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Augustana College

Commodification of Black Bodies

(Short Analytical Essay)

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Religion 203-02 (Christian Ethics)
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In 2010, South Africa made history as the first African country to host the World Cup. Although this major event served as a revenue-generating source for the government, it also provided an avenue to enforce systems of oppression like capitalism. This oppressive system is not only seen major world sports events like the World Cup, but also it is reflected in collegiate sports. Throughout this paper, I will focus on the commodification of black bodies in collegiate sports and discuss how it renders Black persons both over- and underrepresented. Womanist ethicist Emilie Townes argues that “the commodification of bodies is mutated into the commodification of identity- Black identity. This manipulation merges race with myth and memory to create history.”¹ It is important for black people to examine these myths because it helps them discover their true identity. I will explore the potential for Townes’ concept of counter memory to effectively disrupt this systemic injustice.

According to Emilie Townes, counter memory is a methodological strategy that helps in deconstructing myths and stereotypes that over determine Black identity. It serves as a useful tool in disrupting stereotypical ideas that portray black athletes as both subhuman and superhuman. Counter memory shapes the history of Black people and disentangles ideas that perceive them as academically inferior yet athletically talented people. I will argue that counter memory is an effective tool that dismantles the “fantastic hegemonic imagination” which reduces Black athletes to brutes or icons but never dimensional person.”¹

Black college athletes are overrepresented in contact sports like football due to the connotations associated with their bodies as athletic. As written by Emilie Townes, something seemingly innocuous as Aunt Jemima’s pancake syrup is a typical contemporary iteration of

⁸ Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York; Palgrave Macmillan, 2006)

chattel slavery wherein black culture is commoditized.⁸ Collegiate sports serves as another contemporary medium through which black bodies are being commoditized. According to the American Institute for Research, approximately 60% of basketball players and 37% of football players are Black at the collegiate level.² These athletes are regarded as property of the college: they are exploited and treated as instruments for economic gain. While some may argue that these athletes gain full ride scholarships into college, it is important to note that these benefits do not match up to the cost of their labor. Research indicates that black athletes are prone to higher rates of Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) due to the staggering numbers behind the position they play.³ According to the 2017 college sport racial and gender report card, the numbers at cornerbacks, defense and running backs in college football teams are heavily tilted towards black athletes: 99.4 percent of cornerbacks, 80 percent of defense are all black athletes. As far as positions go, cornerbacks sustain the most concussions yet black athletes are drafted into these areas due to the stereotypes about their athletic bodies.⁷ Colleges make huge profits off of black bodies while they remain indifferent about their economic, physical and mental well-being.⁹

Conversely, Black athletes are underrepresented within the sports culture. These underrepresentations are seen in areas like head coaching and administration, intellectual sports, student athlete compensations and so on. In colleges, “70 percent of football teams are made up of black athletes yet 97.8 percent of players in special team’s positions of kicker and punter are white athletes.”⁹ Supposedly, black athletes lack intellectual and leadership qualities to succeed

¹Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York; Palgrave Macmillan, 2006),

² Cunningham, George B. *Understanding the under-Representation of African American*

³ Agyemang, Kwame, John N Singer, and Joshua DeLorme. *An Exploratory Study of Black Male College Athletes’ Perceptions on Race and Athlete Activism.*

in certain positions. Also, according to a study conducted by Harrison, blacks made up nearly 50% of Division IA football players, but less than 1% of these schools had Black football head coaches.⁴ This suggests that black athletes are not highly considered for coaching positions but rather regarded as commodities due to the racial stereotypes surrounding their intellectual abilities. These racist beliefs about Black athletes' intelligence does not only limit their leadership opportunities but also it creates significant barriers for them to attain higher levels of education.⁴

Before we delve deeper into the common myths and stereotypical assumptions about Black athletes, I will provide background on Townes' concept of memory, history and myth. Traditionally, history is a discipline while memory is subjective. Memory is a personal activity corrupted by a teller's choice of words while history is viewed as a scientific field where proof and evidence are applied.⁸ While Townes acknowledges the tension between these concepts, in terms of which method is better, she believes that they are both natural dance partners.⁸ Memory and history go hand in hand: they are weaker apart and stronger together. Myths are widely held but false beliefs: especially stories concerning the early history of people or explaining some natural or social phenomenon.

What are the stereotypes perpetuated in myths that are leveraged in order to both over and under represent Black athletes? One common myth is the idea that Black athletes have specific advantages over other athletes due to their genetic inheritance.⁵ They are then portrayed in the eyes of the public as natural athletes rather than being praised for their work ethic.

⁴ Coaches: A Multilevel Perspective

⁸ Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York; Palgrave Macmillan, 2006)

⁵ Brown, Anthony L. "Counter-memory and Race: An Examination of African American Scholars'

These myths when combined with memory evokes history and stories of slavery in the U.S context. Historically, the healthiest and fittest black slaves were predicted to survive the Middle Passage.⁵ It is also believed that the healthiest African Americans survived disease ridden conditions on overcrowded slave ships as they were being transported from Africa into the U.S.⁵ Consequently, there is a myth that black athletes can endure pain because their ancestors did. During the time of slavery, white slave masters purposefully selected larger and stronger black slaves to work the fields of their plantations.⁵ For this reason, people assume black athletes come from the same ancestral lineage so they must have inherited superhuman physical strength. There is also a hierarchy that aligns black bodies with beasts of burden and white bodies with the mind: black athletes lacking ability to perform in intellectual sports like tennis and swimming.⁶

Although historical knowledge often renders inaccurate accounts of African American historical experiences, womanism offers counter memory as a weapon to disengage and challenge these dominant narratives. Emile Townes writes that counter memory is useful because it helps avoid earlier patterns of essentialism endemic to the fantastic hegemonic imagination.⁸ This means that Black athletes can critically engage with views that categorize them based on their intrinsically different characteristics. As a way to disrupt these systems, black athletes cannot accept narratives about their bodies at face value. Instead, they expand their history to counter the myths and stereotypes about their identity and culture. As Emilie Townes puts it, it is important to remember that “black identity is not a mere commodity formed as a natural by-product of culture and genetics and theological systems.”⁸

⁸ Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York; Palgrave Macmillan, 2006)

⁵Brown, Anthony L. "Counter-memory and Race: An Examination of African American Scholars"

⁶Cooper, Joseph N. "Personal Troubles and Public Issues: A Sociological Imagination of Black Athletes"

With that being said, black athletes can find and value their identity as they refuse ideas that try to commoditize their bodies. They will learn truths behind stories about their racial imagery, mental capabilities and intellectual progress. With counter memory, black athletes and all of society will learn to appreciate their work ethic and disregard stories that attempt to justify why they are better at certain sports.

According to Townes, counter memory “avoids new forms of essentialism in subjugated cultures so that they can remain true to their struggles of exploited groups in their attempts to critique the dominant structures from positions that give meaning and purpose to their struggle.”⁸ In other words, counter memory offers a way through which marginalized groups can discover their true history while critiquing dominant structures that attempt to suppress their talents and portray them as substandard. In relation to sports, we must first acknowledge the struggles of being exploited by colleges and then set out to destroy these systems that define their essence before their existence. This womanist ethical thought will not only help humanize Black identity, but also it will help avoid committing these same stereotypical errors. For example, having suffered from racial stereotypes about their bodies, Black athletes will be equipped to interrogate unsubstantiated ideas that describe specific groups of people. Counter memory also cautions against neglecting responsibility within our communities.⁸ In this sense, Black athletes will have a true sense of responsibility and honor to stand up and fight against all forms of existing discrimination irrespective of who is being victimized.

⁸ Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York; Palgrave Macmillan, 2006)

Finally, counter memory helps to question the label of essentialism when it is always applied to people who are dispossessed, yet empowered enough to demand that their personhood is valuable and should be valued.⁸ In other words, counter memory helps name and analyze the constant subordination of specific groups of people. It will help draw the attention of Black athletes to the ways and forms oppression is carried out through their culture and community. As Townes writes: “within this struggle is the recognition that accountability is paramount. This accountability functions at the individual and communal level.”¹ In relation to sports, Black athletes are individually held accountable to their struggles in the sense that, they remain active members in the ceaseless pursuit for justice. They do not forget their community but rather embrace their roots. Communal accountability requires Black athletes to remain cautious of ideas that tend to label African American struggles as fruitless.

In conclusion, the womanist analysis of the commodification of black bodies reveals how collegiate sports system create stereotypes that maintain the everydayness of evil.⁸ When we think about colleges, we think about the numerous educational and career opportunities it offers to people living in deprived communities; having never to consider the gross exploitation of these students. The good news is that, womanism has provided us the platform and has equipped us with the necessary tools like counter memory to tackle these systems of oppression. As a society, our moral obligation is to address these sports related issues from a womanist point of view. With womanism, equality, equity and justice is necessary and possible.

⁸ Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York; Palgrave Macmillan, 2006)

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