Concealed Racism

There are some who would believe the argument that bigotry and racism towards African Americans is almost gone from our American lives, simply because the same sorts of violence and hate that once existed are not the pervasive ideologies and value systems of the mainstream as they once were during pre 1960s America. We have passed laws that certify their equality, and we have seen some even climb the ladder of success and make it to the top. There is no more outright segregation, and everyone thinks that racism is gone because they see blacks\(^1\) on television, and everywhere else. It is easy to convince ourselves that racism is a thing of the past, because we can just say that those who are outright are just ignorant bigots. But this is not the true state of our country today; racism of modern day educated America has become so subverted that even when giving positive stereotypes to African Americans, the underlying statement is still negative – some realize it, and others don’t. With slavery so entrenched in our countries foundation, a duality in the way we see people has been created, a duality that has juxtaposed and fused both the African American hero images with African American animal images. Without even being conscious, videogames and athletics are a main vehicle that perpetuates the black animal, and in turn, videogames and athletics are the platform best suited to deconstructing the manner in which mainstream America has classified and defined African Americans in relation to white people.

\(^1\) Every black athlete is not necessarily from Africa, but is viewed in the same manner - excuse the absence of “African American” in certain instances.
The duality focused on in this paper, are the differences we appropriate to those of white skin tone and those of black skin tone. These differences (that are mostly constructed stereotypes) have been the defining roles that our nation and especially our media have picked up on and magnified. If someone were to have black skin, they are assumed to be stronger, faster and have superior instinct compared to their white counterparts. Meanwhile, whites are assumed to be smarter, logical and emotional. Both seem to be positive characteristics, but when looking closer, the black side of the duality is all animalistic characteristics while the white side is all glorified human traits. An example of this duality is the way America views crime. The idea of a serial killer or a student shooting his school up has been deemed a “white thing”. Society agrees that this is a negative aspect of white culture, however, it is actually positive when compared to black crime. However, the underlying statement is that black people don’t have the intelligence to be serial killers (whom are generally considered evil genius’) or have the ability o plan out a school shooting. They obviously can do drive bys and other gang related crime which seems to be all very erratic and spontaneous but not anything that is premeditated.

Race … and Other Four Letter Words by Gilbert Rodman critiques the way blacks are portrayed in the media. He states that The Cosby Show does not equal out blacks constantly being portrayed as criminals on the news. He furthers this point stating neither the news nor The Cosby Show are true representations of the African American race. One shows an incorrect negative portrayal, and the other attempts to recreate a black family in a manner whites can swallow because it appeals to their own familiarity with
themselves. However, how can we have a true representation on television if we can’t even do it ourselves in the real life we showcase on TV and other public arenas?

*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. 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. “Shaq 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.

“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

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2 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.
3 Shaquille O’Neal – 7’1 FT 325lbs famous basketball player
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 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\(^4\) 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

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\(^4\) 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
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 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 three 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

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)
each moment as is coming, honestly it resembles a rabbit out running a bobcat in the snow you see on those discovery channel specials.5

There are many different mediums that perpetuate racism and negative images of African Americans throughout the country. “People of color continue to be regularly depicted as dangerous criminals who threaten to destroy the existing social order; as exotic primitives to be feared, despised and controlled …” (Rodman) However, there is one interactive medium that has even a stronger influence on our subconscious attitudes.

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–Americans are in sport games. (Leonard) The most popular game that every avid video gamer owns is Madden6. With the majority of gamers being white, there is something oddly familiar about the white 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 heard among white youth. 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

5 I just compared Vick to a Rabbit, I’m writing this paper and I can not escape this viewpoint of black athletes
6 Madden releases a football video game yearly for the past fifteen years, and this previous year sold 2.2 million games its first week.
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. *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.

Videogames and athletics have thrust the idea of the black as nothing more than a superhuman animal into the minds of many youths and adolescents. But they are not the only ones affected by this warped perception. This kind of fragmentation of human qualities can be seen in sports, as well as most things pop culture. Can something that is positive for a race—such as the representation of them as superior in a certain field actually keep them from true equality? It can when what they are made to be superior in is something that is all brawns no brain, and the very thing that is most heralded as the true defining human characteristic (what separates us from the animals we dominate) is our intelligence. The superiority of African Americans in sports are 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 ones 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.
Works Cited


