

*Ontological (Free) Agency: The Erasure, Commodification, and
Autonomy of Black Athletes*

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ABSTRACT

Ontological (Free) Agency: The Erasure, Commodification, and Autonomy
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The National Football League wields a powerful influence on American society and over various sociopolitical discourses such as race, gender, and class, which influence the degrees of interaction between people of different origins, cultural backgrounds and identities. The purpose of this research is to examine how the NFL is product of a network of racial discrimination directed at Black players and coaches within the league. This study examines how the National Football League functions as a white-dominated structure of power in order to manipulate, exploit, and erase Black bodies for the benefit of multi-billion-dollar profits. This thesis focuses on how Black players are subject to more aversive forms of racism enacted through team ownership and executive decision-making media by analyzing the various racial paradigms undergirding the NFL's infrastructure and corporate practices.

Using Afropessimist philosophy from the works of Frank Wilderson III, Jared Sexton and Calvin Warren, this study examines how Black bodies are essential to the NFL's brand all while the league simultaneously promotes anti-Black images, rhetoric and violence in mainstream media. In other words, this research claims that although Black bodies are essentially tied to the

NFL's capitalist enterprise, many of the league's policies and practices reduce Black bodies to the status of available equipment meant to garner the profits for white team owners. Specifically, this thesis argues that the NFL ontologically erases Black being by 1) transforming Black bodies into biological and capitalist commodities through processes of commercialization and 2) through racist rhetorical and discursive modes of speaking that are distributed by mainstream media and sport fandom.

These two critical points postulate the "Afro-Athletic Spectacle," which is the ontological reduction of the Black athletic body into available equipment via processes of commercialization and through anti-Black discursive rhetoric and images. Finally, this research argues that Black NFL players' hold a unique individual agency that allows them to navigate in Gramscian discourse categories like work, labor, property ownership and wages, and thereby exercise a degree of relative autonomy from several discourses of power that control and exploit them.

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Part I

The Afro-Athletic Spectacle: Black Commodification and Erasure in Sport and the NFL

“Black people, once literal commodities during the Atlantic slave trade, have been transformed into commodity-signs to be bought and sold throughout the globalized media market. Again, it is the Black athlete above all, who occupies pride of place in the fetishized desire for blackness.”

–Ben Carrington (2002: 27)

There is no other business enterprise like the National Football League. The National Football League wields a powerful influence on American society and holds an authoritative sway over various sociopolitical discourses, each influencing the degrees of interaction between people of different origins, cultural backgrounds and identities. More significant is the NFL’s impact on the economic milieu of the geographical locations in which those instituted civil codes are transmitted. As Anouk Bélanger has noted, “Major League sports and sport mega events are prime commodities of growing importance in this international entertainment economy . . . they are central expressions of the contemporary mobilization of spectacle . . . in the economic and socio-cultural regeneration of cities,” thereby serving the development and expansion of the free-market capitalist economy both locally and abroad internationally (51). In today’s U.S. urban redevelopment boom, many of these ‘central expressions’ used for the “economic and socio-cultural regeneration of cities” are actual expressions—faces with physical and symbolic powers connected to bodies of color with extraordinary athletic ability and spectacle. Today, many sport organizations within two of the major league sports, the NFL and NBA, have utilized the names of certain players, athletes, and executives in order to activate the social construction of that

city's future and create certain conditions to shape that city's "revisionary" history.

The National Football League's history beams with dramatic game-winning touchdown drives in the waning moments of the 4th quarter. Champions are crowned while the defeated are relegated to the forgotten corners of NFL history. Defensive battles are fought with fury and ferocity. The sounds of skull-crushing tackles echo with violence across stadiums. Many of the most iconic victories on the field are also tied to the most monumental moments of American history, which is what makes the NFL an embodiment of the American idealization of triumph and victory. Heroic narratives, both personal and political, of being resilient in the face of adversity and strife abound in football narratives. For instance, the 2001 New England Patriots winning the Super Bowl in the wake of a nation reeling from the tragic September 11 attacks, or the 2009 New Orleans Saints Super Bowl Championship five years after Hurricane Katrina swept away hundreds of thousands, many already in abject poverty, from their homes. It is these various sociohistorical moments that the National Football League is situated in at any given period that makes professional football the ultimate American mega-sports league.

Football unites people of various sociopolitical identities, from the blue-collar worker, to the self-employed, and even to the executive. Regardless of difference, American football provides a common ground for all to tread on. Yet for all the NFL's success—both domestic and international—the league has progressively tried, and failed in many instances, to utilize its vast ideological power to ignite a revolutionary change within the racial paradigms ongoing in the sociopolitical atmosphere of the United States. The National Football League contains influential ideological power because "a symbiotic relationship exists between local issues of race in/and sports and global issues of race in/and culture at large" (Buffington 2005). As a known champion of progressive values, the NFL enacts the ideological patterns of thought that create the

systematic practices of power over players and coaches of color.

Understandably, the naysayer could argue that civil rights activism is not the NFL's primary concern, and in fact many believe that sports should be separated from politics. Time and time again I hear the ardent football spectator say, "Sports are my escape from reality." This is not only fallacious but oxymoronic considering sport is reality reflected back at us on the screen, not an escape from its grip. As Robin Kelley suggests, "[p]olitics is not separate from lived experience or the imaginary world of what is possible; to the contrary, politics is about these things . . . [and] comprises the many battles to roll back constraints and exercise some power over, or create some space within, the institutions and social relationships that dominate our lives" (8). Although sport is a personal interest formed from an individual's own imaginary world, the personal is always political in one way or another, especially for the players whose bodies are demanded to be physically productive for the sustainability of the capitalist discourse. Still, one must be fair to recognize the limits of the league's political influence while being mindful that the NFL can also function as an antagonist toward civil rights activism. In these instances, it is clear that the league can also be responsible for openly promoting and disseminating anti-Black images, discourses, and rhetoric despite claiming to be an ally of the marginalized Black community.

To this end I am primarily concerned with how Black players are subject to other, more aversive forms of racism through team ownership, executive decision-making, and through the mainstream media which often perpetuates racist narratives around Black players, especially Black quarterbacks. Often these narratives denigrating premiere Black players are unfounded, or deliberately fabricated lies, meant to further enforce negative images of Black players. For instance, former Auburn and Carolina Panthers quarterback Cam Newton has repeatedly been

vilified by both the media and fans since he entered the league in 2011 as the first overall selection in the 2011 NFL Draft despite his many accolades in 2010 during his time at Auburn, which include AP College Player of the Year in 2010, Heisman Award winner, and leading Auburn to win the BCS National Championship. Neither, too, can his NFL records and awards go unmentioned, although they are certainly and intentionally overlooked. I extrapolate further on the erasure of Black quarterbacks later in Part II, where I deploy Colin Kaepernick and Cam Newton as the prime examples of the player-martyr.

The purpose of this research is to examine how the NFL is product of a network of racial discrimination directed at Black people within the league. These networks of exclusion establish deep-seated inequities against Black people, ultimately establishing those systems of power that gatekeep coaches of color from advanced positions and oppress Black player cultural agency. These white-dominated racist discourses are the foundations of the racist and negrophobic attitudes marking the NFL's inception as an anti-Black sports organization. In this thesis, I analyze and compare various racial paradigms undergirding the NFL's infrastructure, corporate practices, and day-to-day business happenings. These investigations include the material components that undermine Black life in the NFL, such as the playing field and the various sports television networks and social media covering daily sports news, where Black bodies are subjected to alternative forms of violence that rob Black players of their personhood on and off the playing field. However, I am particularly interested in complicating the metaphysical aspects of the NFL's infrapolitics¹ that violate the ~~existence~~² of Blackness, and here I aim to expand the

¹ A term used by Robin Kelley to refer to a “politics of the everyday” that Ben Carrington describes as “the ‘hidden transcripts’ of every day resistance [that] offer a way of understanding the informal modes of struggle that remain excluded from formal narratives of political resistance” in contrast to traditionally defined politics by political science (2002: 28).

² I will repeatedly be using a strikethrough throughout this study in words that emphasize the non-being of Blackness, a convention notably used by Calvin L. Warren in *Ontological Terror*.

academic discourse regarding Black exploitation by focusing on the ontology of Blackness, which is altogether given no recognition of ~~being~~. I explore both the material and the metaphysical components of the NFL, which are separate yet also interdependent planes, that exploit Black bodies for the purpose of capitalist gains, economic growth, and entertainment value in order to demonstrate the aversive and overt mechanisms that erase Blackness in the league.

This research examines how white-dominated structures of power like the National Football League manipulate and exploit Black bodies for the benefit of multi-billion-dollar profits. Using the work of Frank Wilderson III, Jared Sexton and Calvin Warren, my research analyzes the several facets undergirding the complex superstructure of the NFL to argue that Black NFL players' individual agency allows them to navigate in Gramscian discourse categories like work, labor, property ownership and wages. I examine how Black bodies are essential to the NFL's brand yet how that same brand simultaneously promotes anti-Black images, rhetoric and violence in mainstream media. In other words, I argue that although Black bodies are essentially tied to the NFL's capitalist enterprise, many of the league's policies and practices reduce Black bodies to the status of available equipment meant to garner the profits for white team owners. Here, I argue that the NFL ontologically erases Black ~~being~~ by 1) transforming Black bodies into biological and capitalist commodities through processes of commercialization and 2) through racist rhetoric and discursive modes of speaking that are distributed by mainstream media and sport fandom.

From these two critical points I postulate what I call the "Afro-Athletic Spectacle," which is the ontological reduction of the Black athletic body into available equipment via processes of commercialization and through discursive anti-Black rhetoric or imageries. Often, the

commercialization of the Afro-Athletic Spectacle “sexualize[s] and transform[s] [the Black body] into an object of desire and envy” (Carrington 2002: 30). The Afro-Athletic Spectacle, for as much as it excites and even seduces consumer culture with its sexualized images, doubly evokes affects of horror, revulsion, and terror. As Frantz Fanon argued, “the Black male was the repository of white fears, fantasies, and desires . . . of all these constructions, there was one figure above all others that held a central place within the colonial imaginary: . . . the black athlete” (Carrington 2002: 19). The Afro-Athletic Spectacle is thus the fear and fascination of the Black athletic male body *when rendered ontologically void*.

I complicate Black ~~being~~ in the NFL and use these two arguments to further claim that despite their ontological reduction as entertainment value, Black athletes can achieve a unique type of agency from several discourses that control and exploit them. I argue that this exclusive form of agency is solely contingent on their bodies’ labor and productivity, or, in other words, their agency exists to the degree that their bodies’ talents can produce wins for their respective teams and organizations. Here I also argue that although this type of agency can help players exceed certain limitations imposed on them, it is also manipulated by players, as numerous examples attest to the repeated employment of players who are known for off-field criminal incidents like domestic violence and abuse.

Simply put, I ask how, to what extent, and for what purposes the National Football League, National Basketball League, and the NCAA desecrates Black Life and erases its very ~~being~~. I ask difficult questions that often lead to no clear-cut answers but do initiate the discussion toward progressive change. For instance, what does it say about American culture and its racialized and gendered relations when a Black player knocks another Black player unconscious from a tackle and fans wildly cheer? Or when a skirmish happens between two

Black NBA players on the court? Or when a famous Black NFL player has an off-field incident, such as domestic abuse, and continues to be employed by NFL front offices? I pose these polarizing questions in order to expose racist and class-oriented frameworks surrounding Black athletes. Additionally, these examples demonstrate how football culture is a valuable discourse with much to offer for further research, which merits a continued analysis of sport by several schools of theory and praxes.

With such an ambitious exploration I aim to shed light on how the Black body is consumed and made abject by sporting culture, namely professional football. My intention is to reinvigorate and expand the field of cultural studies field by shifting the conversation surrounding the exploitation of Black bodies from the material and capitalist discourses and center that discussion toward an ontological perspective using Afropessimist philosophy. I cannot do this without also pulling in the work of several Marxist philosophers works, as well as feminist scholarship. In doing so, I will also expand the Afropessimist praxis by analyzing how popular sports culture literally erases Black ~~being~~ by making the Black body as the ground on which white patriarchal power structures stand on and define themselves against. While those systems have influenced the NFL's corporate infrastructure and its treatment of Black players, the NFL cannot operate without Black player's bodies, cultural identities, athletic abilities, and physical productivity in order to generate their annual multi-billion-dollar profits. Considering the fact that 58.9% of the NFL's players are Black, according to *Statista.com*'s 2020 racial survey of the league, it is not an overstatement, and may even be an understatement, to claim that Black bodies are necessary to, indeed, even the *sine qua non* of the NFL's brand and its sustainability.

To be clear, I do not claim that the NFL *intentionally* seeks to oppress Black players and

coaches of color. In fact, that so much of its domination of Black bodies can be given the benefit of the doubt as “unintentional” highlights the problem of anti-Blackness. In many ways NFL acts in quite the opposite way as the league is a known champion for the progressive values that combat those social stigmas equating Black males with Otherness, bestiality, and criminality. However, I do contend that the league is problematic with its treatment of Black players and coaches of color, and whether it is intentional or not is beside the point. The problem *exists*; every single season there are story lines that denigrate Black players as trouble makers, criminals, selfish, lacking leadership skills, while white NFL players are largely untouched by the media, and even exalted, despite their own obvious transgressions.

The focused hatred of Black athletes is because, as Frank Wilderson III states, “[t]here is something organic to Black positionality that makes it essential to the destruction of civil society . . . for one could just as well state the claim the other way around: There is something organic to civil society that makes *it* essential to the destruction of the Black body” (2003: 18). In the same vein, there is something organic to the Black positionality in the NFL that makes it essential to the destruction of the league’s hegemonic power hierarchy, which is completely based in whiteness. This, too, can be read the other way: there is something organic to the NFL that makes it essential to the destruction of the Black body. I use an Afropessimist lens to read the NFL, as well as other sports organizations, administrations, and athletes, through a lens of Blackness. Put differently, to read the NFL through Afropessimism is to read the NFL *as* anti-Black.

For Jared Sexton, “[a]fropessimism[‘s] political and intellectual evolution is considerably longer and its ethical bearings much broader than one might expect, and there is work to be done regarding a genealogy of its orientation and sensibility” (1). That Afropessimist theoretical

discourse has manifested within the last twenty years is significant and given the cultural subject matter that today's NFL consistently situates itself in, my research here is responding to Sexton's appeal as I extend the Afropessimist praxis onto the football field. By raising questions of Black ~~being~~ as it pertains to the NFL, I examine how sport not only reflects racist attitudes but functions as a powerful arbiter of anti-Black ideologies. In doing so, my aim is to shed light on how the NFL serves as a hegemonic tool that erases Black ~~being~~ through several mechanisms of domination.

A History of the National Football League and its Anti-Black Origins

The National Football League was founded in 1920 as the American Professional Football Association. The APFA consisted of 14 teams and elected Jim Thorpe as the league's first president. Two years later in 1922, the APFA became the National Football League (Crawford 16).

Although the NFL was the primary football league in the United States, it faced several rival professional leagues through the 1930s and 1940s. By the 1950s the NFL had established a monopoly on professional football in the United States. However, in 1960, the NFL faced its biggest rival with the upstart of the American Football League. The AFL began competing for large television deals and free agent players, which became a growing concern for NFL executives. On June 8, 1966, the NFL and AFL announced a merger between the two leagues but did not take full effect until the 1970 season. During the four years of the merger, the two leagues agreed to participate in a new common era draft and championship game, the Super Bowl. Once the league completely merged in 1970, the NFL was divided into two conferences, the National Football Conference (NFC) and the American Football Conference (AFC)

(Crawford 16-18).

Since the merger, the NFL is implicitly regarded as the most popular sports league in North America. The league's popularity rose to prominence under the tenure of its first commissioner, Pete Rozzelle, from 1960 to 1989. According to Michael A. Hunt in the *Encyclopedia of International Sports Studies*, "Rozelle guided the league to record annual attendance (from 3 million to 17 million) and record television audiences (400 million viewers in sixty countries saw the 1989 Super Bowl)" (933). In 1989, the NFL owners selected Paul Tagliabue as Rozzelle's successor until 2006. Tagliabue's era brought even more lucrative television deals and four expansion teams, but his most lasting legacy is his equal opportunity initiatives that sought to increase minority personnel in the highest team and league positions. Today, Roger Goodell is the current NFL Commissioner, whose legacy thus far is marked by his player safety reforms and controversial disciplinary measures.

Despite the different eras, administrations, and social conflicts, the NFL has always taken the most strategic measures to increase their revenue while securing its image as America's premiere major league sport. In order to cement itself as the leader of sports in the United States, the league created a blueprint that "manages and regulates the league with a focus on the fans, putting a product on the field that is maximally enjoyable and stimulating for its consumers" (Martin 38). By designing its corporate model to cater to the fans, the NFL has become the most powerful sports juggernaut of North America. Roger Martin, a senior adviser to CEOs of large global companies, believes that "[no] sport comes close to the NFL's economic power (15). According to Martin, "[t]he NFL is, far and away, the most successful sports league in America. Regular season NFL games regularly garner higher ratings than the final round of golf's Masters . . . the most watched National Basketball Association final game, and college basketball's Final

Four title game” (15). In a study conducted by Nielsen Media Research, the Super Bowl has broken the most-watched television broadcast event record eighteen times since 1983, which demonstrates the power of the NFL in today’s American sports entertainment industry.

Simply put, professional football is the most adored and revered sport in the United States today. Jared Sexton has gone at length to describe the power and reach of professional football in contemporary U.S. society:

The dimensions of football’s economic and cultural dominance, its centrality to public understandings of American society within and well beyond its fan base, is hard to overstate and easy to underestimate. More than one-third (35 percent) of professional sports fans rank the National Football League as their favorite, over twice the percentage (14 percent) of the second place vote, Major League Baseball, the country’s erstwhile ‘national pass time.’ College football garners another 11 percent of the vote, putting nearly half of the self-identified viewing audience in the gridiron camp. Auto racing, hockey, college and professional basketball each only score in the single digits. Live attendance numbers verify the trend. According to ESPN, the average attendance at NFL games (approximately 70,000) more than doubles that of the MLB (approximately 31,000) and almost quadruples the NBA (approximately 18,000). (2017)

Krystal Beamon and Chris Messer claim that “[s]ports make up an important social institution in American society that holds a prominent position as a component of our culture,” and here I would add that professional football has in most recent years been at the forefront of the sociopolitical issues influencing the cultural sphere of American society (xii). Indeed, the social patterns, movements and ideologies that are embedded in sport, as Beamon and Messer argue,

“mirror larger patterns in U.S. society in quite a fascinating way,” though they have certainly manifested in shockingly grotesque and horrifying ways, too. One only needs to examine the scourge of bigotry and hatred aimed at athletes like Colin Kaepernick, who bravely began the national anthem protests in 2017 as a response to national anti-Black police brutality, or Las Vegas Raiders defensive end Carl Nassib’s open announcement of his homosexuality in June 2021, to see how closely imbricated capitalist major league sports are with postwar U.S. politics.

Similar to many hegemonic power structures in the U.S., the NFL is consistently at the intersection of several issues including class, gender, race, and politics. Racial tension in the NFL has been a long-lasting paradigm, and its racial inequities are undoubtedly rooted in consequences of slavery and racism during America’s founding as a nation. Much like the rest of the country in the early 20th century during the National Football League’s origins, whites were the dominant society and this racial imbalance likewise permeated into professional football. The Eurocentric, white-based racial codes within the NFL’s infrastructure are an imprint of the ideologies that govern race and class on the American social plane, which extend from the collective American conscious onto the individual level. Consequently, much of what happens in the NFL’s discourse stems from the racial paradigms according to the powers that frame those discussions primarily through a lens of whiteness.

Players and coaches were nearly all white and therefore football teams were reluctant to sign players of color. Charles W. Follis was the first Black professional football player for the Shelby Blues from 1902 to 1906. Paul Robeson, who was later a renowned actor and singer internationally, played for the Akron Pros in the early 1920s in order to pay for his law school. The Pros joined the AFPA in 1920 and introduced arguably the most important and famous pre-color line Black player named Fritz Pollard (Crawford 17).

In 1919, Frederick Doug “Fritz” Pollard joined the Akron Pros Football Club just after the “Red Summer” when several lynchings and hate crimes had plagued the African-American community. Two years later in 1921, Pollard became the first African-American to become a player-coach for the Akron Pros in the AFPA and in 1925 was the head coach of the Hammond Pros. However, from 1934 to 1946, Pollard and other African Americans were pushed out and the NFL would not reintegrate until 1946. According to Russ Crawford, “[d]espite the talents of several Black players, the color line closed down opportunities for African Americans after Joe Lillard of the Chicago Cardinals and Ray Kemp of the Pirates left the league in 1933” (17). As time went on, whites occupied all the jobs available in football and were naturally favored for positions on the coaching, administrative and ownership levels.

Reintegration of the NFL began with Paul Brown, a renowned coach in Ohio who began his journey at Massillon Washington High School. After coaching at Ohio State University, Brown was hired as the Cleveland Browns coach in 1946. Brown had coached several talented African-American players in high school and unlike the rest of the coaches in the league, did not have a problem signing black players. Under Paul Brown, the Cleveland Browns became one of the first franchises to dominate the league featuring many African-American players. Being a copycat league, NFL teams saw how the Browns inclusion of Black players gave them an athletic and organizational advantage and soon followed suit in signing black athletes.

Despite its huge turn from the exclusion of Black football players, there would not be another African-American head coach for over sixty years until the Los Angeles Raiders’ promotion of Art Shell as head coach during the 1989 season. Even though African-Americans became the majority of players in the league, racist white team owners, executives and coaches believed they did not possess the intellectual capability to lead football teams. According to N.

Jeremi Duru in *Advancing the Ball: Race, Reformation, and the Quest for Equal Coaching Opportunity in the NFL*, “[s]tereotypes of African American intellectual inferiority dating to slavery presupposed African Americans insufficiently cerebral to succeed in such roles . . . NFL team owners, all of whom were white, shunned African American head coaching candidates because of conscious or subconscious reliance on those stereotypes” (4). Additionally, there were certain, exclusive networks of friends and connections in the coaching fraternity that were exclusively white, leaving no opportunity for people of color to be considered for coaching positions. Regardless, these racist ideologies of white owners prevented people of color from becoming head coaches for decades long after reintegration in the league.

As film historian Ed Guerrero states, Blacks “have been subordinated, marginalized, positioned and devalued in every possible manner to glorify and relentlessly hold in place the white-dominated symbolic order and racial hierarchy of American society,” and the NFL’s corporate gatekeeping infrastructure is no different (2). Drew D. Brown believes that “[t]he lack of representation of Black ownership and leadership can be considered the starting point of intolerance toward Black cultural agency in the NFL . . . [which creates] an institution of racism that ensures the privilege and benefits White privilege, while not having to engage in blatant forms of racial oppression” (47-48).

This lack of representation is what began the major progressive initiative in the NFL known as the “Rooney Rule,” which was implemented in 2003. The “Rooney Rule” was formed in December 2002 after NFL owners unanimously agreed to establish it, which became the NFL’s first equal representation progress initiative named after Dan Rooney, the owner of the Pittsburgh Steelers. While many of the league’s owners did not think the lack of diversity in head coaching positions was an immediate problem, Pittsburgh Steelers owner Dan Rooney had a firm

conviction that the onus was on the team owners to be more inclusive to minority coaching candidates since they were the ones responsible for their teams' hiring of coaches. Therefore, the Rooney Rule's policy essentially mandates league football teams to interview ethnic-minority candidates for head coaching and senior football operation positions. However, in the NFL, a white-dominated corporatocracy of power, when progressive change means creating space for new bodies of representation to come and occupy a white space, the virtuous intentions of "equal opportunity" and "affirmative action" demonstrate the failure of their presumptive logic of Black personhood: there can be no equality to a ~~being~~.

Today, the lack of leadership and team ownership by Blacks remains a glaring problem for the NFL, and league officials cannot seem to find strategies to counter the racist bias plaguing the league's team offices. This has repeatedly been the case even after Rooney Rule protocols have been tightened by the league several times. There are numerous examples of "questionable" Rooney Rule interviews during head coaching vacancies in the league. For instance, most recently in 2018 the then-Oakland Raiders were alleged to have violated the Rooney Rule in their hiring of head coach Jon Gruden. In order to stand in accordance with the Rooney Rule, the "Raiders interviewed their tight ends coach Bobby Johnson and USC offensive coordinator Tee Martin — apparently *after the deal* was struck with Gruden" (emphasis mine, Bell). Despite serious misgivings, the NFL ruled that the Raiders did comply with the Rooney Rule and were not penalized. However, there are no indications that the Raiders gave either candidates true consideration, and even Bobby Johnson did not transition over to Jon Gruden's new coaching staff.

The Raiders investigation was in 2018, but even today in the 2021 offseason, before the additions of Martin Mayhew (Washington Football Team), Brad Holmes (Detroit Lions) and

Terry Fontenot (Atlanta Falcons), Miami Dolphins' Chris Grier and Cleveland Browns' Andrew Berry were the only two Black general managers in the league (Kilgore, Maske). Similarly, *The Washington Post* reported that “[o]ut of the six head coaches hired [in the 2021 off-season], only one, Robert Saleh, is a minority. People of color represent 69% of NFL players and 35% of assistant coaches. But yet, only two head coaches are Black men” (Reimer).

In shedding light on these past, and very much present, systematic injustices in the NFL, how do we begin to ask whether there can truly be any recourse in discourse primed by hegemony? How to resist those systems that are characterized by a disproportionate power balance, where the dominant ruling classes so carefully manipulate and exploit the lower classes into the subordinate position through the adoption of dominant ideologies and cultural practices that only harm them while empowering the elite? In revisiting the same dialectics of Gramscian power discourse, the only logical conclusion appears to be that we could all be better expending our *intellectual capacities*, not our *financial limitations*, outside the football stadium.

The Afro-Athletic Spectacle: Nothingness as Spectacle

“How dare you exist?”

I stand here clenching my fists,

Staring into abyss,

“How dare you exist?”

Why do I feel like this?

Pouring our hearts out . . .

How dare we exist?

—Jermaine Hurley, vocalist of Hacktivist

To reiterate the words of Jared Sexton, “where do black athletes come from and how should we feel about their arrival and appearance, to say nothing of their achievement, in theaters historically reserved for the fabrication of white masculinity?” (66). Sexton’s question has carefully led me to postulate what I call the Afro-Athletic Spectacle, following the work of Douglas Kellner on the “sports spectacle” and Anouk B elanger’s “urban sport spectacle.” Indeed, there is much scholarship done on sport and the “spectacle”; however, here I re-imagine the spectacle in sport as the Black athletic body that horrifies and astonishes, repels and attracts, draws awes and boos simultaneously by infusing the work of Afropessimist doctrine and theory, namely by Calvin Warren, Jared Sexton, and Frank Wilderson III into the sports spectacle.

Since its inception spanning back almost a decade, Afropessimism has become one of the most polarizing schools of Black humanist philosophy because of its epistemological origin in the question of anti-Blackness, anti-Black violence and Black ~~being~~. Afropessimist praxis lies in a space of unknowing, an unknowability that not only triggers what Robin DiAngelo calls “white fragility”—the feelings of social anxiety, anger, and denial that whites use when they are confronted with the legacy of slavery, systemic racism, and anti-Blackness—but a fragility that is found in all of society’s non-Black Others that Wilderson has called “civil society’s many junior partners” (2003:18).

The notable aforementioned Afropessimists have done extensive work in disseminating Afropessimist theories into the global academic discourse, and although Afropessimism, as a theory of theories, continues to elude any type of definitive meaning, Wilderson’s succinct description found in *Afropessimism* (2020) provides a strong point of departure here:

Afropessimism, then, is less of a theory and more of a metatheory, a critical project that, by deploying Blackness as a lens of interpretation, interrogates the

unspoken, assumptive logic of Marxism, postcolonialism, psychoanalysis, and feminism through rigorous theoretical consideration of their *properties and assumptive logic*, such as their foundations, methods, form, and utility; and it does so, again, on a higher level of abstraction than the discourse and methods of the theories it interrogates . . . [i]t is pessimistic about the claims theories of liberation make when these theories try to explain Black suffering or when they analogize Black suffering with the suffering of other oppressed beings. (2020: 14)

As Wilderson argues, “Blacks are not Human subjects, but are instead structurally inert props, implements for the execution of White and non-Black fantasies and sadomasochistic pleasures . . . Black people are the wrench in the works . . . [and] do not function as political subjects” (2020: 15). In other words, Black people function in a structurally white-dominated society as “political currency or objects, not political actors or subjects . . . [for] [o]bjects exist as implements, tools, in the psychic life of Human subjects” (2020: 198).

The Afro-Athletic Spectacle is both at once spectacular and abject. As Ben Carrington argues in regard to the Black male body’s social accumulation as fierce, powerful, and aggressive “animals” by a “romanticised Occidental idealism,” “colonial myths about Black power have been most clearly expressed in the discourse of the ‘tough’ black athlete making the *athletic black body* a key repository for contemporary desires and fears about blackness” (2002: 9, 15). In this sense, the Black athletic male’s³

³I am aware there is a gendered dimension to the Afro-Athletic Spectacle and am by no means attempting to isolate the historical modes of racial oppression solely to the Black male body by purposely excluding a female aspect of this concept. However, given that the subject matter I am attempting to complicate here is the NFL I am limited to only exploring the Black male athletic body in this thesis. Clearly, there are Black female athletic bodies that are reduced to the Afro-Athletic Spectacle as well. For instance, “Serena Williams’ hair beads and power grunts” are a prime example of the bodily characteristics and their affective presence that could assign Williams to this category of spectacle (Brown 45).

body is used as a biologically-commandeered space meant only to re-enact the legacies of dominating white, patriarchal violence, capitalism, colonialism, and homophobia. His ontology is void, his sentience and personhood robbed. The Afro-Athletic Spectacle is formed from the kernel of Black humanist philosophy posited in Afro-pessimism: “that no Blacks are in the world, but, by the same token, there is no world without Blacks. The violence perpetrated against [Blacks] is not a form of discrimination, it is a necessary violence” (Wilderson, 2020: 40). Not surprisingly, as I will demonstrate, the NFL operates and treats its Black players by the same principle through several forms of violence against Black bodies.

Discourses comprising the sociopolitical matrix of domination in sport—race, gender, class, capital, (dis)ability, etc.—as Anouk Bélanger puts it, are “always in a constant state of re-articulating itself amid various contextual forces at play” (62). The powerful yet oft underplayed connection between sport and race has never been situated on a stable or static plane separate from politics but rather is always in flux, constantly being re-imagined through both public and media discourse. These discourses, whether vocal or silent, outspoken or aversive, animate the insidious political agendas that gesture toward the destruction and livelihood of Black athletes. In the case of Black athletes, perhaps it is better said that they are in a state of non-articulation, for how can you announce what ~~is~~ not, and what cannot ~~be~~? Frank Wilderson III cogently posed this quandary when he wrote that “negrophobogenesis is the bedrock, the concrete slabs upon which any edifice of Human articulation (whether love or war) is built” (2020, 13). Utilizing Afropessimist metatheory as my point of departure for political thought and action, I argue that the Black NFL athlete is spectacle precisely because of the Nothing

with which his Blackness is imbued, which is a core tenet of Afropessimist philosophy.

In developing the Afro-Athletic Spectacle, it is important to briefly examine the work of Douglas Kellner and the sports spectacle of Michael Jordan, for it is what Kellner calls the “Jordan-Nike nexus” that has enabled several institutions of white-dominated power, namely the media, marketing, and public relations, to increasingly commercialize and commodify Black athletic bodies for their images, labor-power, and productivity. In this section, I call attention to how media culture has transformed, or otherwise said, reduced, the Black athletic body into a major feature of sport spectacle and media culture. In exploiting their extraordinary athletic talents, spectacular physical imageries, and commercial value, the mega-sport entertainment industry has essentially reduced the Black athlete into a spectacle that appeals to the values, products, and beliefs of the media institutions and capitalist consumer society, all of which perpetuate anti-Black rhetoric, images, and racist ideologies.

The sports spectacle and Michael Jordan (re-imagined)

Douglas Kellner’s *Media Spectacle* (2002) contends that several types of corporate industrial complexes are chiefly responsible for the proliferation of media spectacles in new spaces and locations in order to generate economic interest and profitability. The result is a “[m]edia culture [that] proliferates ever more technologically sophisticated spectacles to seize audiences and increase the media’s power and profit,” thereby allowing “spectacle itself [to] becom[e] one of the organizing principles of the economy, polity, society, and everyday life” (1). As such, according to Kellner,

Political and social life are also shaped more and more by media spectacle. Social and political conflicts are increasingly played out on the screens of media culture, which display spectacles such as sensational murder cases, terrorist bombings, celebrity and political sex scandals, and the explosive violence of everyday life. Media culture not only takes up always-expanding amounts of time and energy, but also provides ever more material for fantasy, dreaming, modeling thought and behavior, and identities. (1)

Chief among these media spectacles is the realm of sport, and Kellner believes that modern media culture has used advanced technological processes to transform sports into “a media extravaganza of the highest order” (64). Here, Kellner deploys Michael Jordan as the ultimate sporting spectacle whereby processes of “globalization, commodification, sports, entertainment, and media come together to produce a figure who serves as an emblematic totem of athletic achievement, business success, and celebrity in the contemporary era” (63). Hi-tech imagery of Jordan’s 360° slam dunks, half-court defense and air-defying athleticism captured the fascination of sports spectators across the globe throughout the majority of his career in the late 1980s and early-to-mid 1990s. In addition, Jordan’s acumen on the court is reflected through his astonishing career milestones, such as leading the Chicago Bulls to the NBA Championships in six of his eight seasons in the 1990s, where he also won the NBA Finals MVP for all six of those appearances from 1991-1993 and 1996-1998. A five-time NBA Most Valuable Player Award winner, Michael Jordan is the ultimate embodiment of a successful work ethic in sports and represents the major league sport mentality of winning, ambition and success. In this sense, Jordan is a model of the capitalist ideals of dominating the competition to the highest degree in which very few other athletes in the world embody.

It cannot be overstated enough: there is no greater known American athlete throughout the modern world than Michael Jordan. Jordan's physical abilities and determination allowed him to "combin[e] his athletic prowess with his skill as an endorser of global commodities and as a self-promoter, which has enabled him to become a commodity superstar and celebrity of the first rank" (63). In fact, Jordan's fame has reached such a global level of recognition that he has been elevated to god-like status. Boston Celtics legend Larry Bird once called him "God disguised as Michael Jordan," and many fans have referred to him as "Black Jesus," demonstrating the extent that major league sports have become one of the biggest players in media spectacle culture, which have its roots dating back to the days of the first Olympics in Ancient Greece and the gladiator fights (63-65).

Today, major league sport dominates society's everyday attention by "requir[ing] consumption and appropriation of spectacles to reproduce the consumer society" (66). In order to do so, allocating the appropriate resources to the worldwide commercialization of sporting spectacle and athletes are of the highest priority. The demand by consumerist spectator society for constant sporting game action is supplied by TV networks competing over contracts to broadcast major sporting events, like the NFL's Super Bowl, NHL's Stanley Cup Playoffs, and the NBA Finals. According to Kellner, because these sporting spectacles own the highest advertising rates annually, they demonstrate "a dramatic implosion of the sports spectacle, commerce, and entertainment, with massive salaries and marketing contracts for the superstar players/celebrities" (66). In order to meet the consumer society's demand for sporting spectacles, star athletes, like Michael Jordan, began to sign their own endorsement deals, star in television and film, which eventually opened the door for players' own featured product lines.

Simply stated, Michael Jordan's name alone *is* big money. Jordan's agent David Falk

helped Jordan secure a \$30 million contract in 1997 and another \$33 million in 1998. In turn, Falk's negotiations with Nike helped them collect \$40 million by using Jordan as their endorser. Jordan even received his own contract as the star in *Space Jam* (1996). Jordan earned more than \$40 million in 1995 (70). Perhaps the most shocking figure is June 1998's *Fortune* magazine, which "estimated that Jordan had generated over \$10 billion during his spectacular professional career" (70). As Kellner argues, Michael Jordan is both legendary player and an icon that "promotes both commercial sports and the products of the corporations that sell their goods to sports audiences" (72). In the case of Michael Jordan, he is the quintessential example of such commercialized phenomena, and no other Black athlete has come close to his degree of interpellation into the processes of white-dominated commercialization, at least until the rise of LeBron James, who is frequently mentioned alongside Michael Jordan in debates about the identity of the greatest basketball player of all time since he entered the NBA in 2003.

As talented as Michael Jordan was in his prime, his rise to international stardom was not on the back of his superior athleticism and basketball talents alone. Here, Kellner's main argument is that Jordan's corporate marriage to Nike catapulted him to international stardom and an accumulation of unimaginable wealth. Because "the transnational Nike – as well as many other corporations – would purchase Jordan's star power to promote its products" he was able to become "one of the most successfully managed idols and icons of media culture" (64). However, while it is Michael Jordan who has primarily benefited from all his success in becoming such a globalized phenom, it has come at the cost of the fair treatment of many other star athletes today.

The white-dominated commodification of Michael Jordan was a major pivoting point for mega-league sports team owners', most of whom are white men, treatment of Black athletes. In seeing how much the success of Michael Jordan benefited the NBA, white team owners across

various leagues began to view and treat Black players as mere commodity figures that could earn them profits, not as people or valuable members of their team clubs. This shift in thinking about the Black athlete is parallel to Calvin Warren's own contention that "blacks are introduced into the metaphysical world as available equipment in human form" (6). In their reduction to (commercialized) available equipment, borrowing Martin Heidegger's phrase, the Black athlete is used as the ground that supports all of humanity's existence while being robbed of their *being*.

In today's postindustrial society, the collapse of sports, entertainment, celebrity fame, and commerce onto the plane of the Black athletic body promotes the active "consumption of images of the sports spectacle," which demonstrates the dynamism of modern media and consumer culture and its ability to dominate Black corporeality (Kellner 65). In other words, Nike's corporate purchase of Jordan's name, images, and athletic star labor-power is an ideological tool that teaches fans to consume Black corporeal imagery through their collective spectator activities, thereby "mobiliz[ing] spectator energies into deification of players and teams" as well as their demonization and execration (65). This phenomenon is what I call the Afro-Athletic Spectacle, for when a Black body is exalted, elevated or *deified* into the status of Being, it "destabilizes our metaphysical structure and ground of existence" (Warren 27).

The deification and iconic elevation of Michael Jordan is a two-fold process that results in the discrimination of such sports spectacles by hyper-emphasizing their moments of transgression and controversy, demonstrating how the Black athletic body can signify glory and disgrace. Jordan's involvement in several press scandals, poorly executed press behavior and mannerisms, and often arrogant presentation contributed to his meteoric rise to fame just as much as his athletic spectacularism did. These two contradictory representations of Michael Jordan, the "good" and "bad" Black athlete, according to Kellner, "illustrat[e] that those who live

by media can also be brought down by its cruel omnipresent power and eye of surveillance” (63). This “widespread demonization of blackness,” as David J. Leonard calls it, “elucidate[s] the powerful ways in which blackness, particularly a Black (male) athletic sexuality represents both a sign and symbol of moral indecency/decay” as well as “a site of contestation and profiteering, condemnation, and pleasure-seeking” (166). The signification of Black athleticism as “moral indecency/decay” is the defining feature of the Afro-Athletic Spectacle that distinguishes itself from Kellner’s sports spectacle, a concept that is generally not based on racial signification.

This is not to say that Kellner’s work overlooks racial factors, for he does in fact recognize that race can also factor into the sports spectacle. I, however, question if this is only because Michael Jordan *is* a Black male. How much of a factor would race be if Kellner had done his work on Tom Brady, who has nearly as many prestigious accolades in his NFL career as Jordan does in his NBA one? Still, Kellner does his due diligence and does pay significant detail to Jordan’s identity as a Black male, claiming that Jordan was initially “perceived as both Black and not Black, as a superior athlete and an all-American clean-cut young man who transcended race and yet was obviously an African American” (73). It is notable, however, that Jordan was the beginning of athletes who helped break the color barrier in advertising, “helping to pave the way for lucrative contracts for the next generation of Black athletes” (73). Today’s NBA features a myriad of Black athletes that have carried Jordan’s legacy of world-class commercialized super star athletes, such as a Chris Paul, Damian Lillard, Stephen Curry, and of course, perhaps none more so than LeBron James.

The 1993 season was akin to a smear campaign for Michael Jordan in which he faced substantial negative press. For the first time in his career, Jordan was under ontological erasure stemming from hyper-racialized dialectical forms of press coverage by both the media and the

NBA centered on rumors of gambling problems, not to mention the tragic murder of his father, which media speculated was because of said gambling issues. Much of the media narrative surrounding Jordan throughout his career featured phrases describing him as “transcending race,” and Jordan himself in an interview with Larry King in 1996 has told the media “to see him as a *human being*” (emphasis mine, 74). But as Wilderson has himself asked, when trapped center stage in a discourse of unrecognizability, how can one “tell the story of a sentient being whose story can neither be recognized nor incorporated into human society” (2010: 96)? Consequently, many stories told about Black athletes are never truly told in the first place as they are robbed of their personhood by narratives filtered through whiteness. In a world constructed on anti-Black sentiments and fears, not even Michael Jordan is capable of establishing his sentience.

The color-blind, post-racial stories following Jordan throughout his career are clearly ones robbing him of his personhood as a Black male, suppressing any ontological valence and marking him as “a highly polemic signifier who encodes conflicting meanings and values” (74). His rise to fame has injected into the conscious collective of American society the fallacies of meritocracy, presenting a fairy tale narrative that all it takes is hard work to transcend the oppressive limitations gatekeeping opportunities for people of color. Kellner notes that Jordan is “extremely Black and his race is a definite signifier of his spectacle, though his blackness too has conflicting connotations” (74). On the one hand, Jordan represents exceptional work ethic, success, and ambition, all which helped him overcome his racial signification. “He is *that* Black guy. He did it, I can, too,” some would say. On the other, his Blackness is overwritten by white anxieties and has been defined according to his transgressions, such as gambling and being an aggressive loudmouth athlete, which have been used to determine Blackness in general, especially Black masculinity/sexuality.

In reality, one could say that there is no “real” Michael Jordan. Rather, the only Michael Jordan is the one defined according to the projections of an anti-Black world. In an anti-Black world, Jordan, as a polysemic signifier, is a site of *fear*, for as Kellner cogently states, “Jordan’s physique, power, and dominance might feed into the fear of black bodies, . . . [demonstrating] how contemporary media culture is characterized by a simultaneous fascination with the accomplishments of the black male body and fear of the threat it poses” (74). Here it is important to note how the Black subject position is located “[i]n a global semantic field structured by anti-black solidarity . . . [and] holds out a singularly transformative possibility, an energy generated *by virtue of its relation to others* in a field of force” (emphasis mine, Sexton 13). Even if we were to define Jordan into the two categories of the “good” and “bad” Black man created by racist America, that energy collapses. “The good” Michael Jordan warns children about drugs—“Just say no!” The “bad” Michael Jordan is a self-indulgent, gambling, corporate tool used to perpetuate the hegemonic capitalism of Nike—“Just do it!” In the end, perhaps the most certain, yet bleak, conclusion to the sports spectacle of Michael Jordan is to say that the hyper-globalized media culture, and its processes of advertising, marketing, and commercialization, as Kellner claims, “[are] only too ready to use Black figures to represent transgressive behavior and to project society’s sins on to African Americans” (77).

Ontological Erasure through Processes of Commercialization: Adrian Peterson, Nike Pro Combat, and the Player-Commodity

“We knew we needed explosive players on the offensive side of the football, and we got one of the best.”

—Former Minnesota Vikings head coach Brad Childress

“This guy won’t go out of bounds. Every time he carries the ball, he tries to hurt you.”

—ESPN analyst Jon Gruden

“He’s got burst, acceleration and he runs hard every down.”

—Former Browns GM Phil Savage

“When the guy’s foot hits the ground, the earth moves in the opposite direction.”

—Former teammate Dan Cody

“Burst.” “Acceleration.” “Runs hard.” “He tries to hurt you.” In every sense, these words and phrases describing future Hall of Fame star running back Adrian Peterson are parameters used to trigger a captivation with the Afro-Athletic Spectacle, especially “to the extent that the athletic contest is viewed as a site for the discovery and adjudication of human capacity, of limit and possibility” (Sexton 66). In any case, these particular discursive modes of speaking not only circumnavigate the human from the Black male athlete but also undercut the very possibility of his *being* by redirecting the focus of their imperatives “on the question of the production of *talent* and of its proper evaluation and management” rather than on the sentient nature of the athlete performing these spectacular moves on the field (66). By situating the rhetorical focus on the *ability* of the Black athlete, his ontological *stability* is troubled, if not to say entirely negated.

Peterson’s reputation as a dominant athlete has followed him his entire life. Born in Palestine, TX in 1985, Peterson comes from a family of athletes, son to Bonita Brown, a three-time Texas state track champion, and father, Nelson Peterson, a collegiate shooting guard at

Idaho State. His life story and statistical production bears proof of a legacy worthy of such exaltation. After witnessing the tragic death of his older brother and best friend, Brian, at age 7 from a drunk driver while riding his bicycle, Peterson channeled that childhood trauma through football, where he soon gained the moniker “AD,” short for “All Day,” because his father Nelson claimed he could run all day.

Much like most NFL narratives, Peterson’s journey into football stardom was anything but strifeless. At age 13, Peterson’s father, Nelson, was arrested for his involvement in a money laundering scheme for a crack cocaine ring, subsequently sentenced to 10 years in prison (Corbett). In 2007, one night before the biggest evaluation process of his career, the NFL Combine held annually in Indianapolis, his half-brother, Chris Paris, only 19 years old, was murdered in Houston. Despite the challenges, Peterson has always responded, and performed sensationally in the running back position drills at the Combine, demonstrating his blazing speed with 4.38 and 4.4 40-yard dash times, and according to *USA Today*’s Jim Corbett, “arguably reveal[ed] more about his mental toughness than any psychological test or team interview could” (Corbett).

Although Peterson’s narrative is inspiring, considering he has lived up to his pre-draft billing as a perennial talent, it has also been one we are all too often reminded of when it comes to star Black athletes “coming out of the ghetto.” Douglas Hartmann has argued that one popular notion surrounding athletics and Black players are that sports are an escape from a life of impoverishment, drugs, and the system of racism that prevents equal opportunities to Blacks via education. For Hartmann, urban youth Blacks use athletics and sports as a way for social mobility and achieving success, to escape what Patricia Hill Collins calls “the matrix of domination” that oppresses Blacks through several mechanisms of oppression and racist barriers.

In this light, then, sports, according to Beamon and Messer, sports narratives, and in particular those pertaining to football, are “another avenue that can subtly perpetuate and reproduce racial and ethnic stereotypes and maintain social inequality” (5).

In 2004, Peterson broke the freshman rushing yards record, running for 1,925 yards at the University of Oklahoma (“OU”). He was then given a unanimous All-American status that year, becoming the first freshman to finish as a runner-up in the Heisman Trophy ballots, completing his college football career as the Sooners' third all-time leading rusher. Since Corbett's article in *USA Today* in 2007 covering Adrian Peterson and his journey to the NFL, Peterson has risen to international stardom and is now widely known to be one of the greatest running backs in professional football history. His decorated collegiate career earned him the 7th overall selection in the 2007 NFL Draft by the Minnesota Vikings, where he set the most single-game rushing yards game as a rookie with 296 yards. He won the NFL Rookie of the Year Award (2007) and the NFL Most Valuable Player Award (2012) and NFL Offensive Player of the Year Award (2012) when he finished the 2012 NFL season with 2,097 rushing yards, falling nine yards short of breaking Eric Dickerson's single-season rushing record, only one year removed from an ACL injury.

Nike Pro Combat—*Alter Ego* (2009)

It can be readily stated that the NFL can be understood as a corporatocracy that cherishes the commodity value and athletic fetishization of the Black body for the accumulation of its own currency capital. The 2009 Nike Pro Combat *Alter Ego* commercial focuses on the physical prowess and sexualization of the Black athletic male body through a series of cut shots and visceral close-ups. In these spectacular scenes, Peterson is shown displaying bursts of fury and

speed as he punishes defenders on the field in every direction, seemingly unstoppable, ultimately diving his way into the end zone, reflecting Gruden's words on the physical tenacity of the three-time NFL rushing yards leader and 2012 NFL MVP. The *Alter Ego* commercial's bleak black-and-white footage is dramatically used to emphasize the type of labor that is "required for the production of (athletic) labor power capable of creating (entertainment) value greater than itself" (66). As player-commodity, Peterson is portrayed as an abject phenomenon comprised solely of entertainment value greatly outweighing any ontological valence. More importantly, as David J. Leonard argues, *Alter Ego* shows that "black athletes have increasingly become objects of consumption and production within the marketplace," demonstrating how Black flesh is quite literally consumed by narcissistic desires and projections promulgated by white fear (167).

Nike's Pro Combat *Alter Ego* (2009) commercial's powerful and bone-crushing images of dominant hyper-human athleticism features graphic, violent patterns of ferocity and fury. In this section I will close-read specific shots that illustrate the minute-long commercial's formal construction, which (un)consciously promote various anti-Black images and social anxieties regarding the Black body. Directed by David Fincher, these various shots all amount to its final affective rupture, at which point the commercial's featured athlete, star NFL running back Adrian Peterson, stares back at the camera's (white) gaze, provoking an uncanny sense of being-looked-at-ness that can simultaneously astonish and horrify viewers at any level of spectatorship. Nike announced that the commercial would run on the widely-viewed networks ESPN, ABC, Fox, NBC, NFL Network, MTV and BET, and that the commercial was to market "a lightweight, breathable padded protective base layer ergonomically designed to provide sport-specific protection to athletes without restricting flexibility" (Nike).



Fig. 1. Adrian Peterson in stance before a hand-off Nike Pro Combat *Alter Ego* (2009)

First, early in the commercial's sequence there is a 3/4s (three-quarters) shot featuring Adrian Peterson in a determined running back stance before receiving a charismatic handoff from a prop quarterback (Figure 1). To his immediate right there is a radiant, all-beaming light shining in on the gridiron's frozen tundra landscape. Although the light can be assumed to be stadium lighting, it has no clear fixture or stand with which to sustain itself, and here I read it as the all-seeing, omniscient eye of white domination that is historically responsible for the surveillance and control of Black bodies going back to the days of Antebellum slavery. Considering that the NFL's founding occurred during key periods of ontological and political terror against Blacks, a primordial condition to the Afro-Athletic Spectacle then becomes the *vigilance* itself, that is, the constant, omnipresent vigilance of Blackness. Put differently, the vigilance and policing of Blackness *is itself* the spectacle of the Black athlete. The surveillance of Black skin is necessary to civil society's organic white order because the dehumanization of Blacks grants Being to the rest of the world and maintains whiteness as the ultimate power group, especially in corporations like the National Football League.

Drew D. Brown's work is concerned with the control and surveillance of Black athletes, as well as the suppression of players' cultural agency. He has connected the historical consequences of colonization to Black football players in the NFL, stating that "the social and psychological scars from five to six generations of enslavement remain" and contends that because of colonization "Blacks have been viewed by Western culture as bodies for labor and entertainment rather than as fully human" (44). This dynamic has taught many Black athletes to use sports as a medium of liberation despite the exploitation of their labor, most notably in the NCAA and collegiate football, where players' labor goes uncompensated and is instead used to generate the multi-billion-dollar college football industry. The NCAA's blatant exploitation of the Black body is an unsettlingly cogent example of how "Black people [are] alienated from the surplus-sign value of their own bodies . . . [and] struggle to survive against the material conditions of global capitalism" (Carrington 2002: 27).

Marc Lamont Hill believes that "[w]ithin this exploitative universe, NCAA football players are worked (and profited from) like professional athletes but paid like work-study students" (xv). The constant vigilance and control over Black football players reap transfers over from the NCAA and into the professional ranks for the "benefits for White NFL team owners [who] treat Black players as profitable goods not valuable leaders of the league" (Brown 48). This unsettling continuation of power-dynamics of the dominant groups—the NCAA and NFL's executives and team owners—over the subordinate groups—the players—has secured the status of collegiate and professional football one of the greatest hegemonies in the U.S. today.

In the parlance of Ben Carrington, the Nike Pro Combat *Alter Ego* commercial displays a subject that is "debased and reduced to the status of animal-like savagery," triggering spectacular horror, while "at the same time [being] imbued with certain hyper-masculine qualities of virility,

strength, power, and aggression” (2010: 87). As the camera alternates between a series of cut and tracking shots, Peterson flashes elite athleticism as he jukes and dashes, hurdles and trucks over defenders in every style of play. The chilling soundtrack features waning trumpets, beats, and electronically-engineered booms that elicit an affect of astonishment (and horror) as spectators witness the marvel of the Afro-Athletic Spectacle dominating the football field (Fig. 2).

Leonard cites bell hooks in describing this process of consuming Black bodies for profit and pleasure as “eating the other,” and argues that capitalism and ideology are intricately linked in the commodification of Black bodies. For hooks, “[w]hen race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative *playground* where members of dominating races . . . affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the other” (emphasis mine, hooks 23).



Fig. 2. Adrian Peterson displaying his elite athleticism as he runs between defenders in *Alter Ego* (2009)
 Today, the football field is perhaps one of the ultimate playgrounds in which consumer society, driven by a dominant white group, can play with the signification of the Black body, its cultural

meanings, and thus alter the ontological valence of Blackness to negation via processes of commercialization.

And while hooks certainly is correct in that consumer society “eats” the Other, put differently, it is also true that these commercial processes *erase* the Other by re-writing Blackness according to the demands that spectators need and desire. This ontological erasure of the Black body by consumer society is enabled by the “operations of systems, structures and institutions . . . the fantasies of murderous hatred and unlimited destruction, of sexual consumption and social availability that animate the realization of such violence” (Sexton 14). The re-writing of the Black body via commercialization is an act of anti-Black violence in and of itself, for it demonstrates what Wilderson describes as the *fungibility* of the Black subject, which is an accumulation, or rather, a “condition—or relation—of ontological death” (Wilderson 2010: 58). The term “fungibility” has several meanings and uses, and it is important to note that Wilderson employs it here in such a way that is specific to Blackness.

Fungibility refers to the condition of being “flexible,” “interchangeable,” or “readily changeable to adapt to new situations,” if we are to cite the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* definition. In the same way that football coaches have to adjust throughout the regular season and be flexible with their starting lineups on their rosters, the position of the Black subject in civil society is one of fungibility, for their ~~being~~ is exchanged for Nothing so that the rest of civil society—its juniors members and dominant white core—can exist freely. From this position, then, Black ~~being~~ is not just unknown, unseen, or unrecognized, it is “an entity unintelligible within the field of ontology” (Warren 27). In the same manner, then, Adrian Peterson, as the Afro-Athletic Spectacle featured in the *Alter Ego* commercial, is interchanged, his ~~being~~ for the demand of consumer fetishization of his bodily form and athletic prowess, and for Nike’s

profitable gains.



Fig. 3. Adrian Peterson barreling through defenders in *Alter Ego*

In every angle shown, the “alter ego” of Adrian Peterson that is shown is that not of a Black man but as a metaphysical Nothing that terrifies whites and destabilizes humanity’s metaphysical ontological ground. In the following scenes, *Alter Ego* displays the chaos that ensues when the Black body cannot be controlled, flashing images of players and coaches frustrated by their inability to (in football terminology) “contain” Peterson’s hyper-human athletic abilities. As Peterson glides across the field, dodging countless opposing players, and even twirling around one with dynastic ability, there are various shots of nameless defenders signaling their frustration through body language or throwing their helmets off. After trucking through two defenders, we see an image of a defender writhing in pain on the field, evoking images of the battlefield and war (Fig. 4). Marc Lamont Hill has noted “the openly bellicose language of the football lexicon, with talks of ‘air and ground attacks,’ ‘battling in the trenches,’ ‘sending blitzes,’ or ‘long bombs’” (Hill xiii). There, however, is no mistake to make between the two; football *is* war.

Unremittingly, the commercial in many ways proves Hill's belief that "football plays a powerful role in promoting the status of the US as a global hegemon," casting "football" [as] the cultural Ground Zero for the normalization of the US empire" (xiii).



Fig. 4. A defender on the ground after missing a tackle on Adrian Peterson in *Alter Ego*

At the end of the commercial, the boundaries of Peterson's hard, chiseled body are shown to be ontologically void of any being. With his pads off, the image also reminds us that often times Black male athletes are shown through a sexualized state. For Douglas Kellner, "[r]epresentations of male athletes . . . present a sexual dimension through images of their physical bodies in a state of undress and as potent and powerful" (85). That Black athletes are sexualized are no new phenomena. However, that they are inscribed sexually through a symbolic, transformative process of commercialization via name-brand corporations, i.e. Peterson's Black literal nude body protected under some pads, signifies "the hyper-commodification of the contemporary black athlete, alongside expansive processes of globalization" while demonstrating the mass "growth in the profitability of Black bodies, and their importance within colorblind discourse" (Leonard 168).

That Peterson, as an Afro-Athletic Spectacle, is stamped by Nike's hexagonal matrix of corporate domination suggests that his corporeal signification and metaphysical valence have been overwritten by currency value. He is a prime example of the player-commodity in 21st C. America's commercial racist movement, literally marked as corporate property of Nike, not to mention also that of the NFL, through the myriad of penetrating hexagon-shaped squares (resembling the shape of the Nike Pro Combat player pads marketed in the commercial) protruding into his skin as he stares firmly into the camera's lens (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Still from the Nike Pro Combat *Alter Ego* commercial featuring Adrian Peterson

That Peterson's personhood is overwritten via processes of commercialization is no surprise, and certainly not by Nike, but it is important to note that currency value, which assigns literal monetary capital value to a product, erases Black ~~being~~. Player-commodity value is inscribed *through* language, and in a variety of ways, whether spoken or written in a contract. Therefore, capital value acts as a very specific agent on behalf of language because it alters corporeal signification in very distinct and unsettling modes that often go unnoticed, *especially*

in regard to Black corporeality.

As Penelope Ingram argues in her re-interpretation of Heidegger and Being through the work of Luce Irigaray and Frantz Fanon, “[l]anguage is not mere speech; rather it is the ‘house of Being which comes to pass from Being and is pervaded by Being.’ It is not I that express language but rather language that expresses me” (xii). Ingram recapitulates Fanon’s work on visual representation, and states that “race and racism are discursive regimes predicated on a *scopic* economy” (emphasis mine, xii). In this sense, the *Alter Ego* commercial demonstrates that “the negro suffers in his body quite differently from the white man,” and this is because any willful “[c]onsciousness of the [Black] body is solely a negating activity” (Fanon 83, 106).

Although Peterson’s commercial value negates his personhood, it only inflates Nike’s profits, which demonstrates that the libidinal economy of Blackness is predicated on forms of visual representation that maintain the colonial discourse of power and oppression. As Ingram claims, “[t]he Black man is robbed of a Being-for-itself because he is imprisoned by a white gaze that cannot recognize him as an ethical Other, but rather reads him according to a string of empty racial signifiers” (xiii). The message in *Alter Ego* appears readily available, then, and harkens back to Frantz Fanon’s eponymous words: “the black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man” (110).

What viewers see in *Alter Ego* is not Adrian Peterson, a Human Black man. Rather, they are viewing the complete corporate commercial process of ontological erasure of the Black athlete, shown through a “3-D overlay treatment of the distinctive Nike Pro Combat deflex pattern on Peterson’s skin,” which Nike described as “symbolic of an implied transformational experience for athletes who wear the product, and creates a visually compelling closing to the ad” (Nike). The “visually compelling” 3-D overlay of Nike’s product is a cogent example of the

“empty . . . signifiers [that] constitute a visual grammar of the body, the syntax of which results in the ‘fact’ of blackness” (Ingram xiii). Under this pretense, Nike demonstrates, as Harry Cleaver has written, that “the ‘products’ of the work of sports . . . are not only about labour power but the spectacle itself” (xxiii). The *Alter Ego* commercial is, then, clearly a sexualized, fetishistic spectacle of Black ferocity and power with spectators from all across the globe enjoined to gaze at Peterson’s body in motion. Adrian Peterson, an Afro-Athletic Spectacle stamped by Nike’s hexagonal matrix of corporate domination and an exemplar of the player-commodity in 21st C. America’s commercial racist agenda.

Part II

Discourses of Dominance: Media, Sport Fandom, and the Black Quarterback

“[A]ll of us who are marked as Black are of a different species than all of those who are not. We are a species of sentient beings that cannot be injured or murdered, for that matter, because we are dead to the world. No narrative arc of dispossession can accrue to us.”

–Frank Wilderson III, *Afropessimism*

With the degree of intellectual curiosity, armed alongside the accessibility and drive to create new knowledge, Humans remain great mysteries, and thereby manifest a World that is driven by the individual and collective anxieties deep within the (un)conscious mind. Questions manifesting from ethical and moral crises continue to open new spaces of discourse, which are ignited by both the imaginary and material realities tied to the Symbolic order of language. These spaces, too, often manifest from encounters with what Julia Kristeva called “abjection,” which are those boundaries—material and immaterial, visible or invisible— that confront the subject with the distinction between “self/Other, inside/outside, and clean/unclean bodies through the expulsion of that which is not ‘I’ and through the demarcation of spaces where such divisions blur and threaten the boundaries of subjective identity” (Kee 48).

The World behind the Human eye is always an everchanging “new” frontier, located within the individual mind and formed alongside the subjective experiences that form the internal and external Self, or in other words, the Self that is *reflected* back in the mirror and the one that is *projected* outward into the World. These spaces can never fully satisfy the anxieties driving us to those metaphysical inquiries, nor the lack within the unconscious Other, in the Lacanian sense, that lead Humans to create—and eventually destroy—these new frontiers. These

frontiers have been envisioned from within the White eye and manifested into reality through the collective whole of the white consciousness because the World in which we live has been shaped by the devastating consequences of Western imperialism, colonialism, and slavery. The legacies of those discourses of dominance all carried with them their own forms of spectacle, each springing from within a white imaginary of absolute power and violence determined to institute a Eurocentric power structure that could designate specific bodies as the Other needed “[f]or the maintenance of white patriarchal hegemony” (Carrington 2002: 11). Consequently, these new frontiers that Humans of the twenty-first century Western world walk upon are paved by the pervasive discourse of race. Ideologies concerning race, and racial difference—along with the notion of inferiority attached to ‘difference’—are manifested outward into society by whites who have projected onto Black people the “tropes of blackness [that] provide the discursive boundaries within which the Black subject is still framed” (Carrington 2002: 4).

Today, the depths to which Humans look inward have an entirely new social mapping based on the complex shifts in racialized identity politics following the four years of Donald Trump’s right-wing racist political agenda. Questions driven by the political and personal imagination like, “Why do Humans become ill?” or “Why do we not heal?” no longer have clear or concrete answers to them that might have been acceptable before the global pandemic arrived. This is because Humans are no longer searching for an infection but instead are searching for a story. The answer to Human healing is found in a narrative, or in reasons that are an enigma to the logical frameworks of the Enlightenment and the “European standards of moral and intellectual development” (Carrington 2002: 7). That narrative is the historical trajectory of Western colonialism and slavery, a narrative that should be read not “as an account of history but as an allegory of the present,” and this is precisely because in the present-day U.S. civil society

“Human life is dependent on Black death for its existence and for its coherence. Blackness and Slaveness are inextricably bound in such a way that whereas Slaveness can be separated from Blackness, Blackness cannot exist as other than Slaveness” (Wilderson 2020: 192).

Civil society has a saturated need to *know* and *dominate* Blackness, because as a collective whole, society’s grounding rests upon the statutes and norms of hegemonic whiteness because as Robin DiAngelo states, “in the white mind, Black people are the ultimate racial ‘other’” (90). Anti-Blackness quite literally flows through the veins of whiteness, and the blood of anti-Black violence springs from the fountains of white supremacy. As DiAngelo states, “[a]nti-blackness is foundational to our very identities as white people. . . [because] [w]hiteness has always been predicated on blackness” (91). Wilderson, too, has claimed that “anti-blackness is the genetic material of this organism called the United States of America,” and that Black death and “anti-Black violence [are] not a form of racist hatred but the *genome* of Human renewal; a therapeutic balm that the Human race needs to know and heal itself” with (2021: 17, 196).

Ben Carrington argues that “[t]he ‘dehumanisation’ of blacks was a contradictory process. For as blacks were vilified for their supposed *sub-human* impulses they also, simultaneously, became the subject of a romanticised Occidental idealism, being seen as reflecting a pure state of abandonment . . . Africans became idealised/eroticised *and* despised/condemned at the same time; the colonial construction of the *abject* Black body was ambivalent from the start” (emphases mine, 2002: 9). For Carrington, the “[s]tereotyped images of blacks [that] have circulated in European culture (both popular and elite)” have indelibly marked Black people with “[t]he negative representation of the Other [that] was vital in helping to legitimate the continuance of European slavery of Africans, and the violent acts carried out

under the auspices of ‘Western civilisation’” (6).

The processes of abject colonialism are important to note here because as Jessica Baker Kee states in her reading of Kristeva, “abjection [is] a site of cultural production, which helps to describe how bodies are raced, classed, and gendered as ‘insiders’ or ‘outsiders’ within communities” (48). The cultural malediction of Blacks through community exclusion and Western discourses of dominance, therefore, were “accumulate[d] . . . over time through affective encounters within unequal power relations” since “bodies do not inherently possess such characteristics” as race, class and gender (48). Thus, Black ~~being~~ was made ontologically void in the affective realm of revulsion, disgust and horror that permanently divided Western society between the quintessential racial demarcation of ‘white’ and ‘Black.’ Likewise, Carrington posits that “as modern science tried to uncover the secret truths encased within the Black skin of African bodies . . . [t]he attempt to essentialise and place that Other in a binary opposition grew from an *ontological* perspective that also allowed the idea of Europe to emerge” (emphasis mine, 2002: 9). As such, the ideological components of “‘race’ and white supremacy were not then minor appendages or epiphenomenal exceptions to the emergence of Enlightenment thought or European humanism, but were *from their inception* pivotal and internal to the project of modernity” (Carrington 2002: 9).

Consequently, the origins of today’s consumer drive for new forms of media and sport spectacle can be traced to the racist movement of modernity, which reveals the Western world’s need for anti-Blackness. As I argued in Part I, those new forms of affective astonishment, alongside the images of Blackness that frame it as the ultimate abject horror, is the Afro-Athletic Spectacle, which is the ontological reduction of the Black athletic body into commercialized available equipment, or as Drew D. Brown simply puts it, “the commodification of the Black

body for White entertainment [that] has suppressed much of the validity African bod[ies] once had” (44).

The last vestiges of Western slavery and colonialism can hardly even be considered such a diminution, depending on the definition of the word “vestige,” for the sociopolitical effects of those discourses of dominance are still present with us today, though, they are a mere hologram to the true atrocities committed against Blacks—physically, psychically, and ontologically. Quite the contrary, for in the biological context of the signifier, Black people *are* the vestige of ontology, if we are to cite the Merriam-Webster Dictionary entry of “vestige” as “a bodily part or organ that is small and degenerate or imperfectly developed in comparison to one more fully developed in an earlier stage of the individual, in a past generation, or in closely related forms.”

On the football field, however, the social valence of the Black body is framed differently, and hypocritically duplicitous according to the dominant Eurocentric standards of the body. The Black male athlete threatens his white counterparts as the ordinary or average player. However, the Afro-Athletic Spectacle, which is the execrated ontological reduction of the Black athlete—the ultimate abject specimen—reduces his white counterpart as the biological vestige, in the physical and athletic capacity. This is especially the case within the sexual imagination of “the visually-driven image-world of media culture with its obsession with the body,” and this is precisely because colonial projections of Black masculine sexuality are still hyperactively embedded within sport fandom and media discursive modes of speaking, as well as through the processes of corporate commercialization, as we have seen with Adrian Peterson (Carrington 2002: 29).

As Carrington has argued, “[m]ainstream media culture too is dominated by Black faces and bodies” because now “[t]he spectacle of ‘hyperblackness’ itself unwittingly reveals the

psychic investments that such racialised identifications produce in projecting colonial discourses about the racial other forwards into the post/colonial present” (3). I argue here for the converse: the *hyperspectacularity* of Blackness is now at the helm of Western civilization’s new racialized frontier. More accurately stated, this ‘new racialized frontier’ is marked by the hyperspectacularity of *anti-Blackness*, which was manifested outward into one of U.S. history’s most spectacularized social justice protest movements stemming from George Floyd’s senseless murder during the pandemic-struck 2020.

On May 25, 2020 police officer Derek Chauvin knelt with full force on Floyd's neck for over nine minutes after he was handcuffed and lying face down on the pavement. Floyd's shocking murder made global headlines, leading to worldwide protests against police brutality, police racism, and the lack of proper police training and accountability. The day following Floyd’s murder, after videos made by witnesses and security cameras were released to the public and major news outlets, all four officers involved were dismissed. After several autopsies found Floyd's death to be a homicide, Chauvin was then later convicted of second-degree unintentional murder, third-degree murder, and second-degree manslaughter. Chauvin's trial began on March 8, 2021 and concluded on April 20, 2021, after which Chauvin was later sentenced to 22.5 years in prison on June 25, 2021. But even the fact that Floyd’s horrific murder was visually circulated worldwide demonstrates how, according to Ben Carrington, that “[c]onsumers can now enjoy the spectacle of blackness 24-7, in a way which is no longer threatening by its mere presence, for those who actively desire a taste ‘for a bit of the other’ (2002: 3).

Given that society is still in a post/present COVID-19 moment in which the order of Life itself is sustained by the ontological terror and anti-Black violence imposed on Black people, the only recourse to any societal healing from a global pandemic is to continue searching for it

through “the material and ideological effects of racial inequality, discrimination, and violence [that] continue to brutally manifest themselves within the public and private spheres of Western liberal democracies” (Carrington 2002: 3). The sociopolitical protests that burst out globally following Floyd’s murder indicate just that *it is* that civil society *needs* anti-Black violence to sustain itself as a whole, a wholeness grounded on whiteness and U.S. white supremacy; even the nucleus of what Wilderson calls “civil society’s junior partners”—those bodies of color that are not Black—is sustained through the never-ending imposed ontological erasure and terror on Blacks. For Wilderson, this is because “Blacks are constituted by a violence that separates the time of the paradigm (ontological time) from time *within* the paradigm (historical time)” (2020: 218):

At every scale of abstraction, violence saturates Black life. To put it differently, for Black people there is no time and space of consent, no relative respite from force and coercion: violence spreads its tendrils across the body, chokes the community, and expands, intensifies and mutates into new and ever more grotesque forms in the collective unconscious through literature and film (2020: 218).

So, too, as I have been demonstrating through the National Football League, more specifically, these “grotesque forms” of anti-Black violence are appearing “ever more” in the sporting arenas of Western society and *have been there all along*. Indeed, race and sports sociologist Ben Carrington has propelled forward, in his own significant contributions to the Cultural Studies and Sport field, how “the athletic Black body in particular remains deeply inscribed into the psychic imaginary of the West” (2002: 4). For Carrington, “the ‘racial signification of sport’ means that sports contests are more

than just significant events. Rather, they act as a key signifier for wider questions about identity within racially demarcated societies in which narratives about the self and society are read both *into* and *from* sporting contests involving racial competition” (2002: 16).

The Black Quarterback as the (Primordial) Player-Martyr

Narratives tied to Black athletes are usually solely focused on instances of their racial appropriations through sport media’s language. Stigmas concerning Blackness and Black transgression in the sporting broadcast media industry is an always-already there presence that subtends any narrative concerning “problematic locker room” Black players, which by default situates the Black player positionality amidst a hyperdialectic of anti-Blackness, which can be both aversive and blatant phrases, words, and attitudes.

Even NFL coaches of color suffer from anti-Black discursive modes of speaking. In 2020, four nationally recognized coaches were fired from their positions. In a series of SportsCenter Tweets, each of the language of the firings were phrased differently according to the racial identification of the coaches. Doug Marrone “parted ways” with the Jaguars, Adam Gase and the Jets “parted ways,” Tom Herman was “out as Texas coach,” but Anthony Lynn, one of three Black NFL head coaches that 2020 season of the NFL, “was fired” by the Los Angeles Chargers (Fig. 6). This very clear example of anti-Black sentiment—the word “fired”—is what Wilderson called “the *hyper-discursive violence* that first kills the subject, so that the concept may be born.



Fig. 6 The discursive language geared toward Anthony Lynn as “fired” is questionable. In other words, from the incoherence of Black death, America generates white life” (emphasis mine, Wilderson 2003: 23). The phrase “fired,” when used to describe the termination of a Black coach in the NFL, in stark contrast to “parted ways,” “is out as coach,” or “has been let go” applied to white coaches that have also been “fired” “generates the coherence of white life” such that whites occupy a different space of discursive subjectivity, and obviously, employment opportunity.

Marrone, Gase, and Herman were all released from their jobs, freely open to explore the job market now as unemployed. Lynn, however, as a “fired” coach, shows as Orlando Patterson stated that “a slave has no symbolic currency or material labor power to exchange. A slave does not enter into a transaction of value . . . but is subsumed by direct relations of force” (Wilderson 2003: 23). Indeed, Anthony Lynn was subsumed by the media’s anti-Black discourse of violence. “Fired,” like being ontologically set aflame and reduced to the ashes on which whiteness is grounded. This reveals, as Wilderson posits, “that the problems that America has,” and especially through the power of media,

“are *not* structural, but rather that they are performative (that is, to be found in acts of discrimination or in the use of excessive levels of force)” (Wilderson 2020: 195).

Language, in this instance, is an excessive level of force used to ontologically erase Anthony Lynn by media’s racialized discursive modes of speaking.

The stories and fabrications in the media concerning Black players, and especially Black Quarterbacks, are always centered around an origin, one rooted in the unknowability of Blackness. That ‘unknowability,’ which is a trigger to white fears and anxieties concerning Blackness, is transposed onto the Black body through denigrating racist stereotypes. Hortense Spillers posited that at this epistemic point of that very unknowing of Blackness that a “narrative of antagonism is inscribed in its memory”; that memory is an irreducible trace of the atrocities committed against Black life, from the 400 years of slavery, to the horrors of Jim Crow segregation, to the government-enabled urban ghettoization characterized by red-housing lining policies (Spillers 306). Sadly, today’s current order of mass incarceration, coined as “The New Jim Crow” by Michelle Alexander, is the current White governmental oppressive apparatus that controls and perpetuates Black maleness as criminal, effectively locking them into “a state of everyday *social* incarceration” (emphasis mine, Sexton 2018: 67).

Similarly, when Wilderson questioned the positionality of the slave, he found that there was no heritage tied to their culture, only a sordid past. The Black subject did not register on the Historical Axis nor the Anthropological Axis⁴, “for Blackness in America generates no categories for the chromosome of history, and no data for the categories of

⁴ Frank Wilderson uses the concepts of the Historical and Anthropological Axis from J.M. Coetzee’s *White Writing* (1988) to demonstrate how European colonial discourse rests on two structuring axes. For Wilderson, a “Historical Axis” consists of codes” distributed along the axis of temporality and events, while the “Anthropological Axis” is an axis of cultural codes” (2003: 23).

immigration or sovereignty. It is an experience without analogy—a past without heritage” (Wilderson 2003: 25). For Calvin Warren, the quest and the need to know Blackness is what fundamentally drives metaphysical science, for Blackness is metaphysics’ greatest Nothing; science abhors this Nothing yet *needs* to dominate it. Jared Sexton critiques multiracialism in the post–civil rights era United States stating that such discourse only reifies anti-Black beliefs with prescriptions of a heteronormative sexuality. Saidiya Hartman traces back the root of Black women’s origins through the labor of Black women’s belly and their (re)productive capacities both in the domestic field and the slave field. These various Afropessimist theorists all bring together different perspectives of Black ~~being~~’s social location within an anti-Black world.

I align myself towards the study of the Black body, specifically within a sporting context, and argue that in today’s U.S. consumer sporting culture, which is propelled by what Cedric Robinson called “racial capitalism,” perhaps no other enigma fascinates and titillates media spectacle culture and sports science more than the Black Quarterback, for he is such a prime and conditioned figure for the displacement of anti-Black hatred and both an anti-Black fascination that seek to test the intellectual capacities, work ethic, leadership skill and most importantly, the measurability of strength and will.

In this section I will be examining how discourses of language and discursive modes of speaking are also mechanisms of domination that erase the Black athlete’s ~~being~~, where I deploy the figure of the Black Quarterback as my prime model of observation. I argue that the sports coverage media promotes various anti-Black narratives and imageries through the Afro-Athletic Spectacle of the Black Quarterback.

Here I utilize the Black Quarterback as the penultimate object of fascination and

fear within the tripartite nexus of media spectacle, science, and sports. The Black Quarterback is inherently dispossessed on the heteronormative plane of the political-sports nexus, which paradoxically places him at the center-stage to spectacle fetishism, wherein he is compounded further by processes of media commercialization and sport fandom networks like television, social media, and now more than ever, fantasy football, which literally reduces the Black Quarterback to virtual gaming available equipment for mere statistical data game-point values.

In the fantasy football virtual gaming space, the “mobile” Black Quarterbacks, like prime Cam Newton in his early league years, and current stars Lamar Jackson and Kyler Murray, are given a “fantasy” value, based on upside, or who can offer more point totals based on their dual rushing-passing athletic abilities than their white quarterback counterparts. Since white quarterbacks often lack the athletic ability to run and are often relegated within the protection of their offensive line’s pocket, fantasy football provides a salient example of how Black athletes, in certain spaces, can hold a certain degree of power over white athletes through notions of “value.”

The history of the NFL is undoubtedly fettered in anti-Blackness. However, as the most elevated professional sports league in today’s postwar U.S., the NFL has been making visible strides to maintain an image of integrity with “its varied attempts to displace racial antagonism through partial and hierarchical integration” (Sexton 2018: 60). The increasing demand for new forms of media spectacle, alongside the continual fascination with the Black male body, has opened more opportunity than ever for Black quarterbacks in today’s NFL with today’s meteoric rise of star Black quarterbacks Patrick Mahomes, Lamar Jackson, Kyler Murray, Dak Prescott, and Deshaun Watson. In fact,

this past 2021 NFL Draft featured two future hopeful star Black quarterbacks drafted in the top 15 selections, Trey Lance (3rd overall) out of North Dakota State and Ohio State's Justin Fields (11th overall).

Although various Black quarterbacks have been active in the league for various decades now, society's open acceptance of their presence on the field remains questionable. The resistance to Black quarterbacks from an ideological perspective is rooted in "[t]he social conditions and representations that structured colonial relationships between blacks and whites [that] led to the perception of Black people as effectively sub-human" and therefore less intelligent people (Carrington 2002: 7). These racist parameters determinately left no space on the field for Black players who were contained in a matrix of white domination yet still had the physical and intellectual capacity to play the most iconic position in American football: the quarterback.

In 1968, the first Black Quarterback to ever start a game was Marlin Briscoe of the Denver Broncos. Briscoe's story is special because "Marlin Briscoe didn't want to be pigeonholed simply because of stereotypes against black men. He was a star quarterback in college and he believed he had the talent, *intelligence* and *leadership* skills to be one in the pros" (emphasis mine, Brunt). Although the Broncos drafted Briscoe as a QB, the team tried to move him to cornerback, a position typically stereotyped for quicker, more athletic, Black players, rather than quarterback, where he flourished at Omaha University. But Briscoe was very clear with the Broncos, and according to Cliff Brunt, "[told] his team that he'd return home to become a teacher if he couldn't get a tryout at quarterback. Denver agreed to an audition, and that season the 5-foot-10 dynamo nicknamed "The Magician" became the first black quarterback to start a game in the American Football

League.” That Briscoe, during such a tumultuous 1968, with the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, could exercise such a swift degree of agency from team constraints is not only unheard of but admirable, and is what Carrington would describe as agency acted by “self-expression under structural constraints” (2010).

However, in 1978, Doug Williams of the recently renamed Washington Football Team was the first Black quarterback drafted in the first round of the NFL Draft, selected 17th overall out of Grambling State University, which is a historically Black college (Haynes). Williams eventually went on to also become the first Black quarterback to win a Super Bowl. Today’s Black Quarterbacks like Colin Kaepernick and Cam Newton can be considered examples of how “[t]he participation of Blacks in sports must be done in a way that is not too far removed from White cultural norms or else it faces social ridicule” (Brown 44).

Colin Kaepernick and Black Politics in the NFL

Colin Kaepernick, former San Francisco 49ers quarterback, is the most iconic example of the **player-martyr**, which is the Black athlete who is subject to political, social, and institutional forms of oppression and ontological erasure out of an act of *political* or *personal* resistance. During the 2016 NFL pre-season, then San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick decided to make a statement using his platform that would send shockwaves throughout the country. Kaepernick, long tired of the injustice of police brutality against minorities, decided to protest police violence by kneeling during the national anthem. In a statement to NFL media, Kaepernick voiced his reasons for protesting during the anthem:

I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder. (Wyche)

Although Kaepernick's kneeling was intended to target police brutality against minorities in the U.S., the dominant society quickly changed the narrative of the protests into disrespecting American patriotism and U.S. military personnel. Kaepernick faced endless scrutiny for his convictions. President Donald Trump would play a critical role in creating public unrest and distorting the protests' message. In a Sept. 2017 rally in Huntsville, Alabama, Trump blasted NFL owners, asking the rally attendees, "Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, 'Get that son of a bitch off the field right now, out, he's fired. He's fired. You know, some owner is going to do that. He's going to say, 'That guy that disrespects our flag, he's fired.'" (Stelter).

The following day on Twitter, Trump continued to attack the players and said that "'If a player wants the privilege of making millions of dollars in the NFL, or other leagues, he or she should not be allowed to disrespect. ... our Great American Flag (or Country) and should stand for the National Anthem. If not, YOU'RE FIRED. Find something else to do!'" (Stelter). Trump strategically disguised his criticism against the protests as an attack on the game of football, but in reality, Trump was defending the power of white supremacy. Kaepernick made a stand against the injustice of systemic racism of America through his NFL platform like no player had done before and it eventually cost him his NFL career. Kaepernick has not played in the NFL since the 2016 season and although the majority of the NFL universe knows he is still capable of contributing to a team, he has virtually been blackballed by league owners. He became the

player-martyr out of political resistance against heightened police brutality and killings of minority people, namely black people.

In a Gramscian interpretation, Kaepernick was “positioned not as a positive term in excess of hegemony i.e., a worker, but [was] positioned in excess of hegemony, to be a catalyst that disarticulates the rubric of hegemony, to be a scandal to its assumptive, foundational logic, to threaten civil society’s discursive integrity” (Wilderson 2003: 23). Excesses predicate a need to expel, and Kaepernick was an excess that could not tolerate the hegemonic repressive state apparatus of the police and the ongoing acts of police brutality. As such, Kaepernick was expelled from the NFL for becoming a scandal in the discursive integrities defending the veneration of the military and anthem kneeling.

Cam Newton: Sub-Human or Super-Man?

As I mentioned, the player-martyr is “the Black athlete who is subject to political, social, and institutional forms of oppression and ontological erasure out of an act of *political* or *personal* resistance.” While Kaepernick acted out of political resistance, Former Auburn and Carolina Panthers quarterback Cam Newton is an instance of the personal resistance to the NFL’s strict regulation of Black cultural expression. Newton has repeatedly been criticized by both the media and fan discourse since he entered the league in 2011 as the first overall selection in the 2011 NFL Draft. Newton’s accolades in 2010 during his time at Auburn include AP College Player of the Year in 2010, Heisman Award winner; he even led Auburn to win the BCS National Championship that year.

Newton’s NFL records and awards are certainly and intentionally overlooked, too, and they are astonishing, even gaining him the nickname "Super Cam." Newton is the NFL career

leader in quarterback rushing touchdowns at 70. Newton made an impact in his rookie season where he set the rookie records for passing (4,051) and rushing yards (706) by a quarterback. He won NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year in the process. He became the league's first rookie quarterback to throw for 4,000 yards in a season and the first to throw for 400 yards in his NFL debut game. He also set the season record for quarterback rushing touchdowns at 14. His most successful season came in 2015 when he was named Most Valuable Player and helped Carolina achieve a franchise-best regular season 15–1 record while leading the Panthers to an appearance in Super Bowl 50. He is one of four Black quarterbacks to win NFL MVP and was the *first* to ever win it.

But Newton's career feats have been overwritten by the manner of media and fandom discourse seeking to erase not only his career accomplishments but his very *being*, and much of this is because of his *personal resistance* to the NFL. As Brown states, "[t]he NFL is also a place where Black cultural presence has been challenged but continues to (re)emerge through the persistent agency of Black people" (45). And while Newton's personality and personal expression is a natural act from any Human, for the Black *being* his resistance can be interpreted as an act of resistance to not just the NFL but to whiteness.

Rosemary Plorin, a white woman, even sent a letter to the *Charlotte Observer* "after a jarring incident at a Carolina Panthers and Tennessee Titans football game" complaining about Newton's cultural expression (Gould):

"Because of where we sat, we had a close up view of your conduct in the fourth quarter," [Florin] wrote. "The chest puffs. The pelvic thrusts. The arrogant struts and the 'in your face' taunting of both the Titans players and fans. We saw it all."

What does it say about the current state of racial tensions in a then-Trump run America when a white woman has to write a letter to the *Charlotte Observer* to criticize a Black male athlete for expressing not just his joy, but Black joy, during moments of success on the field (Fig. 7)?

Gould's satiric response is comical, but does well in exposing and responding to Florin's racism, and rightfully so:

“Wow, she really dislikes cheerleaders setting a poor example for her daughter.

Wait, she was talking about Cam Newton celebrating touchdowns by smiling and dancing. Saving her daughter from this dubious display of dabbing, the mother ‘redirected her attention to the cheerleaders and mascot’ so the young girl could instead watch scantily clad women dance.” (Gould)



Fig. 7 Newton's signature “Super-Man” pose has received criticism for expressing too much joy

Michael Tillotson (2011) contends that “Black expressions of agency are often met with resistance from the dominant group” (Brown 46). In this, Tillotson postulated what he called “Agency Reduction Formation,” (ARF) to “argue that laws, media, social ridicule often diminish the cultural presence of authentic Black production” (46). Indeed,

Newton's astonishing football production merits his joy, but when a person is not looked at as a Human, but sub-human, there is no room for joy, only suffering. This is a cogent example of what Jared Sexton believes is "a persistent effect of the mark of slavery that the social category of racial blackness bears the burden for this immanent critique of the metaphysics of presence" (2018: 67).

Clearly, Newton's Black joy is a destabilizing presence amidst a fanbase in a politically right-wing social location such as Nashville, Tennessee, but in order to continue resisting racial modes of oppression by both the media and fandom, Black joy must persist to be visibly expressed and acted. It is only in these acts of Black cultural resistance that the fight for forward progress of racial equality, both within the NFL stands and in the social sphere of the U.S., can continue.

Part III

Destabilizing the Field: Afro-Athletic Agency and the Autonomy of Blackness in Sport

“Choice is a fundamental power of the [H]uman experience . . . that everyone should learn that the power of the choices you make have infinite consequences. From the littlest choice to something that is great, big, huge, and that here’s the paradox—You have no idea what a little choice is or a big choice.”

–Caroline Myss, TEDxFindHornSalon

At the kernel of life lies the abstraction that ‘choice’ is at the beginning of every autonomous decision a Human is able to make. For those with the privilege afforded to be able to be called Human, we are born with a knowing of will that everywhere we go we must make long-lasting decisions with infinite consequences. We are given opportunities to decide, and it is because of one of the single-most fundamental dimensions of Human abstraction: the choice of free will. The idea of choice, and the ability to choose, continue to open up new spaces and uncover voids of discourse in order for Humans to continue to observe themselves. But for those who are not granted *being*, choice is not an option, nor can that abstraction hold itself *as* abstract thought for the ontologically void. To be born not of the gift of Being but its execration means that the common gifts given to Man—thought, free will, choice—are not given to Black *being* for they are key endowments to beings by Being.

I begin this final Part of this thesis with the idea of choice, because choice not only impacts the individual but all the Life force of Humanity, which lives in relation to one another, not in isolation, which is a deep-seated ideological belief instituted by generations of American individualist thought and meritocracy. In fact, ‘choice’ as a fundamental aspect to Human life, is

an underlying concept imbricated throughout this entire thesis, and so I end this project with stories that are all consequences of choices made by others, impacting other lives, and thereby affecting the entire scope of today's U.S. sociopolitical sphere.

Hierarchies of Nothingness

For the Black being, “[a]t the center of the Black experience in America sits the constant quest for agency and all ideas associated with it, such as self-determination, sovereignty, autonomy and collective advancement” (Gordon 2011: xxii). Afro-Athletic Spectacles in the NFL have been reduced as commodities for labor and production rather than positioned as sentient beings, and as Brown states, “[t]he unfair treatment of Black players and their cultural contributions in the NFL are clearly racially motivated” (44-45). Black players are inscribed with specific markers of their high-profile status, from the way they speak, carry themselves, perform (socially and athletically on the field) and dress. The following story I am about to tell, in fact, reflects all these statements, but more than that, it reveals the ways in which Black athletes hold a certain social valence—a power that is tied to their reduction as player-commodities.

It was a hot summer day in September 2020 when I met Corey Coleman. Corey was a former first round pick by the Cleveland Browns in the 2016 NFL Draft. Coleman's collegiate career was, like many other individuals discussed in this thesis, filled with spectacular accomplishments of the will and of his Black body. It was his 74 catch, 1,363 yard and 20 touchdown senior season production at Baylor that earned him his 16th overall selection in 2016 by the Browns.

That we met that day was a result of my choice for that year to become a server at a brunch spot while working on my Master's degree at the University of Texas at Arlington. As I

was hosting the front that day directing customers to their tables, distracted by the tablet controlling the floorplan, I hear, “What’s the wait time?” Before I could even look up from the stand that voice followed with, “I’m Corey Coleman.” Flustered by the flurry of persistent customers demanding to be sat all around me, I responded, “Yeah, I know who you are. It’s at 45 minutes to an hour right now, man.” Despite the fact he was wearing a mask, his physical stature and presence had already presented himself as Corey Coleman. His athletic and NFL reputation preceded him, and I had been watching his whole career on the television screen.

“Man, you can’t get me up to the front, then?,” he said. I was confused, and although I was excited to be meeting him, as a fan of “his game,” I told him, “Naw, man, I can’t. People have been waiting. Let me add you to the wait list, though, that’s no problem.” He was clearly flustered, as if his name alone could hop him to the front of the line. “Well, what about if I give you \$40? Come on, man.” He had my attention. And although I knew in my heart that this was wrong—to have others pay the consequence of an under-the-table deal—I, too, was a product of my social conditions and the power of capitalist forces of constraint. As Harry Cleaver states, “capitalism is analysed as a social system in which human agency, both individual and collective, is subjected to a series of constraints which people have resisted from the beginning and from which we have repeatedly struggled to free ourselves ever since. At the heart of those constraints is imposed work” (xxvi). I had known this fact for a long time now, especially as a first-generation Latino male trying to elevate himself in a society where I, too, was marked as Other, my body inscribed by labels such as “wetback,” “beaner,” and “spic” my entire life. I folded, took the money, and gave Corey and his friends a spot at the top of the line. His hour wait had turned into a 10-minute wait.

This experience provided the intellectual mapping of much of this thesis, for it made me

realize the extent to which Black male athletes hold a certain power in society *despite* the fact they are viewed as metaphysical Nothings in society. More than that, it allowed me to form the idea of Afro-Athletic Agency, for it is a very different type of agency that can not only grant the Black male athlete with certain privileges, but also provide him an escape from grave consequences for their individual choices. I was personally convicted, for if this were a rich, white customer who had tried to bribe me, I would have absolutely denied it.

This brought to my attention that in regard to the Afro-Athletic Spectacle, there is a hierarchy and no one Black athlete holds the same valence of power as another. Corey Coleman does not hold the same degree of power that Michael Jordan and LeBron James do, and so there is clearly a hierarchy of Nothingness with Black athletes based on their fame, physical productivity, and social value attached to their names. Coleman's specific agency here resembles Albert Bandura's definition of agency: "a person's ability . . . 'to influence intentionally one's functioning and life circumstances'" (Bandura 164).

My encounter with Coleman led me to consider how agency itself can be subverted by Afro-Athletic Spectacles in order to dodge penal consequences like domestic violence abuse. Here, I will extrapolate further by exploring the meaning of agency and detaching its connotation as a positive force of resistance in an attempt to determine what agency *becomes* when exercised for the wrong reasons. Specifically, I explore what agency is reduced to by examining the issue of domestic abuse in the NFL, and how agency, while empowering some to lift themselves from conditions of oppression, can often come at the cost of others' well-being, health, and lives.

Cycles of Tragedy: The NFL's Domestic Abuse Problem

It was July 14, 2021, and I will not forget the text message I had received. It was a screenshot of a Tweet from Adam Schefter, one of the most credible and reputable sources of breaking NFL news for the majority of the early 21st century. “Bruhhh,” read the initial text. “Im shocked.” Soon, however, my mind went in the opposite direction than my friend Christjan’s. “It’s happened again,” I thought. In a world that is governed by patriarchy and the phallus, armed alongside its legacies of colonialism, misogyny, rape, murder, and violence, sadly, it did not seem shocking to me that even Richard Sherman, an All-Pro and future Hall of Fame cornerback, could be capable of committing domestic abuse.

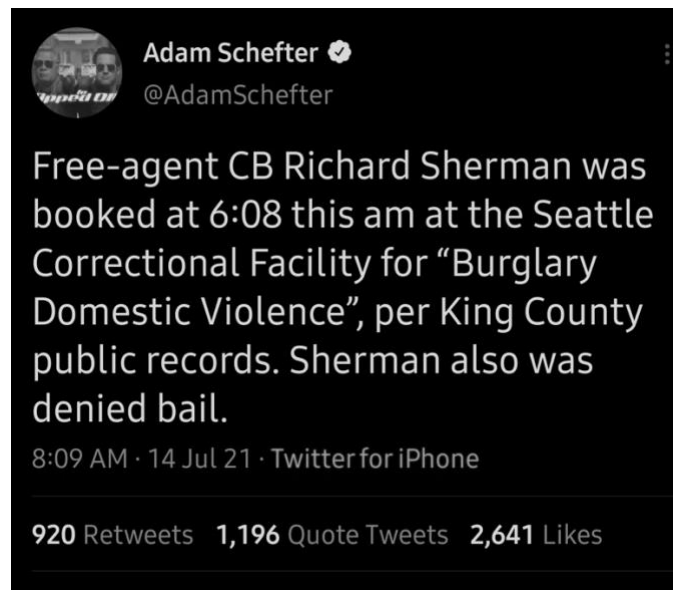


Fig. 8 The breaking news Tweet of Richard Sherman’s domestic violence incident on July 14, 2021

The cycles of tragedy that plague the NFL are never as clear or visceral as the power of a Tweet such as Schefter’s that Wednesday morning (Fig. 8). According to Chris B. Geyerman, “[a] woman is beaten in the U.S. every nine seconds; each year, more than 4.5 million women are subjected to physical violence at the hands of their intimate partner” (99). Sadly, “[o]ne in four women will be the victim of severe intimate partner violence during the course of their life” (99). What makes this even more unremarkably tragic is that domestic abuse is always framed by

public discourse as a “women’s issue,” but the reality is that domestic abuse is a men’s issue, and we are the ones most quiet about it. For the better part of the last 40 years, and very possibly longer than that, domestic abuse has been the NFL’s dirty secret. Like a monster that lives in the closet, or a pest lurking in the corners of your kitchen at night, the NFL’s domestic abuse problem is all too often never seen, or if it is, it is blatantly ignored or swept under the rug.

However, since 2014, the awareness of the glaring domestic abuse problem has increasingly gained attention. With the vicious assault of former Ravens running back Ray Rice on his then-fiancée Janay Palmer in an elevator at the Revel Casino Hotel in Atlantic City, New Jersey, it became more obvious than ever that the NFL has a violence against women problem. The Ray Rice case was spread nationally and globally, and, according to Jessica Luther, “allowed public consumption of two different things at the same time: domestic violence and *Black suffering*,” which demonstrates the depths to which media spectacle culture has sunk more than ever when Black suffering is spectacularized into consumer entertainment (emphasis mine, 177). This also proves that “the violence that both elaborates and saturates Black ‘life’ is totalizing” (Wilderson 2020: 226).

Regrettably, domestic abuse against women in the NFL could in fact be becoming more of a problem than ever before. In 2019, former Kansas City Chiefs running back Kareem Hunt was caught on film released by TMZ kicking a woman to the ground in a racially-charged altercation. Though he was released by the Chiefs after the footage was released on November 30, 2018, he was signed by the Cleveland Browns on February 11, 2019 and received a two-year extension on September 8, 2020 and remains employed. Hunt is just one example, but there remains a log-jammed list of offenders since then that, although not entirely unnoticed, have been repeatedly let off the hook.

Since the NFL at its core is a spectacle of violence, of bodies colliding and clashing, it has enabled these cycles of violence against women to continue to repeat. Similarly, because Blackness has been linked with aggression, domination, and control, the NFL, as Denzel Smith writes, “contributes to a culture in which violence against women is not regarded as a serious enough issue to warrant collective outrage.” That the NFL has done so little to intervene in the problems of their employees manifesting in domestic violence criminal incidents demonstrates how the league itself is a perpetuator of the stigma that has made Blackness and criminality synonymous to each other.

Afro-Athletic Agency

Frank Wilderson’s essay “The Prison Slave as Hegemony’s (Silent) Scandal” examines how the Black prison slave presents a scandal for hegemonic categories like work, labor, wage and exploitation. For Wilderson the prison slave is a scandal for hegemonic discourses of power because s/he does not exist in coherence with the rules of white supremacy on which civil society is founded. Here Wilderson analyzes the Black subject’s incommensurability with Gramscian categories like labor, production, exploitation and hegemony. Wilderson “contend[s] that the positionality of the Black subjectivity is . . . bound up with the political limitations of several naturalized and uncritically accepted categories that have their genesis mainly in the works of Antonio Gramsci, namely, work or labor, the wage, exploitation, hegemony, and civil society” (2003: 20).

The Black subject’s relation to these discourses is an antagonism that cannot be resolved because capitalism’s genesis was found in the slave “by approaching a particular body (a Black body) with direct relations of force,” however, the Black slave’s positionality within those

discourses “makes a demand that is in excess of the demand made by the positionality of the [non-slave] worker” (2003:22). As much as capitalism needs Black bodies to exploit for its sustainability, their presence alone renders those Gramscian discourse categories chaotic, so whereas the “worker demands that productivity be fair and democratic,” in contrast, “the slave demands that production stop, without recourse to its ultimate democratization”; “[t]he worker calls into question the legitimacy of productive practices, while the slave calls into question the legitimacy of productivity itself” (22).

Whereas Wilderson believes that “a slave has no symbolic currency or material labor power to exchange,” I argue that the Black NFL player is *himself* the material labor power that is exchanged. NFL players, both Black and non-Black, offer their bodies and their physical attributes, talent and production as capital exchange to NFL teams through contracts binding them to legal and corporate obligations. In other words, Black athletic bodies—Afro-Athletic Spectacles—are rewritten by capitalist processes of exploitation as a corporeal currency through which NFL teams garner multi-billion-dollar profits annually.

As such, Black NFL players possess a *powerful* degree of agency. However, agency does not operate in a single mode of resistance, nor can it be contained into a single definitive action. Agency “can be misdirected, specifically in the NFL—[for] one can be Black and still struggle with the desire to serve the interest of White supremacy” (Brown 46). But the distinction between the prison slave and the NFL player is coercion and consent. Here, the Black NFL player’s consent is what provides any type of relative autonomy within the NFL. His consent presents an antagonism and scandal as well, as they ultimately get to decide whether they play or not to play in a white-dominated league that oppresses them.

NFL players willingly and literally sign their bodies over to teams as corporeal capital.

Players' consent is essentially the trade-off between players' physical labor for the hegemonic control of the NFL teams over players' livelihoods, incomes and health. Since the NFL's capital comes with players' on-field performances and their athletic abilities, the success of NFL teams is naturally predicated on the productivity of its players on the field, with the ultimate goal being team wins, success and championships.

Afro-Athletic Agency is a subversive contractual engagement with the team powers and authorities (team owners, general managers, coaches) that decide the rules and regulations, and especially, the culture within the specific team organization. Since team owners continually attempt to alter league regulations (for instance, the annual NFL Owners Meetings) in a way that can maintain control over players, Black NFL players, too, must consistently find ways to navigate through these changes. A prime example is that this 2021 NFL Season will feature the first ever 18-game schedule after owners agreed to add one more regular season game. Although white NFL players will also suffer the consequences of an additional game, such as increased injury risk, they are not as equally affected because they are not Afro-Athletic Spectacles commodified for the desires of the white consumer imagination.

Afro-Athletic Agency occurs when Black NFL players are “place[d] . . . in a structurally impossible position, one that is outside the articulations of hegemony. However, it also places hegemony in a structurally impossible position because—and this is key—our presence works back upon the grammar of hegemony and threatens it with incoherence” (Wilderson 2003: 25). In this sense, then, Afro-Athletic Agency is the Black NFL player's ability to use his scandalous presence against the very system that oppresses him by disarticulating the rules of engagement.

A cogent example of this is former Seahawks running back Marshawn Lynch's refusal to speak with the media in 2013 and 2014, eventually leading to a \$100,000 fine. Although NFL

policy requires players to speak with and answer media questions, later that year during the Super Bowl media day—which is a media spectacle of press engaging with Super Bowl participants the day before the game—Lynch appeared before the media stand, albeit clearly reluctantly, and answered every question with “I’m only here so I won’t get fined.” In fact, the next day he responded with the same message but phrased differently—“You know why I’m here.” Lynch’s defiance is a fascinating example of Afro-Athletic Agency because even though Lynch was eventually fined *another* \$75,000 for his open resistance, that resistance led the NFL to create a new rule in order to discourage “media avoidance” incidents like Lynch’s (NFL.com). As Drew D. Brown states, “[i]n the NFL a White commissioner, who acts on behalf of an all-White cast of team owners, imposes penalties” that are enacted in order to further control and oppress Black players like Lynch. But acts of open defiance exercising Afro-Athletic Agency are the catalysts that are necessary to enact change. Choice is the final determinant when it comes to trying to subvert power structures, and Lynch’s choice to enact his Afro-Athletic Agency, although it cost him \$175,000, gave him some relative autonomy from a system of complete control.

Conclusion

The forms of spectacle that have fascinated cultures and societies are everchanging. Today, the commodification of the Black athletic body itself dominates mainstream media, television, and film. Blackness is no longer contained within an invisible sphere of unknowing as began with Western colonialism and slavery. Instead today processes of commercialization have embedded the Black body within the fabric of the imaginative realities that society engages in. As the new frontiers of racial discourse continue to expand Western liberal politics, the Black

body has become the biological fetishistic structure imbricating both global and US racial capitalism, all while being rendered void of its ontological valence. To say it differently, the commodification of Black athletic bodies via hyper-commercialized processes of domination are in many instances capitalist (re-)manifestations of the assumptive logic of anti-Blackness.

Likewise, the discursive modes of speaking by media culture and sport fandom serve as powerful reifications of white supremacist ideologies, which are rooted within colonial mythologies that instituted the fear of the Black athletic body, as well as a sexualized fascination with it, which is the Afro-Athletic Spectacle. Such historically deep-seated notions of Blackness can only continue to be resisted and disassembled by first *recognizing* its ubiquitous nature within twenty-first century media spectacle culture. In order to do so, society has to revisit long-standing representations of Blackness and interrogate the presumptive logic of today's Western post-racial politics along with multiculturalism and its fallacies of meritocracy and equal opportunity.

Finally, in hoping to deconstruct racialized significations of Blackness we must fully engage in *understanding* how representations of the Black body, athletic or ordinary, inform not just the conscious realities we live in/with, but the unconscious ones we form within ourselves, for it is within the limitless boundaries of the (un)conscious mind that we manifest the World. Such arduous individual ideological reworking is necessary in order to appreciate the beautiful, colored and athletic bodies around us, and predicates being able to recognize their personhood, not just the color of their skin or extraordinary athletic gifts.

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