Talking Trash: Late Capitalism, Black (Re)Productivity, and Professional Basketball
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Source: Social Text, No. 50, The Politics of Sport (Spring, 1997), pp. 97-110
Published by: Duke University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/466817
Accessed: 11-11-2015 14:33 UTC

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In one of a series of television spots in Nike’s NYC-Attack campaign, Pee-wee Kirkland, a legend of street basketball, offers himself as an example of both the American dream deferred and fulfilled.1 In 1980, Peewee was drafted by the Chicago Bulls (“every kid’s biggest dream”), an offer he turned down in order to continue playing street basketball in New York City. His “life on the streets” soon turned to drug addiction and homelessness (“every kid’s worst nightmare”). The TV spot ends with Peewee exhorting today’s youth to remember that “the street takes lives,” as the Nike logo appears discreetly on the screen. The curious ellipsis in Peewee’s monologue, between his “dream” and “nightmare,” marks a space rich in the contradictions and paradoxes of African American life in fin-de-siècle American society, where despite the inroads made by African Americans in professional sport, the entertainment industries, corporations, and academia, the life-chances for black people as a whole are bleak and not improving.2

Seen from the vantage point of fans and players today, Peewee’s rejection of an offer to play in the National Basketball Association (NBA) is incomprehensible. However, if we follow the cues in the Nike advertisement, Peewee’s decision to remain on the “street” is continuous with his eventual slide into criminal activity and, presumably, drug addiction.3 After more than thirty years since the publication of the Moynihan Report for the U.S. Department of Labor,4 the association of the “street” with black male lawlessness, parental irresponsibility, and emasculation has become a part of American common sense, for both African Americans and white Americans. Indeed, Peewee’s own narrative succumbs to the pressures of this paradigm by staging his “fall” as the consequence of his renunciation of the corporatized, disciplined, professional realm of the NBA for a life of hoop-hustling and street basketball.

As one of its dubious achievements, the Moynihan Report continued a tradition in U.S. society that has historically constructed the black body as the exemplary site through which anxieties about the (re)production of labor, the nuclear family, and gender have been played out, all in the national interest. Yet the pervasiveness of the Moynihan “thesis” cannot alone account for the appearance of a dichotomous opposition, as it appears in Peewee’s narrative and elsewhere, between the “street” and the professional sport arena as sites for black male annihilation and recu-

The paradox that Nike’s NYC-Attack campaign cannot contain is that the same late-capitalist economic practices that led to deindustrialization and the decline of black urban communities in the post–World War II United States also produced the black basketball star as a commodity and an object of desire for mass consumption; that both the “nightmare” of the urban ghetto and the “dream” of being a celebrity, professional athlete are manifestations of the economic and cultural workings of late capitalism. To admit such a paradox is first to suggest that basketball’s association with black urban bodies is a historical and by no means “natural” one and, second, to raise a question about the function of “visibility” in the public sphere, image industries, and professional sports for a minority group within the context of late-capitalist America. As Wiegman has discussed, an economy of the visible has particular consequences for African American communities whose “gains” in a post–civil rights period bear a striking resemblance to the “old economy of corporeal enslavement . . . situated instead in the panoply of signs, texts, and images through which the discourse of race functions now to affirm the referential illusion of an organic real.”6 The burden of corporeality and racial marking borne by slaves in modernity continues to situate black bodies always-already outside the definitions of citizenship and family and always-already under the sign of white paternalism.

Within the race-gender matrix that evolved from and justified a modern slave society in the United States, the “Negro problem” has historically been read as a crisis of black masculinity and black paternity. According to liberals like Daniel Moynihan, the ability of the nation-state to discipline black bodies into a productive workforce has been hindered by the aberrant black familial structure of female-headed households, a structure that emasculates black men and retards their entry into the mainstream of American society. The recurring insistence that black NBA players serve as “role models” to embattled black urban youth is a partic-
ular indication of the salience of discourses of race, gender, and the family to our contemporary understanding of professional basketball. Even Charles Barkley’s vociferous refusal to act as a surrogate parent to young black fans has done no more than secure the continuing centrality of concerns about the black family, black masculinity, and black economic productivity that subtend the spectatorship and sponsorship of the game. But what does all of this have to do with Peewee Kirkland and his career as a street basketball legend and Nike spokesman? While it may not be immediately apparent, Peewee’s personal story offers us a window through which to see the production of professional basketball as an ideological site for the recuperation of black masculinity and black economic productivity under postindustrial conditions.

Significantly, the Nike advertisement fails to say that, when offered a chance to play with the Chicago Bulls in 1980, Peewee decided not to join the NBA because street basketball was a more lucrative occupation. While Peewee’s narrative for Nike participates in the widespread pathologizing of the “street” and black men on the “street” as outside social and economic controls, this is clearly a retrospective reading of events. At the time of his decision in 1980, Peewee believed that he had a greater opportunity for economic advancement on the “street” than in professional basketball. My contention here, though, is that the ostensible opposition between Peewee’s participation in the informal economy of pick-up games (his “life on the streets”) in the late 1970s and early 1980s and his appearance in the corporate world of product endorsements in the late 1990s points to a crucial mechanism underpinning the recent success of the NBA as one of the United States’ most lucrative cultural enterprises: the recuperation of socially abject bodies and the inner city as commodities and objects of desire.

The dichotomy between the informal and formal economy, between the “street” and the professional sports arena, forms a coupling that relies on ascriptions of difference where the racially marked and gendered body stands in for the inferior term. In the American context of deindustrialization, the rhetorical appearance of the “welfare queen” is a paradigmatic instance of the ideological use made of the association of black female bodies with urban blight and the effects of economic restructuring. Within the dominant imaginary, the “street” is always peopled by either black single mothers or their violent, criminal male offspring; poverty, urban decay, crime, and unemployment are manifestations of individual failure and black social pathology. The postindustrial city has become the emblematic landscape for the operation of narratives about unruly sexualities and economic dependency, and the emblematic subjects of these narratives are the hustler and the welfare queen. In debates about affirmative action, ongoing racial inequality, and the responsibilities of the
“welfare state,” these two characters are opposed to the black ladies and professional black men whose successes prove that the system really does work. What is denied in the operation of such binary oppositions, however, is the unnaturalness of these designations (i.e., their discursive and material production), and their contingent and mutually reinforcing meanings. For example, the boundary between informal and formal sectors of the economy has its historical roots in a period of ascendant industrialization when the movement of surplus value had to be regulated and centralized for capital-intensive production. Although the codified boundary between informal and formal economic activity is not maintained to the same degree in late capitalism,12 the ideological apparatuses separating work from play and gainful employment from unproductive distraction continue to discipline bodies and determine life-chances along racial lines. Nike’s use of Peewee’s story as a “before” and “after” narrative of disciplined, productive employment turns on precisely these ideological codings of space and bodies. Peewee, the hoop-hustler, must renounce the “streets” if he is to enter the productive space of professional employment. His is a literal passage from exteriority to interiority, from the “street” world of economic dependency, hyperreproductivity, crime, and drug addiction to the regulated, economically productive, patriarchal, and white world of corporate life.13

In dominant narratives, the ghetto (i.e., the “street”) is intelligible only as a public zone, without a compensatory private realm where interiority, nuclear families, or patriarchal authority can dwell. Hence, when the hoop-hustler is juxtaposed with the NBA sports star in “The Streets,” the implication is that African Americans have traveled down a progressive continuum of individual achievement where the ability to “just say no” (to “street” life and “patriarchal” culture) is all that distinguishes those men who have failed from those who have reaped the rewards of success and citizenship. In this context, Peewee’s injunction reads as a challenge to African American male youth to get off the “street” and resist the incomplete masculinization, aberrant familial structures, economic unproductivity, and biological hyperreproductivity that have come to signify urban blackness. Yet, for black urban youth, the “street” provides the very site of their interpolation into consumerism and “corporate citizenship.”14 There is an ostensible contradiction here for (black and white) consumer-spectators because they must repudiate the inner city as a site of abjection even as they consume commodified images of its metonymic personifications: the hustler and welfare queen are deplored as socially aberrant, while the inner city becomes the locus of authentic blackness and consumers’ acquisitive desire. This contradictory coding of urban blackness accounts for the status of Peewee’s narrative as both a public-service announcement and an advertisement for Nike products.
Capital, to be sure, experiences none of the contradictions faced by consumers. Indeed, the status of “difference” as the commodity in post-modernity attests to the increasing reliance of capital on precisely such contradictions. That is to say, it is extraordinarily economical (in both senses of the word) for capital to make the postindustrial city productive once again through its symbolic representation as the locus of racial and sexual difference. As Nike’s NYC-Attack advertising campaign demonstrates, the material and ideological construction of the urban ghetto as a site of dereliction, drug abuse, and economic dependency is transformed into a commodified image that can produce surplus value. Wiegman has remarked that “such a commodity status is not without irony in the broad historical scope of race in this country, where the literal commodification of the body under enslavement is now simulated in representational circuits.”

The coordinates “nightmare” and “dream” in Peewee’s monologue point to this simultaneous process of abjecting and recuperating ghetto bodies, which drives contemporary popular cultural representations of African Americans. In order to make these connections among late capitalism, professional basketball, and black (re)productivity clearer, I will have to take a brief detour through the recent history of the NBA.

The extent of the NBA’s current success can be gauged by the fact that few people recall that sports arenas could not attract enough spectators fifteen years ago to cover operating costs. In 1980, the year Peewee turned down a professional draft offer, the league’s annual gross revenues were $118 million, with seventeen of the twenty-three teams losing money. Estimates at the time claimed that 75 percent of the league’s players were on drugs and around the league “hotels became known as ‘party palaces’ with marijuana and wall-to-wall hookers.” The NBA had a serious “image problem” and corporate sponsors were reacting by withdrawing their support. David Stern, who was hired in 1980 to bolster the league’s public relations, marketing, and broadcasting and then went on to become commissioner in 1984, recalls that “sponsors were flocking out of the NBA because it was perceived as a bunch of high-salaried, drug-sniffing black guys.”

What is striking about the administrative responses to the NBA’s unprofitability is the overt recognition that the “race problem” had to be managed in order to make the league not only economically viable but also profitable. As Stern has commented, “It was our conviction that if everything else went right, race would not be an abiding issue to NBA fans, at least not as long as it was handled correctly.” Two significant points can be drawn from Stern’s comments: First, while race was the NBA’s problem, the solution had to be economic; and second, profitability for the league could be achieved through a skillful management of perceptions of the black players’ productivity. The specific administrative changes Stern
introduced to handle this situation were a much-admired drug program, a collective bargaining agreement, and a salary cap. By late 1983, the NBA set an attendance record and in ten seasons under Stern’s leadership the league experienced 1,600 percent growth in annual revenues, ending 1994 at the $3 billion mark with international monies accounting for $500 million. Currently, 170 countries belong to Fédération Internationale de Basketball (FIBA), the international basketball association that guarantees overseas broadcasting of NBA games in its member countries.

The dichotomy between the “street” and the professional sports arena that surfaces in Peewee’s story is a structuring tension that has defined the relationship between the NBA and its black players throughout Stern’s tenure as commissioner. Significantly, the league’s efforts to rehabilitate the perception of its players as “over-paid, drug-sniffing black guys” have not involved simply eradicating “street” elements from the confines of the arena; they depend on the recuperation of black players as model citizens and productive employees. The controversy surrounding the refusal by Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf (of the Denver Nuggets) to sing the national anthem and pledge allegiance to the American flag before games is the most recent illustration of the league’s concern to represent its black players as respectable working Americans.

Rather than being dissolved through management directives, the ties between the “streets” and the sports arena are reinforced and subjected to a rationalization process whereby the black sports celebrity is contractually obligated to serve as surrogate parent to the “fatherless” children of the inner city. This expectation is demonstrated in the documentary film Hoop Dreams (1994) when Isiah Thomas makes a surprise visit to his Detroit high school alma mater to address the aspiring players of the boys’ varsity basketball team. Within the context of the protagonist Arthur Agee’s life, Thomas is, briefly, a source of paternal advice for the youngster, whose own father, a chronically unemployed drug addict, abandons the family. This type of surrogacy role is facilitated by the league’s careful monitoring of its players’ on- and off-court behavior and by the cultivation of ties between the “community” and the players. Stern credits the growth of the NBA to the fact that teams have become “important elements in their communities. Virtually all of our teams have community relations directors, public relations directors, [and] kids’ programs—the kinds of things that you expect from good neighbors.”

It is ironic that David Stern invokes the idea of neighborliness when speaking of the NBA’s community relations programs, which, properly understood, represent a corporate interest in protecting its market shares. When Stern joined the NBA in 1980, inner-city New York neighborhoods were already bearing the scars of economic restructuring, capital flight, and a manufactured fiscal crisis that justified social services cutbacks for
the most disadvantaged of the city’s population. Language about “good neighbors” in the corporate context of the 1980s is incongruous with the reality of government-subsidized corporate relocations to the suburbs, which left urban neighborhoods severely dislocated and underserved.

The flexibility of capital accumulation under late capitalism has also provided a global economic context of “unlimited growth” for the U.S. image industries, of which the NBA is a significant part. Executives like David Stern, however, see only expanding consumer markets and not an increasing disparity in wealth between African Americans and white Americans, or between North and South. Stern has commented: “I keep thinking in terms of NAFTA and the North American concept. . . . [W]e’ve expanded to the 29 million fans to the north (Canada) and there are 80 million more fans to the south, with Latin America still to come. It seems like a sensible thing to think about.” As Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro have forcefully demonstrated, however, continuing racial inequality in the United States is maintained through a tripartite system of institutionalized racism which “fosters the accumulation of private wealth for many whites [as] it denies it to blacks, thus forging an intimate connection between white wealth accumulation and black poverty.” A further paradox, then, in Peewee’s public-service advertisement for Nike is its repudiation of black socioeconomic marginality while embracing black consumerism as a way to enter the socioeconomic mainstream. I have already alluded to one of the contradictions for white consumption of black urban authenticity. Here, the tautology in Nike’s hailing of the black consumer is the suggestion that an economically marginal and systematically impoverished community can participate in its own recovery into the center of American economic (and by extension, political, civil, and social) life through consumption. In effect, black consumers are being told, “You will be making money by spending money. You will enter the productive economic mainstream by being marginal to it.” Ultimately, however, this message produces a version of bootstrap social theory that accounts for growing black impoverishment by adding the inability to consume properly to the list of black social pathologies.

Nike’s interest in producing the NYC-Attack advertising campaign came at a time in 1994 when the spectatorship and consumption of the game were undergoing a change. Advertisers, corporate sponsors, and the NBA were becoming aware of growing disaffection among fans who felt that the game had “lost touch with its roots.” Exponentially increasing players’ salaries, a series of bench-clearing brawls during the 1994 NBA Championships, and low-scoring games had begun to generate spectator-consumer hostility. The scenario in 1994 bore an uncanny resemblance to the circumstances in 1980 when David Stern was hired to rehabilitate the league’s “image problem.” The charge of unprofessional-

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isism was again linked to a perception that black players were not earning their high salaries. The NBA’s response in the following season was to implement a series of rule changes that were designed to increase scoring, shift play from defense to offense, and reduce the “rough play” that had provoked on-court fights among players. Rod Thorn, the vice president of operations for the NBA, justified the rule changes by commenting, “We had gradually gone back to where we were sixteen or seventeen years ago, with guys riding people up the floor.” While the league’s actions reflect an anxiety about maintaining the boundary between the professional arena and the “street,” Nike’s NYC-Attack campaign was an attempt to counteract consumer alienation by returning to the “roots” of the game. It should not go without saying that the “roots” of basketball refer to the corner-courts of inner cities in the postindustrial United States, and not to West Springfield, Massachusetts, where the game originated in the nineteenth century. It was an expedition to the inner city of New York that Nike found the “submerged” history of Peewee Kirkland and his legendary status in street basketball.

The NYC-Attack campaign represents a departure from Nike’s previous advertising in two ways: First, it was designed to disassociate the athletic sportswear and sneaker manufacturer from the NBA in the minds of consumers; and second, it was the first city-specific campaign produced for Nike. NYC-Attack, as the name implies, was a media assault developed specifically for New York City. The television spots, print advertising, billboard art, and animated movie trailer designed for NYC-Attack were not shown outside the boundaries of the city. Nike’s interest in downplaying its affiliation with the NBA at a time when negative publicity surrounded the league directed the campaign producers to seek out images of the game’s enduring authenticity. In order to escape the stench of commercialization and professionalism that began to permeate the arenas of professional basketball in 1994, Nike retreated to the “purity” of the game’s “roots” as an urban community practice. In light of my earlier discussion about the dichotomous relationship between the professional sports arena and the “street” as formal and informal economic sectors, Nike’s flight to the inner city to protect its corporate productivity is more than simply ironic; rather, Nike’s NYC-Attack campaign enacts the economic and cultural logic of late capitalism which produces “trash” and recuperates it as a sign of difference and a site of desire.

In developing the NYC-Attack campaign, the advertising executives at Wieden and Kennedy had to work within a small budget and short production schedule, conditions which influenced the creative path they eventually chose. Armed with simple video cameras and sound-recording equipment, the creative team engaged in the kind of fieldwork one would expect from sociologists, anthropologists, ethnographers, and cultural

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studies scholars interested in studying black urban cultural practices: they conducted interviews, collected footage, and compiled a series of oral histories about street basketball and people’s local involvement with the game. These interviews provided the raw material out of which the NYC-Attack campaign was produced.

The nineteen television spots follow two distinct formats. In the first type (“That’s It-2,” “Color,” “Joe Regular,” “Helicopter”), no editing cuts are used. Instead, a voice-over narrative is superimposed on grainy footage of congested city streets and traffic, a wall covered with graffiti, or the intricate weave of a chain-link fence surrounding a city basketball court; this footage, played back in slow motion, is filmed by a stationary camera. The ambience of these advertisements is reminiscent of Martin Scorsese’s depictions of New York City in the 1970s films Mean Streets and Taxi Driver.

In the second type, the camera movement mimics the flow and pacing of the narration. In the spot “Trash Talk,” the camera bobs and weaves around Peewee as he boasts: “Hey man, you can’t guard me. I got so many moves, last game I shook myself”; in “Jock Strap,” the camera follows Master Rob across the court in slow motion, eventually settling on the ground so that he is filmed from below, crotch in the center of the frame when he says, “I was at half-court, and I just let [the ball] go. And it went all bottom, and the crowd ran back in, jumped on the court, ripped my shirt off, ripped my shorts off. I was standing out there with a jock strap and a pair of Nikes.” In a variation of this second type (“Sittin on the Rim,” “Quarter,” “Young vs. Old”), the background scene consists of medium shots of young black men playing on a street basketball court, dunking and flying in the air, the backboard and netless hoop jerking back and forth. A close-up of the narrator is digitally superimposed on this backdrop and serves as a visual and aural window into the scene.

Displaying a documentary, realist aesthetic, albeit a heavily stylized one, NYC-Attack used the interview sequences and grainy footage of the city to construct an organic connection between the game of basketball and black male urban culture. The many fond reminiscences about rivalries between players, legendary styles and plays, and trash-talking (the artful put-down) provided a context in which black male socialization could be appropriately recoded for consumption by disaffected fans. This time, black males visible on the “street” provided a glimpse of better times, a golden age in basketball before contracts, deals, and salaries took over the game. In contrast to the commercialized realm of the NBA, the courts of the derelict city were depicted in NYC-Attack as uncorrupted spaces of play and communal activity. In “Rucker,” Peewee reminisces about the paragon of all New York City street basketball spaces, the Holcombe Rucker Basketball Courts on West 155th Street in Harlem: “At Rucker it
wasn’t about money. It was heart, hustle, and soul. It wasn’t about fame. Had nothing to do with gold. It was all about your reputation. Until you get to Rucker, no matter what what you did in your life, don’t mean nothing. But when you get to Rucker, that’s the arena. The arena of goodwill.”

Nike’s recoding of the black male body as a site of play and pleasure in NYC-Attack, however, relies on the very same set of assumptions that stigmatize the urban black body as economically unproductive and biologically hyperreproductive. In both instances, the black body represents the organic real, an essential entity unrestrained by the fetters of modernity. Nike’s depiction of Rucker as outside the circuits of capital accumulation, however, simultaneously identifies the street basketball court as the very site of interpellation for black consumption of Nike products. Furthermore, the suggestion that street basketball is pure, in contrast to the commercialization of professional basketball, is a disavowal of the institutionalized channels connecting the “street” and the arena, and informal and formal economic activity (Nike’s ABCD program being one important example). The curious ellipsis in “The Streets” between “nightmare” and “dream,” with which I began, marks, then, the anxious reiteration of the boundary between the sports arena and the “street” as productive and unproductive sites, respectively, while that boundary is being transgressed by corporate interests. Whereas the reiteration of the boundary attests to its discursive instability, the coding here of blackness as pleasure, play, and authenticity effectively fetishizes black bodies as commodities to serve capital’s expanding consumer needs. Robyn Wiegman’s critique of the heightened commodity status of blackness in the wake of Afrocentric political demands addresses this “visual culture predicated on the commodification of those very identities minoritized by the discourses and social organization of enlightened democracy.”

In this essay I have tried to draw together questions of consumption and productivity as they relate to the context of professional basketball to address the paradoxical representation of African Americans as both image industry celebrities and social parasites. By focusing on the NYC-Attack advertising campaign and its symbiotic relationship with the NBA, I have attempted to draw to the surface the contradictory narratives about black masculinity and black (re)productivity that undergird the spectatorship and sponsorship of the game and serve to construct professional basketball as an important ideological site in the late-capitalist United States. The relationship between the informal sporting practices of the “street” and the multimillion-dollar industries of the NBA and athletic-wear advertising attests to the material and symbolic means through which surplus value is created in late capitalism. Significantly, the postwar construction of African Americans as consumers rather than producers coincides with the unprecendented focus of attention on black participation—
as simultaneously desirable and deviant—in the material, representational, and political-economic matrices of U.S. public culture. What I have tried to suggest here is that by attending simply to consumption practices as a site of black popular resistance, cultural critics must be mindful not to reproduce the very disciplinary apparatus that has kept African Americans lagging behind white Americans in their pursuit of the American “dream.” Even in Nike’s ode to Rucker as a “goodwill” space uncorrupted by “money or gold,” the mask of the United States as a meritocratic or egalitarian society slips to reveal the far-less-charitable doctrine dictating the possible futures available to African Americans. As Peewee concludes in “Rucker,” “Either you did it or you got it done to you.” This ominous appraisal of life on the “streets” would also seem to describe the conditions under which Peewee receives his redemption from the winged goddess in the form of a product endorsement.

Notes

I would like to acknowledge the invaluable help of Seamus Culligan, campaign director of NYC-Attack at Wieden and Kennedy, who provided me with all the NYC-Attack campaign materials and generously answered my questions about the campaign’s development. This paper owes its genesis to Robin D. G. Kelley’s observations about basketball and the postindustrial city in “Playing for Keeps: African American Youth in the Postindustrial City,” in The House That Race Built: Black Americans/U.S. Terrain, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Random House, forthcoming 1997); I have benefited greatly from my conversations with him about basketball and other topics. Special thanks are due to Ephen Glenn Colter, Philip Brian Harper, and Toby Miller for their engaged and critical readings of this paper.


3. I use scare quotes when referring to the “street” in order to draw attention to the discursive production of the “street” as more than simply a physical location. The scare quotes are intended to disrupt the naturalized reading of the “street” as the antithesis of good U.S. civic life and other normative forms of “publicity.” See Bruce Robbins’s introduction to The Phantom Public Sphere, ed. Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) and Michael Warner, “The Mass Public and the Mass Subject,” in Habermas and the Public Sphere, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992) for a discussion of the “public” and “publicity.” For an extended and specific discussion of


5. Wiegman, American Anatomies, 144.

6. Ibid., 41.


8. My knowledge of Peewee’s economic calculation of the relative dividends offered by the NBA as compared to a street basketball career comes from personal communication with Seamus Culligan (10 November 1995), campaign director for NYC-Attack. Culligan interviewed Peewee Kirkland (along with other legends of New York City street basketball) during the preproduction phase of the NYC-Attack campaign.

9. Pete Axthelm in The City Game: From the Garden to the Playgrounds (New York: Penguin, 1982) offers a robust description of the interplay between professional basketball and the street basketball cultures that have sustained it. Written at the cusp of the ideological transformation of basketball into a specifically black urban practice, Axthelm’s ode to basketball as a quintessentially urban game pre-sciently marks the tensions around race that would come to the fore in the NBA during the 1980s. Axthelm documents the street basketball players’ bitterness about quota systems, which limited the number of black players on professional teams, and rule changes, like the NCAA’s “no dunk” rule, intended to impede both the advancement of black players and the appearance of “street” styles in the sport. The “no dunk” rule was introduced by the NCAA during Lew Alcindor’s (Kareem Abdul-Jabar) career at UCLA. While the book is an unabashed celebration of the “Knick phenomenon,” it does contain extensive (and reverential) descriptions of the world of street basketball and pick-up games. The legendary plays of Herman “Helicopter” Knowings and Earl Manigault are described. Knowings’s legendary encounter with Willis Reed was featured in a NYC-Attack television spot called “Helicopter.” See Axthelm’s chapter “The Fallen Idol: The Harlem Tragedy of Earl Manigault” for a narrative precursor to Nike’s “The Streets” television spot about Peewee Kirkland.


11. My understanding of how the term welfare queen functions as an ideological weapon is as the embodiment of economic unproductivity and reproductive excess. This black female excess is predicated on and simultaneously produces and sustains black male emasculation and economic immaturity. Hence, whenever welfare queen is put to ideological use, both black femininity and black masculinity are being delimited in a national, political-economic frame. I am trying here to flesh out the implied but unnamed figure of the hustler as the partner to the welfare queen.

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14. My thanks to Toby Miller for this point. The notion of “corporate citizenship” links consumption to good civic life by projecting an image of corporations as civil societies unto themselves, heralding a return to middle-American values, albeit inflected by the transaction of money. Corporate citizenship through consumption has been the underlying ethos behind Nike’s emergence as the leader in sales of basketball apparel and shoes. Using its multimillion-dollar marketing budget, Nike established the Academic Betterment and Career Development (ABCD) program, ostensibly as an academic program to prepare high school basketball players for the rigors of college life. Through his association with Nike, the young black athlete supposedly learns how to value intellectual achievements, to act responsibly, and to plan for a future after his basketball career is over. In actuality, the ABCD program, which includes the annual Nike All-American camp, works as a funneling device to identify the most talented inner-city black high school athletes, make them available to college basketball recruiters, and guarantee the players’ (and the college coaches’) lifetime association with the Nike trademark. See Darcy Frey’s *Last Shot: City Streets, Basketball Dreams* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994) for a description of the ABCD program and other systematic processes that mine the inner cities for young black basketball talent.


17. Ibid., 8.

18. The salary cap does not extend to management positions. Counting on the owners’ fears that he would become baseball’s commissioner instead, Stern brokered for himself a $27.5 million five-year contract, including a $10 million bonus.

19. Players receive 53 percent of certain league revenues, but nothing on the sale of T-shirts and memorabilia where overseas money is generated.

20. It remains unclear why the NBA threatened suspension in March 1996 when Abdul-Rauf’s compromise of waiting in the locker room during the playing of the national anthem had been accepted (by management and teammates) since the start of the season in September 1995. Clearly, though, the notion of “respectability” remains high on Stern’s agenda: he has also battled with states and provinces to prevent legalized gambling from “staining the integrity of the game” (see Lazenby, “Stern Goes Global,” 8). When an injury in March forced Abdul-Rauf off the starting lineup, sports commentators called the situation “resolved,” thus highlighting the connection between visibility and respectability.


26. My thanks to Alondra R. Nelson for drawing my attention to the notion that the black poor are also stigmatized as irresponsible consumers. Oliver and Shapiro make a similar point when discussing the “economic detour” experienced by African Americans, which forced them into the role of consumers because they were prevented from participating in the U.S. economy as producers (47).
28. Clifton Brown, “Can’t You Hear the Whistles Blowin’?” New York Times, 30 October 1994, sec. 8, 1. The new rules beginning in the 1994–95 season included: an increase in fines from $100 to $500 for each technical foul; the automatic suspension of any player who leaves the bench during an altercation and a fine of up to $20,000; automatic ejection of any player with two flagrant fouls; and several rules specifically to deter “aggressive defense.” For a complete list of the new rules, see Clifton Brown, “NBA 94–95: By the Way There’s No Taunting Either,” New York Times, 30 October 1994, sec. 8, 9. Given the NBA’s concern about the incursion of the “street” into the arena, it is instructive to compare professional basketball with the ritualized spectacle of white-on-white violence that takes place regularly in professional ice hockey (and often in the very same venues where professional basketball is played). See Richard Gruneau and David Whitson, Hockey Night in Canada: Sport, Identities, and Cultural Politics (Toronto: Garamond, 1993) for a discussion of the fetishization of violence in ice hockey. My thanks to Toby Miller for this point and the reference.
30. The success of NYC-Attack prompted Nike to commission Wieden and Kennedy to produce a city-specific campaign for Los Angeles. According to Seamus Culligan, the campaigns differ significantly in the type of basketball ethos that is represented: whereas style, showboating, and performance are valorized by New York City basketball culture (to the extent that the score doesn’t always indicate who the winner is), in Los Angeles winning and “making it” (to the NBA) are the players’ primary goals. Other city-specific campaigns, according to Culligan, are potentially on the horizon.
31. Wiegman, American Anatomies, 49.