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NBA: No (Anti-) Blackness Allowed

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Art

by

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University of Houston
Bachelor of Arts in Photography & Digital Media, 2019

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Abstract

This paper serves as the foundational pillar in my art practice. This paper combines my experiences, influences, motivations, hopes, dreams, methodologies, historical research and contemporary analyses into a single document ripe for revisions. This document lives and breathes; its contents are constantly evolving, and should be continually challenged and evaluated for relevancy and validity. Part memoir, part manifesto, and part artist statement, it establishes where my work sits in the canon of fine art, even as I don't know yet what that means. My writings, visual artworks and all other creative actions are tethered to this document and vice versa. Its first examination is the body of work that comprises *NBA*, my thesis exhibition. While the projects will change over time, the rigorous examination of the ideas and research that support them will remain constant.

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to Virnita, Adriana and Nasir, whose grace and understanding made every part of this new life possible. To my mother, for always reminding me of what matters. To Gale, who selfless support kept me going, rest peacefully in Heaven. And lastly, to Dr. Alphonso Grant for challenging me in ways that changed my life. Rest peacefully, and love forever.

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Introduction: Voyage to Atlantis

Art was the furthest thing from my mind during my late teenage years. I loved girls, rap music and basketball; in that order. After my senior year of high school ended, all extra-curricular activities ceased and I eagerly scheduled as much quality time (i.e., sex) as I could get with my then-girlfriend. Forty days after graduation, I would be on a plane headed to Fort Knox, Kentucky to begin my career as a tanker in the US Army. In between desperate escapades with the young woman I loved, I played a lot of basketball and watched even more. Roughly four years later, I would watch the former girl of my dreams fall in love and have children with someone else, and I would be honorably discharged from the Army, returning to the “real world”. To everyone’s surprise, I decided to pursue a career in the arts; enrolling into the Institute of Art in Atlanta for drawing. A favorite pastime of my childhood, drawing was a meditative skill I developed over many years in my lonesome adolescence. My first real memory of making art was as a 11-year old, drawing basketball players on my grandmother’s living room table. I was so excited to experience a new state, and a new beginning, returning to a hobby I hoped to make a profession.

In an ironic twist of fate, forty days before I was set to leave, my baby sister crashed my uninsured 2001 Chevrolet Malibu into a pole, sending me into a cyclone of debt. I never made it to Atlanta, instead remaining home where I accepted a job as a security guard for the local newspaper. Depressed but determined to do something notable, I enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, this time in the seemingly more practical discipline of journalism. Maybe I wasn’t meant to be an artist, I told myself, and that writing about basketball would be an amazing consolation prize. Two semesters later, I would become a college dropout, choosing to invest my GI Bill tuition on a cranberry-red 1978 Oldsmobile with whitewall tires. Home felt so

dark and gloomy. Everyone around me seemed to be letting life happen to them, and school just felt like I was “checking the boxes” as everyone else does after they leave the military. Having the car women in my neighborhood expected me to have would make things better, I told myself. I watched sports all day and subconsciously dreamt of opening segments on ESPN.

In a couple weeks, I will strut across a platform and accept an MFA diploma from the University of Arkansas. In the twenty years between my last semester at UWM and my graduation day at UA, I will have deployed overseas three times, dodged several explosive devices, became a father twice, had a nervous breakdown, moved to Houston, got married, converted to Islam, changed majors and earned my BFA, reconstructed my ideas around race, gender and sexuality, learned how to read again, found my memory, initiated a bidding war for my graduate school selection, moved to Arkansas, won several awards as a collage artist, survived COVID-19, and completed a successful graduate program. I’ve come a very long way from the insecure boy performing Blackness for acceptance. My journey started by simply questioning the root of the anti-Blackness I have seen in the world. The answers I found only lead to more questions. In the process, I found my calling in life.

Part 1: In Between Us

Before 2013, I never considered my Blackness much beyond the surface. I was Black, my neighbors were Black and the majority of places I would go in Milwaukee were predominantly Black. Whenever I found myself in non-Black spaces, the obvious otherness was accepted as a matter of fact and not interrogated any further. When you wanted to eat good *and* experience great service, you drove all the way out to the “white Red Lobster”. Milwaukee ranks annually amongst America’s most racially-segregated cities, and most of the dialogue around the racial dynamic centers on education, income and crime. They have it, and we don’t, so it made sense why our neighborhoods looked the way they did. Reading some of the books I heard rappers mention and seeing police-related deaths in the news started to challenge my hardened ideas around race. My second deployment to Iraq led to my first “real job”; a highly coveted position as a Boiler Operator for WE Energies, the only utility company in town. I went from meager check-to-check living, to a six-figure middle class lifestyle. Older men, mostly white but some Black, talked about breaking unions, preserving their home values and buying land far away from the lazy Black criminals of Milwaukee’s northside. I thanked God I wasn’t like them lazy black criminals. In my eyes, I achieved everything I was told to aspire for. I may have taken an alternate route, but I had a great career, my bills were paid on time, and my family had all the material markers of success. Secretly, I was miserable inside, but I accepted the emotions as a normal part of monotonous adulthood. I wasn’t very good at the job, and I didn’t feel support from my coworkers. It felt like I was losing my memory, as I failed lots of my mandatory tests. Six years later, another high-profile police killing would change my life. In 2014, Mike Brown was gunned down by officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, MO. I watched the entire saga unfold from the very first Tweeted photo of his body under a blood-soaked sheet, to Wilson’s non-

indictment. The decision brought me to tears in the basement of the power plant. It just didn't make sense to me that no amount of evidence or misconduct could result in holding officers accountable.¹ It made me question not only police relations, but everything. Why exactly were all the good Red Lobsters in the suburbs? Why was every person I loved just getting by, doing jobs they could tolerate long enough to collect a check? Why weren't any of my friends talking about these things? It made me realize how easy it was for the Black community to accept death, in all of its flavors. I was forever changed, and from that period forward, vowed never to waste another year letting life just happen. I developed a plan to save money, quit the power plant and relocate with my daughter and her mother (and wife to be) to the state of Texas, a place Black people were starting to flock to in what can now be called the "Great Migration in reverse."²

My career in Milwaukee afforded me all the benchmarks of upward mobility, but I felt like I was being suffocated by the pragmatic limitations of it. I made it through each workday absolutely void of passion or purpose, just competent enough to avoid termination. My coworkers' conservative culture wars and Black respectability politics were wearing me down. I felt trapped in my own mind, desperate for growth in a place that lacked the nutrients to feed me. Houston would expose me to the food my soul needed: like-minded Black people who talked about Blackness, community and ideas, not other people. I expanded my inner circle to include more women, queer people and even religious leaders. For the first time, I was curious about my relationship with the spiritual world. And every day, an urge inside of me wanted to make something and tell our stories.

¹ "Police Accountability: The Record," The Marshall Project, accessed April 21, 2022

² William H. Frey, in *Diversity Explosion: How New Racial Demographics Are Remaking America* pp. 107-130.

I eventually decided to go back to school and use the leftover GI Bill money that sat unused in my portfolio. I had romantic visions of attending Texas Southern, the famous Historically Black College in the Third Ward of Houston, but they didn't offer photography. So, I chose the University of Houston. Thanks to Gale, my mother in-law, I secured my first camera and began making images. I took pictures of trash, flat tires, empty basketball courts, abandoned cars and street scenes. It took a few months to build the courage to start taking pictures of people I didn't know. Discovering the work of Gordon Parks was the first time I decided I would "make art like this artist does". His multi-disciplinary practice inspired me and his images arrested me. When I would go out and try to make photos like his, the results were unsuccessful. There was an invisible deterrent that kept me from capturing the living Black body as my hero did. I couldn't articulate this inability or hesitation, but I could understand that I was still obsessed with images. It wasn't important to me that I make the image, only that I have the image. So, I began to think intentionally about the images I organically collected. I started to search for and arrange rare images of Black people. I bought books and magazines by the box. I studied Parks, Irving Penn, Jamel Shabazz, Carrie Mae Weems, and Lorna Simpson. All the great photographers that captured the human spirit, emotion and movement with such force. I looked at other visual artists and listened to them talk about Blackness in ways I didn't know existed. I immediately knew that I wanted to find a way to do this for a living. I hoped one day that I could harness their powers, but for reasons I didn't understand, I knew there was a different way. By the time I was ready to graduate, I became convinced it wasn't my job to do that *with* the camera. I felt more powerful when I conveyed Blackness through the past, by using the images we remembered and forgot through the medium of collage. In *Listening to Images*, theorist and author Tina M. Campt asks "how do we build a radical visual archive of the African Diaspora that grapples with the

recalcitrant and the disaffected, the unruly and the dispossessed?”³ What happens when stories cease to be told, or were never told at all? It feels like land once occupied by Black life being built over or like historical Black gravesites converted into commercial property. For me, the Black archive is a site through which I can continually resurrect Blackness. I could (and still occasionally do) contribute to the growing number of contemporary images being made every day, but my heart belongs to the past. To use the historical image and give it a new assignment produces a duality because now it exists in two separate time-planes at once. I support my heroes and peers and contemporaries doing the work with labor based in the archive, liberating images from their graves.

³ Tina Campt, in *Listening to Images* pp. 8-8.

Part 2: Death Around the Corner

Only a few people know I volunteered for my first deployment in 2004. It was the second time I felt like I was losing my mind. With a clear conscious, I asked to be sent from my cozy security job in Milwaukee to Camp Navistar, Kuwait, where I would train for nine months to transport supplies up and down the Main Supply Route Tampa. Every day, I placed my body in the center of catastrophe and danger. Six of my peers would beat us home in flag-draped caskets. It became obvious I was always willing to make difficult decisions to make changes in my life. Looking back, my biggest regret is not the fact that I volunteered my body for possible destruction for a country that doesn't love me, but that I have no photographs to show for it.

The Black archive is the greatest story halfway told. Most Black people do not know their familial histories further than a generation or two, and even fewer have photographic evidence of it. Of those images we do have of Black people from centuries ago, they are almost always as object, not subject. Slavery was followed by a brief period of reconstruction, and then another century of racial terror. The archives from this period range from lynching postcards to mugshots, protests to police confrontations and crime scenes. For centuries, we were too busy surviving to document the living of our lives. When we finally had the agency to capture the Black body in a way that brought pride and power to the race, assimilation had taken its toll and we were as fragmented as ever before. With integration came individualization. In the book *Disintegration*, author Eugene Robinson organizes a fractured Black American population into four distinct groups: the mainstream middle class, the transcendent elite class, a two-sided emergent group consisting of mixed-race Black people and Black immigrants, and the large abandoned class at the bottom.⁴ I had no way to understand it back then, but my subconscious

⁴ Eugene Robinson, in *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America*, pp. 5-5

allegiance to this disintegrated Blackness left me indifferent to most Black people that weren't just like me, shielding me from finding commonality with the Black Europeans I would bump into occasionally. I thought they were weird for living there. Back home, my New York-born roommates looked down on me for being from a "lame" city they didn't even know Black people lived in. Together, we all made fun of our southern peers with their deep-fried accents. We were all lost. How I regret not having images of us in our blissful ignorance.

Part 3: It Ain't Easy

When I met Dr. Alphonso Grant in June of 2019, he gave me a list of 10 books he recommended I read. I was excited, since I never had anyone challenge me through literature before. I had already made up my mind the night before that I would attend the University of Arkansas, but his list sealed the deal officially and soothed my anxiety. I knew I would grow here. Three months later, when I see Dr. Grant in the hallway during the first week of school, he had a brand-new book list for me. The look on my face was dumbfounded. “Huh?”, I asked. He just gave me 10 books a few months ago. His return glance was even more dumbfounded than my own. “You haven’t finished that list yet?”, he asked furiously.

This exchange changed my life forever. It would be the first time he opened my eyes, but not the last (Figure 1).

Part 4: Runnin’

My mother removed me from the Milwaukee Public School system and enrolled me in the Chapter 220 program, my hometown’s version of “displacement busing” that sent Black kids out to suburban schools to promote racial desegregation.⁵ I would spend my middle and high school years in Greenfield, a mostly white suburb of Milwaukee. My first experiences with race would prove too complex for my young mind to comprehend at the time. Why were we bused out there and not the other way around? Why wouldn’t they just give Washington High, my all Black neighborhood school which was once all white twenty years earlier, more resources? Why did all my white classmates live in big homes with nice cars? My mother didn’t get a car until my last year of high school. All I knew was we must have been poor, because I never could afford many of the items my friends had. Since I hung around my best friend Larry so much, I just moved in with his family for my last few years of school.

You didn’t typically see artists around the northside of Milwaukee. Not to say they didn’t exist, but a tangible memory of one doesn’t come to mind, and you often need to see examples to see yourself as one. I do remember seeing Black people working in the community, doing their part to make things better. There was a lot to fix. Inner-city Milwaukee was dying slowly due to the exodus of whites and businesses that began in the 1970s.⁶ This, along with a tsunami of housing discrimination, police occupation, drugs, and the subsequent war on drugs that would sweep up the mess drugs made, helped Milwaukee deteriorate into “the worst place for Black people to live” in the country⁷. Often using sports or music as a way in, Black adults became

⁵ Jack Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee* pp. 159.

⁶ Patrick D. Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee* pp. 27.

⁷ Evan Comen, Thomas C. Frohlich, and Michael B. Sauter, “The Worst Cities for Black Americans,” 247 Wall St

mentors to kids hoping to “make it out”. Today, I see just how flawed that narrative and language is. Milwaukee’s Chapter 220 program wasn’t an opportunity for us, it was a concession in which suburban schools received incentives for offering a predetermined number of seats for inner city students. These seats would satisfy the protests for desegregation. Why wouldn’t we stop at nothing to force officials to provide our schools resources instead? By relating to our schools and communities as zones you should aspire to evacuate, ideas of inferiority can be subconsciously baked into your worldview whether you accept them or not. All the deeds, agreements, laws and legislation this country implemented to create these zones of decay, detailed extensively in Richard Rothstein’s *Color of Law*, are forgotten or ignored⁸. The focus is shifted to working hard enough to purchase the option to leave and assimilate into the enclaves created by government-sponsored “white flight” in the first place. Of course, these narratives still persist. As Black people simultaneously receive the visibility and concessions⁹ that allow the perception of post-racialism, American governments, institutions and upper-class citizens (both Black and non-Black) find new ways to contain to the unwanted presence of (unassimilated) Blackness¹⁰. But before you make it to those elevated levels of anti-Blackness, you may experience friction with conservative Black ideals that align with and center whiteness by combating any version of Blackness that is not highly educated, Christian and in allegiance with

⁸ Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* pp. 61-74.

⁹ Carl Hulse and Annie Karni, “Jackson Confirmed as First Black Woman to Sit on Supreme Court,” *The New York Times*

¹⁰ Eddie S. Glaude, *Begin Again: James Baldwin’s America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* pp. 18-22.

traditional American values.¹¹ There will always be active opposition to Blackness from all sides.

The idea that we can unify as Black people is a utopia. By definition, a utopia is an imaginary place that doesn't exist. Black people have fought for centuries to create the utopian vision of existing as every other group of people: the freedom to pursue happiness and succeed (or fail) as our efforts secured. The legacy of American slavery and the perception of Black inferiority eliminated the ability for us to start from the Civil Rights Acts of the 1960s and excel *as a group*. There will always be exceptions to the rule. During slavery, there were free Blacks. There was a Black elite class during Reconstruction and Jim Crow. And today, the Black upper class swells with new entrants daily as internet and social media entrepreneurship becomes more normalized¹². This group of Black people are encouraged to ignore the “race stuff” that could squander your opportunity to become successful and transcend race altogether. But what becomes of the rest of Black America? Old tropes like the necessity of “working twice as hard” evolve into “Black excellence”, where we perform Blackness and Black achievement in exchange for greater platforms and capital. These aesthetic movements may aid in more visibility and cultural power, but we already have that in abundance. Black culture is arguably the most influential (and profitable) social currency in the world. Overall, we remain powerless institutionally, politically and economically. The current condition of Black America, of being hyper visible culturally, but socioeconomically stagnant, has led to new theories and movements to both understand our predicament and contemplate remedies. Critical Race Theory.

¹¹ James Forman, *Locking up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America*, Audiobook.

¹² “Why TikTok Has Become a Launchpad for Entrepreneurs - WSJ,” Youtube.com

Intersectionality. Afropessimism. Black mediocrity. The “Black Tax”¹³ and the ongoing (yet still nonexistent) case for reparations¹⁴. Each of these concepts seeks to change how (anti-) Blackness exists and functions in the world. And there are furious detractors to all of these ideas, both Black and non-Black. Struggle and oppression are not exclusive to the Black community, but what may be unique to Blackness is just how many Black people are rewarded for aligning against Black people who challenge white supremacy. Black people attain influence, curate large platforms, build personal fortunes and even ascend to the Supreme Court by championing anti-Black ideas.¹⁵ Many Black people cannot decenter themselves to align their existence and experiences with Black people unlike them.

I use collage and my art practice as a form of decentering. On its surface, it is about me, my family and the spaces we occupy, but they are also are containers for the larger Black experience. And the medium of collage is the fabric I weave together to find and amplify these larger experiences. If I were more of a traditional image maker, like a painter or photographer who prioritizes the hand and eye as sole creator of artwork, I may not be able to juxtapose Africa, American symbolism, and the legends of Milwaukee basketball inside a single frame as clearly. For me, it is necessary these materials touch as they meet and create friction within on a daily basis. Stitching found basketball league shirts together with the iconography of wax prints from Ghana demonstrate my yearning to find connection to the continent (Figure 2). American symbols like the stars and stripes of the flag brand an image and certify it as “American”,

¹³ Shawn D. Rochester, *The Black Tax: The Cost of Being Black in America*, 2017.

¹⁴ Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic* February 10, 2022.

¹⁵ Wright Leah Rigueur, *The Loneliness of the Black Republican: Pragmatic Politics and the Pursuit of Power* pp. 307-309.

demonstrating how America is more a brand or a trademark than a land of liberty of justice (Figure 3). The basketball players represent various degrees of achieving (or failing to achieve) American assimilation.

Part 5: 2nd Childhood

The first time I seen a Black man lying dead on social media, it provoked a becoming and led me to a new life in Houston. The next time, the whole world would watch a Black man die in real time, confined to our timelines by the Covid-19 pandemic. The 2020 death of George Floyd officially cemented my status as a self-proclaimed “race man”; a flawed archetype Hazel V. Carby attributes to W.E.B. DuBois.¹⁶ It also radicalized the “front-facing” world, i.e. the internet, for better or for worse. Brands dedicated themselves to Black lives and posted black squares in solidarity. My peers became allies and digital activists overnight. White people I didn’t know, or whom I hadn’t talked to in years, sent messages of support or curiosity. I didn’t know what to make of all this attention. Was some of it authentic? Absolutely. Was a lot of it performative? Absolutely. Unbeknownst to me and many other Black people, the world would decide it loved Black people after all and the love would spread to other realms of American culture. Fashion, cinema, literature and especially Black art and culture exploded, and Black visibility was back at an all-time high. Opportunities to sell, show and perform my work seemed to drop out of the sky on a weekly basis. Prior to 2018, it was rare to find collage centered in art spaces. By the end of 2020, collage art was everywhere, and I already had a handful of collage workshops under my belt.

I find myself selfishly reminiscing of a time when I was the only person showing collage work in critiques. Because of its new ubiquity, I began to compensate in ways I never had before. As a collage artist willing to search the depths of the earth and pay whatever I could afford for the rarest images, I always knew the source of my collages was enough. I didn’t need to cut a photo into a thousand pieces, or add fancy embellishments to make it “fine art”. I could put more

¹⁶ Hazel V. Carby, “The Souls of Black Men,” in *Race Men*, 2001.

of my hand in the work if desired, or when need be, but it wasn't the reason why collage was my desired medium. It was *always* the source, or the Black stories being excavated. Now, with the Migos covering their rap albums in collage, magazines covering the racks of Barnes and Noble in collage, galleries in every city dedicating entire exhibitions to collage, and more of the art world publicly centering collage in their studio practice, a feeling of "not enough" swept over me for the first time. I didn't know if my work was still working.

Like a lot of people who find themselves in an identity crisis, I went back to where it all started. Back to my childhood, when making art was drawing pictures of Shawn Kemp and Michael Jordan with colored pencils and magic markers. The urge to tether my hand back to my mind and let the way I feel influence the work is what drove me back to markmaking. Neither as a necessity to validate my work as fine art, nor as a method to compete with the more commercially-accepted medium of painting, drawing was a way to ensure the idea was being spread over the canvas as directly as possible. Free of filters and the limitations of the source I had to work with. Sometimes I allow paint to become a symbol itself, or I outline collage source as a way to "contain it" (Figure 4). The possibilities of meaning become endless, limited only by your imagination.

Part 6: Send It On

We live in an either/or society. Information is either true or false. News is real or fake. This polarity is the fuel for American mythmaking and branding. We can't hold on to our belief as the "best country in the world" if we also admit to being a racist country. But the human condition, in all of its completeness, could never be contained within either/or duality. Black communities have our own struggles with duality, whether based in gender, sexuality, class or religion. We assimilate through unwritten laws shaped by traditional, established norms and expectations. What results is low tolerance for alternative ways to be Black. I deliberately insert these alternatives and multiplicities into my work, where images can have multiple meanings depending on where you stand. Collages can potentially act as a conversation with no answers, only questions (Figure 5). All of these considerations can (un)comfortably occupy the same plane.

Slow looking is a methodology that connects everything I make. I realize my work is as much a reckoning with myself as it is with anyone else in the Black community. Trying to understand these feelings takes time. How do I feel about my indifference and detachment from Africa? How am I coping with my decision to depart from a comfortable middle-class life in pursuit of passion, purpose and social justice? What does it look like to really love Black people? The ideology of "both/and" always apply in my art. I am both confident and insecure. Both Black and African (because there is a difference) (Figure 6). Both "race man" and contrarian able to critique Blackness when called for. I make art from my own hand and use the art of others. All in hopes of influencing more Black people to consider what it would look like to create a real Black monolith, but this time on our terms.

Conclusion: Funkentelechy

George Clinton, the lead architect of influential funk bands Parliament/Funkadelic, is credited for being one of the early practitioners of Afro-Futurism in music, following in the footsteps of famed jazz musician Sun-Ra¹⁷. By creating mythologies based around funk, dance, space and Black liberation, he inspired thousands (and eventually millions through hip-hop sampling), helping to change the sound of Black music. Funkentelechy, a personal favorite from the 1977 album Funkentelechy vs. the Placebo Syndrome, combines the words “funk” and “entelechy”. The term can be roughly interpreted as reaching your most funky potential, with the “funk” being Clinton’s primary power source versus racism and oppression. This song, and most of the Parliament/Funkadelic catalog, takes complex ideas around love, race and consumerism and makes them palatable to the masses. Through double meanings, more people find their way to the groove. It brings different people together. These are some of the many superpowers of music. Its why each chapter of this thesis shares the title of a timeless (and relevant) song in the canon of Black music. My choice of basketball as a maker of a Black utopia is intentional. Basketball has similar powers as music, and probably brings more people together around the world than any sport besides soccer. But it will take more than a thrilling mixture of competition and entertainment to fix the damage that exists.

Basketball has been a huge part of my life since I was a boy. Everyone I know either played the game, support the game through coaching or administrative duties, or sponsor their children in playing. In Milwaukee, it is much easier to count people who don’t engage with basketball than those who do. Part of the reason for that is just how much basketball is advertised to Black people. It’s always there, no matter where you look (Figure 7-8). When I think about

¹⁷ Amelia Mason, “George Clinton, Sun Ra and the Sci-Fi Funk of Afrofuturism,” WBUR News, 2014.

my hometown, and all we have been through as a community, you can argue its basketball that kept us going. When we didn't have much to be proud about, we had great players. Its why I pay homage to the game and those who played, at the same time I question its hold on our community (Figure 9). We cannot deny the good the sport has done for us. The thousands of Black men and women who were swayed away from the streets by the game. The mentorship and attention to children and areas that may not have happened otherwise. The college and educational opportunities. The handful of professionals who made it to the big stage. The thousands who enjoyed professional careers overseas and brought those experiences back home. The midnight basketball leagues. Basketball is ground zero for the sports and entertainment portal that millions of Black people use to “make it out”. If you are lucky, one day you may earn a chance to become a 40-million Dollar Slave.

In 1999, New York Knicks star forward Larry Johnson referred to himself and his teammates as rebellious slaves. The quote received a lot of media attention, and became the central reference for the book *40-million Dollar Slave* by William C. Rhoden. In the book, he alludes to a metaphorical “conveyor belt”; a system where hundreds of thousands of Black kids are wooed by the promise of fame and fortune to trade their athletic abilities to the NCAA, with a tiny fraction of them graduating to the pros.¹⁸ This conveyor belt keeps the revenue rolling in for university officials, television networks and the few local populations affected by the proximity of arenas, but largely keeps power away from the Black community as a whole. Capable Black youth, who only see sports as a viable means of achievement, are siphoned away from other exploits and relegated to 10,000 hours of training for their athletic journeys. It's

¹⁸ William C. Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete* pp. 171-194.

because of this conveyor belt, and the overall visibility of Black people who are star athletes, entertainers or businesspeople (i.e. Black excellence), that makes basketball the perfect vessel for a utopia.

If I asked you to think of one place where you can find any and every Black person in the world, all at one time, what would you say? I've conducted this small survey on several occasions and the answers are typically hard to contemplate. Church, most immediately will say. The barbershop or hair salon, others will say. The final answer I usually get is college, and costs alone make that impossible. My answer, if one truly existed, is an NBA basketball game. Where else could you find Magic Johnson, a billionaire investor and former athlete; Denzel Washington, a conservative-minded A-list actor and millionaire; Jerry Williams, my pro-Black and conservative-hating uncle and soon to be retiree from AT & T; Lil' Nas X, superstar rapper and LGBTQIA+ advocate; Lil' Boosie, infamous street rapper who has recently become just as popular for his anti-queer comments as his music; a teacher, chaperoning her students to the game of a team that is sponsoring her school, Vincent Adams II, my baby brother who is autistic but loves rap and sports; a poor kid from the inner-city who would never be able to afford tickets to a game in normal circumstances but was blessed with a chance to see his favorite player; a family of African immigrants from the Congo, watching their cousin play, and myself, an artist constantly reevaluating my relationship with capitalism and the systems that keep us hypnotized, but will always love the game enough to buy a ticket or two? While eating our popcorn and drinking our soda, we may get lucky and catch a glimpse of Barack Obama walking to his seat. I understand that just because you can get everyone in the same arena, doesn't mean you can get everyone a seat at the table. Even under the same roof, status and class prohibit me from getting

anywhere near Magic, Denzel or Obama to talk about Blackness. But if we are ever going to come together, we have to start somewhere. Why not at the game?

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Appendix: Figures



Figure 1. *Dr. Grant's Corner*, 2022. Installation, books from Dr. Grant's book list, banned books in America, wood bookshelves, polaroid photograph. All images by Kweku Krampah



Figure 2. *Score*, 2022. 67 X 84 inches, African wax prints and found basketball shirts



Figure 3. *All-Americans*, 2022. 43 X 39 inches, monoprint, acrylic, analog collage, watercolor paper and board



Figure 4. *Tan, Yellow, Mandarin, Orange, Blood and Black*, 2022. 23 X 23.5 inches monoprint collage and acrylic on cardboard



Figure 5. *Blue & Orange*, 2022. 30 X 44 inches, acrylic, charcoal, colored pastel and analog collage on watercolor paper



Figure 6. *Versuz*, 2022. Found replica NBA jerseys, screenprint



Figure 7. *Gamefilm*, 2022. Various size, magazine covers, advertisements, analog collage, vinyl inkjet prints attached to wood with clamps, found clock



Figure 8. *Gamefilm*, 2022. Various size, magazine covers, advertisements, analog collage, vinyl inkjet prints attached to wood with clamps



Figure 9. *Green*, 2022. 30 X 44 inches, acrylic, charcoal, colored pastel and analog collage on watercolor paper and *Godizm* 2022. 8 X 8 inches, analog collage on wood