Still Working the Field

In 1708, a white plantation owner scouts the new arrival of African slaves to purchase for his plantation. These men would be worked tirelessly in the fields which lead this owner to pick the strongest, fittest men to create maximum productivity. Although slavery was abolished and they were set free, the idea in question is: are African Americans still viewed as a commodity? In 2002, a six foot eight, eighteen-year-old African American man child Lebron James was purchased for eighteen million dollars by Dan Gilbert, the white owner of the Cleveland Cavaliers\(^1\). This juxtaposition of an African slave being bought by a white owner for his body and Lebron James being purchased for his body in modern times is to set up the point that African American men are still being purchased today. Obviously, there is a very big difference between the statuses given to Lebron James versus a 1700s slave, however, what has stayed the same is the way America views the African American body. The use of language in this paragraph has been specific. The language in this paragraph was chosen on purpose to illustrate that these terms: “set free,” “man child” are in the everyday vocabulary of many American. Most of us do not even realize how these words reduce the status of already second class African Americans to animals or a lesser human. Subconsciously, America and the media are doing the exact same thing in all venues of black\(^2\) civic life, but specifically in athletics. Turn on your TV, buy a movie ticket, attend or watch a private high school sporting event, or simply turn on your video game console. This same language used in America has kept the African body a commodity through various athletics and journalism for athletics.

\(^1\) The Cleveland Cavaliers are a professional basketball organization in the NBA (National Basketball Association)

\(^2\) Every black athlete is not necessarily from Africa, but is viewed in the same manner - excuse the absence of “African American” in certain instances.
SportsCenter, the nation's leading resource for sporting news, depicts the widely accepted thought of African Americans as superior athletes. “Black people dominate sports in the United States. 20% of the population and 90% of the Final Four. ³ We own this shit. Basketball, baseball, football, golf, tennis, and as soon as they make a heated hockey rink we’ll take that shit too!” (Rock) SportsCenter also falters with depicting black male athletes as mentioned in the previous paragraph. Black athletes are referred to as strong, powerful and aggressive - yet wild and unpredictable when they supposedly lack cognitive capabilities in critical situations. (Carrington 17) White athletes are considered to have great dexterity and have amazing composure under critical moments where a black athlete would be unpredictable. “Shaq⁴ is a beast!” is something commonly heard while watching basketball game. These animalistic characteristics are degrading the black athlete under the guise of calling him a being a physically superior human being. America’s fear of the black body is resulting in its objectification of that same body. It creates this idea if blacks are physically superior, they’re obviously not mentally superior, they’re nothing but strong animals.

The Black Hero

“All actual heroes are essential men,
And all men possible heroes...”
- Elizabeth Barret Browning

Heroism exemplifies our definition of humanity; something a sportswriter would have a hard time grappling in the 1930s for a black athlete. In 1939, Joe Louis knocked out a Nazi-German boxer. He was heralded among the black community for knocking out a Caucasian athlete. He was a hero among the white community for knocking out a Nazi. Clearly, an African

³ The Final Four is the Super Bowl of college basketball where four teams from across the nation compete for the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) Championship.
⁴ Shaquille O’Neal – 7’1FT 325lbs famous basketball player
American can’t represent America’s national hero, which gave sport writers a problem. To get over this obstacle, journalist caste Joe Louis as nothing more than an animal fighting for survival. They stripped him of his pride for himself, his country and his ability as a boxer. He won out of his supposed innate instinct to fight. The New York Times proclaimed him as “the magnificent animal … He eats. He sleeps. He Fights. Is he all instinct, all animal?” (Carrington 17) This style of writing and train of thought can even be seen in modern sports. To further prove the black body was superior due to their savagery, Mike Tyson answered the call. Mike Tyson, a skillful boxer, was involved in the famous ear-biting incident. As he was losing, in an act of desperation, he lunged and savagely bit part of his opponent’s ear off. Tyson would later be called a monster, a savage and chants of “Ban Beast Tyson” could be heard in an English crowd at his next boxing match. (Carrington 18) This was in fact a very bestial action on Tyson’s part, however, if his pigment was a lighter tone, would it have been the same? Later that year at a rugby match, a Scottish player bit off part of an opponent’s ear. The result was shock and disbelief solely within the rugby community and faded away. (Carrington 18) Tyson is known internationally and will forever be remember for the same exact incident.

The top two quarterback’s of the NFL (National Football League) are Tom Brady and Michael Vick. Tom Brady is Caucasian and is featured in People’s top 50 most beautiful men. Michael Vick is African American and has the highest selling football jersey especially within black youth. Brady plays the traditional role of quarterback while Vick created a hybrid version of the position. Brady’s style is brain over brawn, he stands in the field and watches play develop

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5 The quarterback is a position for the offense for American football. He is generally the leader of the offensive team and is responsible for initiating play by receiving the ball from the center. After receiving the ball, the quarterback typically attempts to pass the ball or hand it to another player and on occasion will run the ball himself. (Wikipedia)
and makes a decision on what to. Vick’s style is run first - think second. Instead of standing and watching the play develop, he will run and make the field develop around him. He is able to do this because he is the greatest athlete in the NFL and exciting to watch. The majority of black youth aspire to be him while most football players would rather be like Brady. Brady has won two championships and consistently plays well every single game. Vick however, is erratic and does not always make the right decisions. His playbook is even simplified compared to Brady’s. This is problematic as black youth wants to play like Vick, brawn over brains, reinforcing the view of blacks as nothing more than physical superior bodies lacking the cognitive ability to possess the human characteristic of decision making. Ten students from Sacred Heart University were polled to give descriptors of each athlete. The four most common words/phrases for Brady were: Vision, Wisdom, Clutch, Winner. For Vick: Fast, The Perfect Specimen, dumb, the human joystick. (Poll) This poll came into question as a pollster commented that Vick also has great vision on the field giving him the ability to run around, through and away from would be tacklers. The difference is Brady keeps his composure with people surrounding him getting closer and closer and makes the decision on what to do. Vick runs around the field sporadically, almost out of survival, reacting to each moment as is coming, honestly it resembles a rabbit out running a bobcat in the snow you see on those discovery channel specials.6

Pick Up Your Controller

Mario, Zelda, Sonic, Snake and Master Chief are all famous video game characters, all of which are white. Unless you’re playing a sports game, there is a good chance you will not see an African American in a video game. All aforementioned video game characters are heroes and earlier in this essay articulated why this is occurring. Eight out of ten virtual African –

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6 I just compared Vick to a Rabbit, I’m writing this paper and I can not escape this viewpoint of black athletes
Americans are in sport games. (Leonard) The most popular game that every avid video gamer owns is *Madden*\(^7\). With the majority of gamers being white, there is something very wrong about the gamer being able to control a squad of black men at the whim of his hand. Yes it’s just a game, but hearing “you should of caught that, you’re black!” is a very common phrase. This racial stereotype is rooted in our culture. “Many people living in the suburbs admire this fire and this funk they see in blacks, a kind of aggressiveness a lot of them want too. A lot of these suburban, white-bread kids hunger for this kind of experience.” (Leonard) This role-playing does not break down barriers or increase exposure, it’s just furthering the dominant ideologies of whites over blacks. The objectification doesn’t stop there; personally, when playing a basketball video game, the strategy employed when picking a team is finding a player with good ball handling skills surrounded by large men to muscle their way to score. The Point Guard (ball handler) is generally white surrounded by extremely large black teammates is usually the formula for victory. It’s not that blacks are too stupid to handle the ball, it just so happens to be all the good handlers are white. As with Michael Vick, it’s the athlete choosing the position, not the position choosing the athlete. As society continues to commodify the black body, everyone will continue to purchase it, regardless of skin color. *NFL Street*, the urbanized version of *Madden*, features a simplified version of football while giving it an extreme appearance. White players are practically non-existent in this game that revolves around hard-hitting and muscular beasts that somewhat resemble a human being. All the bodies are stronger and ridiculously cut making the athletes look freakishly strong. This game romanticizes the brute aspect of the game; leaves strategy at the door and the all black caste looks even further barbaric.

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\(^7\) Madden releases a football video game yearly for the past fifteen years, and this previous year sold 2.2 million games its first week.
Grab Your Popcorn

*White Men Can’t Jump* debuted in theatres across America in the early nineties and depicted two basketball players of different race teaming up to hustle other basketball players for money. The movie touches on the ever-apparent fact that blacks play basketball better than whites. “When you talk about race in basketball, the whole thing is simple: a black player knows he can go out on the court and kick a white player’s ass.” –Dennis Rodman

Sidney (Wesley Snipes) harasses Billy (Woody Harrelson) “I know your weakness. You like all the white boys I ever met.” The weakness is Billy’s love for his girlfriend and if you attack this love, he plays basketball very poorly. So Billy retorts, “You’re like every brother I ever saw. You’d rather look good and lose than look bad and win.” Love, one of the most intricate human emotion, is being portrayed by the white basketball player. The black player portrays irrationality and the inability to win and only excels at the physical part of the game if basketball.

Furthermore, the cover the album even portrays the black body as superior. Billy is wearing an oversized t-shirt while Sidney is wearing a skimpy shirt that covers nothing and reveals his bulging muscles.

Man Children

Earlier, Lebron James was mentioned as a black body that was purchased as he graduated high school. This is actually happening for younger black athletes as well. Kingswood – Oxford, my alma mater, purchases black athletes all the time. Kingswood gives scholarships for black athletes to play basketball. There are good athletes of different races as well, but the majority

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8 Basketball player in the NBA during the 80s and 90s. Notoriously known for being a bad ass, marrying Madonna and going against the hetero-normative ideal of life.
9 Kingswood – Oxford is a co-ed private day school located in West Hartford, Connecticut for grades 6-12.
were black while I attended high school, while there, these players rarely attended class. This is unfair because when White Canadians were recruited for hockey, the student body and administration viewed them as student’s first, athletes second. The exact opposite was true for black athletes. This transcends to the university as well or even further. In the early nineties a phenomena occurred where black basketball players were skipping college basketball or staying for one or two years before heading to the pro’s. Compared to their Caucasian counterparts, who play college ball for at least three of their four-year-college-program. Black athletes are just developing much faster than there white counterparts so they can compete with men at an earlier age. This would-be compliment is actually just reaffirming the view of blacks having superior bodies and lack the intelligence to stay in school. It has gotten to the point where coaches for college basketball teams want schools to de-emphasis SAT scores so it’s easier for blacks to get into college. (Hutchinson) African Americans score poorly compared to other races, is it because they’re stupid or the cities they live in provide horrid education?

Chicken or the Egg

The superiority of African American in sports is discussed by many behind closed doors usually among white males. But something less discussed is the other half of this idea where blacks are physically superior but not mentally. Whenever mentioned, my father always explains his theory of the superior black body. He always refers to his Marine Corps buddy, which he immediately states is black, to reaffirm he’s not a racist. Then furthers his statement saying he’s a smart guy, graduated college. “African Americans have better bodies because slavery weeded out the weak.” Does this mean slavery weeded out the intelligent as the Africans that taught themselves to read were immediately killed off? They can be stronger than their plantation owners, but certainly not smarter. It’s this theory that is widely accepted among the majority of
sport fans is why I so firmly believe people still objectify and commodify the black body. Although the latter is generally less discussed because they feel it gives a racist stigma; it’s clearly seen as the graduation from college was a key characteristic for Marine Corps buddy as to give him credibility. So what is it, did African Americans intellect physically diminished or is American society diminishing their education, not their intellect. It is the latter; subconsciously is drilled in every one’s brain that follows sports. ESPN, the Mecca of sports inadvertently does it, going to a movie portrays it as well. As a child plays their first videogame, it happens as well. As America gawks at the black athletic superiority, African American athletes end up conceding to the idea of brawn over brains.
Bibliography


