves dribbling into a strong defender with no perceivable way around, they might hear teammates reminding them to, "get it [the ball] off your wrist," "treat it like a hot potato," "make it hum," "give and go."[114] John Wooden, ten-time UCLA Champion basketball coach who recalled playing against the Renaissance Big Five many times as a young athlete in the 1930s, remarked over sixty years later that the Rens were "the finest exponents of team play [he'd] ever seen."[115] Although players changed through the years, the style of play and ethos of the team centered on teamwork remained remarkably consistent and effective.

Sportswriters described the Rens with colorful language that informed the public of the Ren's earned prestige. *New York Amsterdam News* noted after the Rens versus Syracuse game in mid-December 1929:

> Bob Douglas' colored champions functioned like a well-regulated, well oiled, high compression machine, and sparkled like the purest of crystals in the bright sun. Their offensive plays were deadly in their precision, they were lightning fast in their execution of their moves, and in addition, they presented a defense, as impregnable as the Rock of Gibraltar."[116]

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[114] Cal Ramsey, former NBA player, quoted in Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, *On the Shoulder of Giants*, 2011, DVD.

[115] Susan Jane, "The New York Professional Black Basketball Team, 1923-1950" (dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 1996), 203. John Wooden commented on the Ren's performance in a letter to the author on 27 September 1994. He was a former forward for Purdue University, played on the St. Louis All-Star team against the Rens. Wooden held most every scoring record in the Big Ten Conference ("New York Rens Play St. Louis," *The Chicago Defender*, March 18, 1933, 8, ProQuest). Wooden was the highest paid player for the National Basketball League in the 1930s. He noted that players for Indianapolis Kautskys, another team Wooden played for, earned $50 per game with occasional bonuses for well-played games given to them in an envelope after each game.

[116] Frances, "Nat Holman, Foremost Star of Basketball, and His Syracuse Five Swept Off Their Feet By Renaissance Five, *New York Amsterdam News*, December 18, 1929, 16, ProQuest. The Rens defeated Syracuse, 47-27.

In another game that same month against the Passaic Russian (YMRA) team, the Rens gained a lead of eighteen points in the first ten minutes of the game. The sportswriter noted an "exhibition of passing that for its rapidity and deftness could not be surpassed."[117] Their bewildered opponents were dazzled by their passing accuracy and speed. And, six years later in March 1935 another Black newspaper described the Ren's consistent performance as:

> Passing like dazzling streaks of lightning, the Rens brought their fans to their feet time and time again. With Tarzan Cooper ably playing his famous role as pivot man down near the foul line, the ball was whipped into him with bullet-like speed and shot back like a vulcanized boomerang. It appears as if the Rens were hurling golf balls against a concrete wall, with the towering Tarzan playing the part of the wall and the ball bouncing back with the speed of a bullet."[118]

The Rens' performance on the basketball court carried a particular lexicon that was consistently present within articles of the 1920s and 1930s. Their overall performance can be perceived two ways. On the first level, words like *precise*, *deft*, and *machine* emphasizes both the intellectual and practical activity involved in ball play perfected through observation, practice and experimentation. On the second level, metaphoric phrases that include the words *sparkled*, *dazzling*, *deadly*, *vulcanized*, and *lightning*, evokes a god-like, herculean

[117] Francis, "Death Dealing Renaissance Wrecking Crew Unleashed Guns on the Passaic Russians Here Last Sunday," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 11, 1929, 14, ProQuest. The Rens defeated the Passaic Russian team, 61-44, with a score of 22-4 after the first ten minutes.

[118] Chester L. Washington, "Renaissance Routs Y.M.H.A. in Fast Game: Smith and Rick Lead Rens to 38-27 Victory," *Pittsburg Courier*, March 9, 1935, A4, ProQuest. The Rens defeated the Pittsburg YHMA, 38-27 at Duquesne University with 1500 spectators.

symbology that accentuates the aesthetic nature of the Rens' execution. Even in January 1939, a decade after the first passage, sportswriter Chester L. Washington Jr. of the *Pittsburg Courier* saw adroit execution, "For a perfect picture of precision and timing, watch the Renaissance floor machine clicking on all five." He continued, "Here you have harmony, color, skill, and showmanship all blended into a brilliant combination. Here one sees the rarest artistry of the courts at its best."[119]

While the Rens exhibited the "rarest artistry of the courts," the Harlem Globetrotters who were just as successful in terms of wins, perpetuated the trite stereotypes of Black males that circulated in early twentieth century performances of Blackface minstrelsy. Abe Saperstein, a Jewish businessman, organized the Globetrotters from Chicago's Savoy Five team in 1927. He deliberately used "Harlem" in the team's name so that the public knew that the Globetrotters were a Black team. The Globetrotters consistently used humor as a part of their games.

Carl Green, former player for Harlem Globetrotters, recalled that "Abe Saperstein is about the money, and he's about keeping you in your place. He was god."[120] The Globetrotters consistently used humor as a part of their games. Despite having great shooters and stellar ball handling, they would resort to "comical antics which had the huge

[119] Chester L. Washington, "'Sez Ches': Rens on a Rampage," *Pittsburg Courier*, January 7, 1939, 16, ProQuest.

[120] Carl Green, former player for Harlem Globetrotters quoted in Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, *On the Shoulder of Giants*, 2011, DVD.

crowds in fits of laughter for most of the forty minutes." [121] They were asked to assume this jolly and clownish role in order to increase popularity among white audiences and to generate money. The style of the Harlem Globetrotters starkly contrasted that of the Rens, as it gave into the stereotypes of Black people depicted in minstrelsy as innocently jolly, clown-like and primitive. Hans Nathan, author of the book *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* observes, "Minstrel dances were consciously worked out, for the stage demanded planned variety and it encouraged showmanship. The dancer was expected to excel in precision, speed, near-acrobatic flexibility and endurance, and stress jolliness and clownishness for their own sake." [122] The jolliness and clownishness, in particular, attempted to undercut the hardships of Black people and misrepresent them as clowns.

Douglas and the Rens represented the sensibilities of Harlem, constructions created for and by Black people for the renewal of their spirit and their social advancement. They created entertainment that met the needs and aspirations of the Black community. Hal Jackson, the first African American Radio Broadcaster indicated, "They [The Rens] were like gods when they come around the Harlem community, and everybody would know that they were around. Everybody wanted to meet the ball players."[123] The Harlem Globetrotters were not clearly

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[121] "Harlem Globe Trotters in Thrilling Win, 37 to 34," *The Chicago Defender*, February 22, 1936, 14, ProQuest.

[122] Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), 71.

[123] Hall Jackson quoted in Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, *On the Shoulder of Giants* 2011, DVD.

afforded this opportunity while they were fulfilling the convenient hegemonic distortions of the Black spirit of survival. By distinguishing himself against Black stereotypes considered exotic and entertaining, Saperstein sought to obtain mainstream acceptability in the burgeoning professional sports industry similar to the way some Jewish performers wore disparaging masks of Blackface in order to enter into the larger American Theater industry. In other words, Saperstein encouraged the Globetrotters to play great basketball while masking their experiences of double-consciousness.

Sports historian John Schleppi noted that Douglas used the term burlesque basketball to describe the Globetrotter's show.[124] Harlem Globetrotter recruit, Inman Jackson, for example would twirl a ball on his finger and roll the ball down his arm in the early 1930s on the court while playing. While many exciting basketball games were described in the newspapers as rough competition, one could imagine seeing this comic routine as a paradox or dissolution of the game's momentum in a heated moment. While stellar passing and shooting abilities proved to be entertaining, the Rens remained focused on their execution of basketball moves that facilitated the scoring of points, of winning. Carl Younger, brother of Rens player Eddie Younger, shared in an interview that the Rens were admired by young people and were great people on and off the court, "wearing Harlem like a dare…[with] a no-nonsense approach to the game, and … very,

[124] John Schleppi, professor emeritus of University of Dayton quoted in Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, *On the Shoulder of Giants*, 2011, DVD.

very tough suffocating kind of defense."[125] The exhibition had to be focused on winning at basketball, defending the hope that someday the world would see that being Black, or a "negro," meant champion not second-class citizen. They desired to earn the respect of fans with their character and work ethic, setting an example for Black youth to follow.

Saperstein's appropriation of Harlem's sensibilities and the distortion of Black male athletes for his financial gain would further elevate Bob Douglas and the Rens as the ambassadors of Harlem and Black America. The Globetrotters stated they had challenged the Rens for four years. According to the Rens though, the Globetrotters misinformed the public in saying that they had defeated the Rens, when the two teams had never met. The *Pittsburg Courier* suggested a two out of three series played in three large cities with a share of the gate donated to charity. This caused basketball fans to wonder if the Globetrotters meant business or if they were retreating from the challenge.[126] In all likelihood, they were backing down. Douglas preferred that his Rens not play Abe Saperstein's team, but was willing to in order to claim the unofficial pro title. Though fans desired to see a Renaissance-Globetrotters match-up, the Rens would not actually compete against the team from Chicago until March 1939.

The New York Renaissance and the Harlem Globetrotters were two of twelve teams at the first professional basketball tournament that took

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[125] Carl Younger quoted in *On the Shoulder of Giants,* 2011, DVD.

[126] "Want the Rens," Pittsburgh Courier, January 7, 1939, 17; "Globetrotters Afraid?" *Pittsburg Courier*, January 21, 1939, 17, ProQuest.

place at the Madison Street Armory in Chicago on March 26-28, 1939. This competition was the first time any Black professional team was allowed to compete against a white team for the official championship title. Organized by co-promoters Harry Hannin and Harry Wilson, the champion team would receive $1,000 with $10,000 distributed among all participating teams. [127] After the first day, the *Sheboygan Press* referred to the Rens as "brilliant," and stated, "The Renaissance displayed the most class, and to most observers, they appear to be the team to beat although anything can happen in a tournament of this kind." Approximately 3,000 spectators attended the afternoon games, and a capacity crowd of 6,500 were on hand at night. With the Globetrotter's defeat of the Chicago Harmons, 31-25, the Rens and the Globetrotters were scheduled to meet on Monday night. The winner would advance to the finals Tuesday night.[128] That Monday, the New York Rens beat the Harlem Globetrotters, 27-23.[129] The *Chicago Defender* noted, "At no time did the Globetrotters get a chance to put on an exhibition of ball handling or passing. They were guarded so close that most of their shots were from a distance." Experience, in addition to height

[127] *Chicago Herald and Examiner*, March 15, 1939, 26; *Sheboygan Press*, March 22, 1939,10. The twelve teams included: Chicago All-Americans (Harmons); New York Yankees; Harlem Globetrotters; Clarksburg Oilers; SPHAs (later withdraws from the tournament due to injuries and are replaced with the Illini Grads); New York Renaissance; Michigan House of David; Sheboygan Redskins; Fort Wayne Harvesters; Cleveland White Horses; Oshkosh All-Stars; and the New York Celtics.

[128] "Rens Beat Globe Trotters," *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 1, 1939, 16; Chester L. Washington, "'Sez Ches': Something to Crow About..," *Pittsburg Courier*, April 8, 1939, 16, ProQuest; *Chicago Herald and Examiner*, March 25, 1939, 23; *Oshkosh Daily Northern*, March 27, 1939, 15; "Renaissance Five Gains: Downs New York Yankees, 30-21, in Pro Basketball," *The New York Times*, March 27, 1939, p. 21, ProQuest. Interestingly, *The New York Times* article did not give any mention to the racial identity of either team.

[129] *Sheboygan Press*, March 27, 1939, 12. That Tuesday night, the team Oshkosh defeated Sheboygan, 40-23, which means Rens then would play Oshkosh for the final championship.

and defense, favored the Rens. The Rens won in the last fifteen seconds with a basket by Charles "Tarzan" Cooper.[130]

With the defeat of the Globetrotters in the semi-final round, the Rens faced the white team Oshkosh in the final game.[131] Charles "Tarzan" Cooper, William "Pop" Gates, "Puggy" Bell, "Wee Willie" Smith, Clarence "Fats" Jenkins, Eyre Saitch, and John Isaacs played for the Rens in the professional tournament. Isaacs noted during an interview about his experience that, "Oshkosh, we played them often enough, but they were also big, but they couldn't jump with us, and that was the unfortunate part about it. And they couldn't pass with us, but they would roll you over if you got in their way you know."[132] Three thousand fans, mostly Oshkosh fans, witnessed the Ren's win. The Rens led for the entire game though they lost Tarzan Cooper and Wee Willie Smith due to fouls in the second half. Oshkosh displayed erratic shooting and wild passing as compared to the confident play of the Rens. The Rens won $1000 for their efforts. [133] The headline to the small article in *The New York Times* reads, "Renaissance Wins, 34-25, --Negro Five Beats Oshkosh for National Pro Title." News coverage of

[130] "Rens Defeat Harlem Globe Trotters: N.Y. Quint Advances to Finals," *The Chicago Defender*, April 1, 1939, 8, ProQuest.

[131] *Sheboygan Press*, March 28, 1939, 12; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 28, 1939, 19. Oshkosh had defeated the Rens earlier in the season, 55-33, but lost to them later in the season, 42-38. The Rens came into the tournament with a 109-7 record; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 29, 1939, 21; Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, *On the Shoulder of Giants,* 2011, DVD. Charles Edwards, son of Oshkosh player Leroy Edwards, stated that the Oshkosh played against the Rens 33 times, and they won 17 of those times.

[132] John Issacs, former Rens player, quoted in Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, *On the Shoulder of Giants,* 2011, DVD.

[133] "Renaissance Wins, 34-25: Negro Five Beats Oshkosh for National Pro Title, *The New York Times*, March 29, 1939, 28; *Chicago Herald and Examiner*, March 29, 1939, 23; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 29, 1939, 21.

Black teams rarely occurred in *The New York Times* though the white community was aware and attended their games. However, the win of championship title for the Rens set a precedent in being a part of "All The News That's Fit to Print."[134] Since the founding of the club in 1923, it was Douglas' desire to see his team officially declared world champions. He had finally achieved his goal (Fig. 3.2).

Black Bodies Obtaining Legitimacy Through Movement

Sport is integral to the production of culture. Black Basketball was symbolic for Harlem working class Blacks in the 1920s, as the boxing champion Jack Johnson had been for the Black community only a decade earlier. By defeating white teams, Black teams attained legitimacy among their white counterparts, at least on the basketball court. Put another way, their Black bodies initially considered illegitimate because of darker complexion obtained legitimacy through movement. Professional basketball players, like boxers, had to demonstrate aggressive behavior and execute their attacks properly (shots, footwork, defense, crossovers, combinations) while maintaining elegant mobility and tactical strategy based on the underlying psychology of the contest. Sport set the conditions to allow these seemingly disparate qualities to emerge collectively in one body. I will discuss the media coverage of Jack Johnson winning the world heavyweight title against James (Jim) "White Hope" Jefferies for the purpose of illustrating a connection between Jack Johnson and the New

[134] *See* the Masthead of *The New York Times* (e.g. March 29, 1939, 22). In the early twentieth century, *The New York Times* preferred to cover amateur intercollegiate games over professional games.

York Renaissance basketball team. Johnson's display and performance of his Black body unleashed a ripple effect in the rise of Black athletes who challenged familiar perceptions of Black bodies under the regime of white supremacy.



HAPPY WORLD CHAMPIONS OFF FOR HOME

The New York Renaissance basketball team, world professional champions as they gathered in the lobby of the Hotel Grand Wednesday morning, March 29, prior to their boarding their own bus for Cleveland and on to New York. The Rens have won 122 games and lost seven this year. The team is composed of eight men. Left to right, standing: Eric Illidge, secretary; William "Pop" Gates, New York; Charles "Tarzan" Cooper, Philadelphia; William "Wee Willie" Smith, Cleveland; John Isaacs, New York. Seated: Clarence "Puggy" Bell, New York; Zack Clayton, Philadelphia; Clarence "Fatts" Jenkins, New York and Eyre Saith, New York.—Defender photo.

Figure 3.2 *Happy World Champions Off for Home*. Photograph from "New York Rens Five Wins World Pro Title: Happy World Champions Off for Home," *The Chicago Defender*, April 8, 1939, 10, ProQuest.

Black and white bodies in the boxing ring, however, became cultural symbols of masculine athletics and aesthetics like Black and white bodies on the basketball court. David Krasner notes, "In boxing, the body is not only visible, demonstrating brawn and fluidity of muscle and flexibility, but it is also said to reveal style, courage,

and identity *through performance* (emphasis in original)."[135] Jack Johnson's championship brought into question the tensions of the color line and what it meant to exhibit masculine prowess. To win the champion title meant to be crowned with the quintessence of maleness: strength, agility, endurance, stature, war tactical strategy. Jack Johnson pushed the boundaries of Black masculinity by exhibiting a stellar performance of technique, grace and wit against his opponent. He defied the stereotypes of primitivism and irrationality by showcasing undeniable strategy to win in the boxing ring.

Jack Johnson became aware of his body being on display over the years of his boxing career and decided to sport his own body for profit. The son of a former captive rumored to be a bare-knuckle boxer on a Maryland plantation, John (Jack) Arthur Johnson succeeded his father in eventually becoming the heavy weight boxing champion in the early twentieth century. Harvey Young asserts, "Through performance, a performance of himself as a body on display, the prizefighter asserted control over the presentation of his body".[136] *The Los Angeles Daily Time's* post-fight coverage of the May 16, 1902 match against Jack Jefferies indicated that Johnson wore an "amazing pair of pink pajamas." The reporter continues, "The crowd, which filled every nook and cranny of the Pavilion gasped with admiration and astonishment when the pinkies came up through the ropes. It wasn't an ordinary, inoffensive kind of pink. It was one of those screaming, caterwauling,

[135] David Krasner, *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance 1910-127*, (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2002), 29.

[136] Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 87.

belligerent pinks." [137] Thereafter, Johnson would continue to don colorful robes, provoke his opponents in the ring, blatantly talk to spectators throughout the fight and make incendiary remarks preceding and following his fight. Jack Johnson chose in these moments to capitalize on his Black body being on display and consequently participate as both an agent and subject in bringing attention to his body by way of his flashy clothing and embodying the attitude of a victor before even winning the fight.

Boxing was important to American culture because it embodied the ethos of American nationalism: to be supreme, the strongest, fastest, bravest, and smartest. Jim Jeffries symbolized for whites all that was powerful and manly, thus naming him the "white hope." Boxer Jack Johnson, however, was the model of arrogance when fighting his white opponents. He embodied an exaggerated sense of self in the ring so that perhaps no one person who endorsed the myth of white superiority could undercut his winner mentality. Before his high-profile match against Jim Jefferies on July 4, 1910, Johnson wrote to an editor who published (and printed) his words: "When I go into the ring to fight Mr. Jeffries, I will do so with full confidence that I am able to defeat him at the game of give and take. I honestly believe that in pugilism I am Jeffries's master, and it is my purpose to demonstrate this in the most decisive way possible."[138] Here, Johnson, aware of his Black body's representations, pits Mr. Jeffries's white body against

[137] Young, *Embodying Black Experience*, 90.

[138] James A. Jeffries, "Both Fighters Assert Fitness and Confidence on Eve of Big Battle," *The Washington Post*, July 4, 1910, 2, ProQuest. Though the article equally quotes both Jeffries and Johnson, it only cites Jeffries as the author.

his own body before the actual fight. Newspapers advertised, "Son of Slave Mammy Meets Son of Preacher in Greatest Battle in History of the Prize Ring."[139] The white body indexes the virtuous master, whereas the Black body to the world indexes the "son of a slave mammy." Johnson debunks the claims of the white body being supreme and supersedes the 'master's' body by following through on his intentions and winning the fight against Jefferies—becoming the master of the "master" in his striving for self-determination. Serving as a forerunner for the all-Black New York Renaissance team, Johnson tenaciously regulated the representation of his body. I interpret Johnson's game of give and take as a performance of metaphorical crossovers, where Johnson's movements in the sport arena shifted his everyday lived experience as a Black man in the United States. As articulated in my previous chapters with the discussion of Uncle Drew and Uncle from *Separate and Equal*, I identify the dribbling as a series of controlled dispossessions that have implications on and off the court. As a basketball player may craftily grip and release the ball in a repeated fashion in order to arrest the attention of his opponent and break down that opponent's defense, Johnson performs a controlled dispossession of his bodily display in order to win the game. He fulfills his initial public declarations of the championship title and rattles white American's defense of their supremacy through the victory over Jim Jeffries, their "white hope." As a Black American

[139] "White Jeffries Battles with Black Johnson: Grizzly Bear of Lithe Tiger?—Which Will Win Today in the Arena at Reno?," *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 4, 1910, 1; "On the Eve of Battle Men Wait Breathless: Human Ant-Hill of Ren Disgorges Its Countless Thousands of Bugs," *Los Angeles Times*, July 4, 1910, 11, ProQuest.

athlete living at a time where a sports match between one Black and one white individual served as proxy for larger struggles between the Black and white races, Johnson's livelihood would inform and inspire future elite Black athletes to reflect upon what they would do with the platform, though unstable, professional sports offered them.

Jim Crow segregation enforced that whites were entitled to public spaces for which Blacks were either denied or treated unequally. John Issacs recalls, for example, a time when after a game, he and his teammates followed the basketball promoter to a restaurant for which the owner proceeded to put a screen up around the team. Some of the players continued to eat, however Issacs removed himself from the space as he refused to be treated differently than the other customers. Isaacs remembered feeling strange that they could play basketball for whites, but they had to be concealed when they ate in the same room as whites. [140] While professional sports remained segregated in adherence with Jim Crow segregation laws, Black athletes were allowed to compete collectively against an all-white team in amateur and professional basketball. These contests were also primarily advertised as exhibition games, prohibiting winning Black teams to promote themselves or represent America as the most superior team. Instead, the best Black basketball teams could only officially claim the title of the "world's colored champions" in competition with other Black teams prior to the tournament of 1939.

[140] John Issacs, interview with Susan Jane May 14, 1994 quoted in Susan Jane, "The New York Professional Black Basketball Team, 1923-1950" (dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 1996), 265.

From Rivalry to Friendship: The Rens and the Original Celtics

The Original Celtics, a team established in 1914 that was initially comprised of Irish teenagers from a Hell's Kitchen settlement house and became the Rens' greatest rivals as both teams developed during the 1920s and 1930s. Referred to in the newspapers as "the Irish" or "Shamrocks," the Original Celtics contests against the Rens were racially charged, inspiring the largest attendance of spectators and profits for both teams. For instance, in the 1937-1938 season, sportswriter Chester Washington claimed that the Rens in terms of profit and crowds accrued "five times as much" as the Original Celtics; "Two games with the Celts alone drew 25,000 and helped keep the Rens 'out of the red' for the season." [141] Renaissance players earned $150-$250 per month in the mid-1930s, with bonuses of $25-$50 for winning games against the Original Celtics. Top Black basketball players such as Fats Jenkins, according to former Rens player John Issacs, may have earned $1500-$2,000 in a single season. Top Black baseball players, in contrast, could earn $500 per month or more according to Negro League historians, Larry Lester and John Holway.[142]

Despite racial notions stemming from previous centuries that positioned the Irish at the lowest rung of the Caucasian hierarchy, the Original Celtics further advanced their way into whiteness. By constantly competing against the all-Black Renaissance team and adding

[141] Chester L. Washington, "'Sez Ches': Rens on a Rampage," *Pittsburg Courier*, January 7, 1939, 16, ProQuest.

[142] John Issacs, interview with Susan Jane May 14, 1994 Bronx New York; Larry Lester, conversation with Susan Jane Raytown, Missouri 19 May 1995; John Holway, *Voices From The Great Black Baseball Leagues*, revised edition, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992) all quoted in Susan Jane, "The New York Professional Black Basketball Team, 1923-1950" (dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 1996), 221.

non-Irish local legends such as Joe Lapchick (Czech), Nat Homan (Jewish), and Henry "Dutch" Dehnert (Dutch) to their team, their team became the "white hope" for their fans. Stereotypical representations of Irish, while fictional, circulated and perpetuated ideas about Irish lifestyles. The Irish, like African Americans in the United States, were associated with rural practices and agricultural communities. They were commonly referred to as "niggers turned inside out," while Blacks were called "smoked Irish."[143] These false perceptions of the Irish and Blacks were mapped onto the players of the Celtics and the Rens, causing their cordial sports competition to be the platform for which the public's imaginations played out their racists fantasies.

The Rens and the Celtic's bodily engagement on the court prompted a perpetual racial entanglement that advanced eventual reciprocity and the athletic and aesthetic sophistication of the sport. By discussing the development of American tap dance via the intermingling of West African and Irish cultural heritages alongside the development of friendship between the Rens and the Original Celtics, I elucidate a legacy of racial entanglement that crosses forms of entertainment. Though the two teams were amiable over time, they kept the rivalry going to sell tickets since Black versus white games outsold Black on Black and white on white by a long shot. Issacs fondly recalled, "They

[143] Anita Gonzalez, "Navigations: Diasporic Transports and Landings," *Black Performance Theory*, eds. Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 21. *See* Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, (New York: Routledge, 1995) for a seminal text on how constructions of race were used by the Catholic Irish to advance from their oppressed status to an oppressing group within the Americans.

[Celtics] like to drink. They drank beer. They drank Tequila. Dutch Dehnert, you know, he poured it, and his hand has never lost its touch. So, the first thing you did on the first jump-off, Bam! (motions punch) right in that stomach (mimics throwing up). You had no more problem with him the rest of the night, you know." Through repeat exposure and rough play animated with passes and footwork, these Black and white players touched upon the primal and emotional dimensions of human experience which include desires for connection and belonging. Richard Lapchick, founder and director of the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport and the son of former Celtics player and later coach of the New York Knicks Joe Lapchick, indicated:

> They [the Rens and Celtics] began to understand about the lives of each other and the differences in their lives. I know from my father, he felt that he had begun to understand what racism really meant by watching the effects of racism on the Rens. Three times they left town in tandem, and the Celtics pulled up in their Stutz Bearcats (American sports car) behind the Ren's bus to see the owner of the gas station come out with a rifle chasing away the Rens from his gas station because he wasn't about to serve this group of African American players from his lily white pumps. In five of the games that they played against each other, there were actually race riots that took place during the games. During the games, angry fans storming the courts 'cause they didn't want to see Black players and white players mixing on the same, in the same arena.[144]

[144] Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, *On the Shoulder of Giants,* 2011, DVD.

Indeed, both forms—basketball and tap dance—utilize percussive movement vocabulary that emerged in the midst of prevailing racial tensions, bodies mirroring and reacting to one another during competition. Inevitably, tap contests highlighted the issues of racism, sexism and classism within America. Challenging an opponent in tap dance made stealing and trading of steps easily accessible. With the brutally competitive traditions of bigotry and ethnic camaraderie, "people danced with the hopes of achieving respect and technical perfection."[145] The 'jigging contests,' however, between the Rens and the Celtics in which they both strived for technical perfection by experimenting and imitating each other's motion fostered nuanced understanding for both teams.[146]

Three centuries of musical and social exchange between enslaved African and Irish indentured servants profoundly impacted the development of jigging, later when engaged with jazz music known as tap dancing. Cultural historians like Kathleen M. Gough and Constance Valis Hill observe with great depth the kinship and performance in the Black and Green Atlantic.[147] The Afro-Irish fusion began during the thirteen-year war between England and Spain from 1641-1654. During this time, thousands of Celtic Irishmen, women and children found

[145] Sally R. Sommer, "Tap Dance," 3.

[146] The definition of *jig* originates from the French word *giguer*, which means to frolic; the Germanic *gigue*, which means fiddle; and the Old Norse *geiga*, which means to turn aside, move back and forth. The term did not enter the English language until 1560, where it describes an Irish folk dance in triple time.

[147] *See* Kathleen M. Gough, *Kinship and Performance in the Black and Green Atlantic: Haptic Allegories*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2014); Peter D. O'Neill and David Lloyd (eds.), *The Black and Green Atlantic: Cross-Currents of the African and Irish Diasporas* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

themselves either captured, exiled or sold into the newly colonized English tobacco islands of the Caribbean. A few years later, a substantial number of West Africans were chained and transported to the Caribbean. As a result of the environment controlled by English sugar plantation owners, Irish indentured servants and African captives inherently lived and worked together in the Americas. Tap historian Leni Sloan illustrates an example of the cultural exchange that occurred between the Ibo people, an ethnic group within Nigeria, and the Kerry people, an ethnic group in southern Ireland. She indicates, "Ibo men play[ed] *bodhrán* [an Irish frame drum] and fiddles and kerrymen learn[ed] to play the *jubi* drums, set dances becoming syncopated to African rhythms, Saturday night *ceili* dances [Irish folk dances] turning into full-blown voodoo ritual."[148] Tap's use of slides, drags, shuffles and chugs in a relaxed body attitude suggest the significant influence of African dances that uses the same movements on bare earth. On the contrary, step dances such as the jig and clog dances provided the technical augmentation for tap's percussive development. These European dances were, in contrast to the African dances, performed in hard-soled shoes or clogs on wooden floors. They also favored minimized hip motion and bounding, hopping and shuffling.[149] The bodies of the dances were held erect and highly

[148] Leni Sloan, "Irish Mornings and African Days on the Old Minstrel Stage," *Callahan's Irish Quarterly* 2(March 1982), 52 quoted in Constance Valis Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, 5.

[149] Leni Sloan quoted in Hill, *Tap Dancing America*, 5; Nadine George-Graves, "'Just Like Being at the Zoo': Primitivity and Ragtime Dance" in *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy, Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, ed. Julie Malnig, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

codified heel-and-toe actions were essential to step dance.[150] The Irish jig, played on the fiddle or the fife, began to incorporate both Black and white fiddlers who "ragged" (i.e., syncopated) jig tunes, which further illustrates the fusion of Black and Irish intermingling. The Rens and Celtics stood out to fans and sportswriters as both teams played a controlled game—later proselytized by former Celtics players-turned-coaches Nat Holman and Joe Lapchick as "scientific basketball." This style of play was characterized by "hard-nosed man-to-man defense and short, crisp passing for high-percentage shots." The new emphasis on teamwork helped lead to the development of pivot play, set plays for out-of-bound balls, and switching on defense.[151] The interactions of African and Irish performers consisted of imitation, assimilation and transformation of dance steps akin to the process of the Rens and Celtics riffing off one another in order to develop the most sophisticated basketball performances.

The basketball court became a space in which segregation laws were undermined like in the play *Separate and Equal* from the previous. Expression of comradery and companionship between the Rens and Celtics teams would however come at a cost. Playing a white team in the South was a very rare occurrence for a Black team such as the Rens. In the South, the Rens usually played the Black college teams though southern white coaches and teams would admire the Rens from afar as they attended the Ren's games and scouted the Ren's plays. Barred from

[150] Sally R. Sommer, "Tap Dance," 3.

[151] FreeDarko, 18; Susan Jane, "The New York Professional Black Basketball Team, 1923-1950" (dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 1996), 72.

restaurants and hotels in the South, the Rens stayed on Black college campuses or with private families, who fed them breakfast in the morning.[152] The game against the Celtics was the first ever for the Rens in Louisville, and the first game in a Renaissance-Celtics series of the 1936-1937 season.[153] Richard Lapchick recalled that his father went on the court, approached Rens player Charles "Tarzan" Cooper, and kissed him on the cheek. Joe Lapchick and Charles Cooper both played center position for their respective teams and stood over six feet tall. Cheek kissing is a European social ritual that often indicates greeting, shows friendship and respect and/or confers congratulations; it most likely was a common practice for Lapchick, the child of Czech immigrants. His gesture publicly proclaimed his friendship with Cooper, though opponents on the court, and explicitly challenged the racist notions of white supremacy. As a result, Richard Lapchick claims that his father and the other Celtics were evicted from the hotel they were staying in, and the game the next night had been cancelled.[154] With one gesture, Joe Lapchick exposed the ruse of the rivalry between the two teams. By destabilizing the entertainment of racializing and discriminating against Black bodies for which fans participated such as sticking their umbrellas out on the court while

[152] John Issacs, interview with Susan Jane May 14, 1994 quoted in Susan Jane, "The New York Professional Black Basketball Team, 1923-1950" (dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 1996), 242.

[153] Roi Ottley, "Sportopics: The Passing Show," *New York Amsterdam News*, January 23, 1937, 14, ProQuest. The article noted that Billy Gates, also known as William 'Pop' Gates, served as the captain of Ben Franklin High School basketball team, and he was a high scorer for the high school league. Gates joined the Rens in 1939 and was part of the World Championship team. Johnny Holt was playing his last season with the Rens, as he had passed the police exam and would soon join the force in New York City.

[154] Richard Lapchick quoted in Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, *On the Shoulder of Giants*, 2011, DVD.

Rens players were running in order to cause them to stumble, Joe Lapchick performed the ultimate crossover.

In discussing the Rens and the Celtics, I examined corporeal formations of these racialized bodies as an outlet for the intuitive or unconscious feelings driven by physical and sensual capacities. Dance scholar Susan Foster indicates, "The body serves as physical instrument for an interior subjectivity, and the dance functions as a luminous symbol of unspeakable human truths."[155] The Celtics and the Rens benefitted from playing one another on both an internal and external level. On the external level, they entertained fans by offering a thrilling, competitive performance. On the internal, their bodily contact on the court articulated or represented unspeakable truths that transcended the reality of racial segregation and touched upon the primal and emotional dimensions of human experience. Joe Lapchick and Bob Douglas made a presentation to the predecessor of the National Basketball Association in an attempt to get the Rens admitted as a team in the late 1940s. Ned Irish, the owner of the Knicks at the time, subsequently informed Joe Lapchick and Bob Douglas that their proposal to admit the Rens was denied. Richard Lapchick asserts, "My dad (Joe Lapchick) told Bobby Douglas that he was gonna resign as the coach of the Knicks, that he didn't want to be in a league that would make a decision like this. And Bobby Douglas insisted that 'You need to stay there, Joe. Someday you're gonna have an opportunity to do something important in this league.'"[156] Joe Lapchick heeded Douglas'

[155] Susan Leigh Foster, *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press), xvi.

advice by remaining on the Knicks and three years later in 1950 he signed Nathanial "Sweetwater" Clifton, the first African-American to sign with the National Basketball Association. Robert "Smiling Bob" Douglas, who died in 1979 was inducted into The Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in 1972. He was the first Black individual to be inducted.

William "Pop" Gates, who joined the Rens in the late 1930s, recalled Douglas as a "nice person, who knew what he was doing, and he was a good businessman." Former Ren John Issacs added to Gates' assertion, "Douglas was a handshake man; his handshake was his word."[157] The broader legacy of Robert Douglas and the New York Renaissance team is their consistent winning of multiple competitions despite the deliberate exclusion and inequality they incurred as Black men in a world ruled by white men. The Renaissance Big Five's spectacular presence on the court and Douglas' perseverance and business savviness laid the foundation for positive and specific representation of African Americans. The first professional Black basketball team of this caliber owned by a Black man facilitated basketball's rising popularity in the United States. In stark contrast to racist stereotypes, basketball made visible the portrayal of Black men as both excellent athletes as well as adept entrepreneurs. Though undervalued or simply left out of history books on American sports, the legacy of Robert Douglas and his team lives on through the elite

[156] Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, *On the Shoulder of Giants,* 2011, DVD.

[157] Phone Interviews with interlocutor William Gates and John Issacs from 1994-1996 quoted in Susan Jane, "The New York Professional Black Basketball Team, 1923-1950" (dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 1996), 210.

Black athletes who influence the billion-dollar industry of American Basketball today.

Afterword

The critical nature of memory is that it reconfigures past events and interactions for the purpose of the present moment. Though the past—not to be confused with the writing of history as Historian Keith Jenkins would articulate— has disappeared, the stories full of symbolism, enigmas, and inconsistencies remain. I have attempted to elucidate this throughout the chapter. Representation and social-historical reality, as Elin Diamond presumes, "are fully imbricated; that discourse and its products (gender, identity, and politics) are caught up in fantasies, identifications, and frictional models passing as truths."[158] These stories, nevertheless, shape the lived experiences of future listeners and movers as an embodied cultural memory. By examining the narratives of Uncle Drew in chapter one, Uncle in chapter two, and Uncle Bob in chapter three, I have made a cumulative effort to search for and trace in a somewhat rhizomatic method this embodied cultural memory that still continues to inform the movement of Black male athletes and artists today.[159]

The three case studies of my dissertation highlight that the basketball court has been and remains a space in which previously established social boundaries are contested through movement. By perceiving Black performance in and through the history of American basketball, my research concludes that Black virtuosic bodies are repositories of cultural memory. The Black males discussed in my

[158] Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminisms and Theatre*, (New York: Routledge, 1997), iii.

[159] Keith Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

chapters engaged basketball as an outlet. They expressed a stylized performance of self in defiance of domination and stereotypical prescriptions of Black masculinity put forth by hegemonic desire.

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