PLAYING THE GAME:

UNMARKING "BEAST" FROM THE

BODIES OF YOUNG BLACK MEN

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The journey of engaging this research has been rich. I am thankful to have had the opportunity to lean into a topic that has kept me up more nights than I can count but has also gotten me up on countless mornings. Seeing young black men die in this country is a heartbreaking phenomenon that hits too close to home; because I know that on any given day it could be me. None of us are immune to the virus of dehumanizing young black men that seems to have infected so many in the United States. And the countless lives lost are a continual reminder of this fact. Therefore, *Playing the Game* is dedicated to all those young black men who have lost their lives prematurely. George Floyd. Eric Garner. Michael Brown. Trayvon Martin. Philando Castile. Oscar Grant. Tamir Rice. The list goes on. And while this work has been dedicated to the particular struggle of young black men, it is also motivated by the continued need to protect the lives of black women as well. Sandra Bland. Breonna Taylor. This list unfortunately goes on as well. Your deaths are not in vain.

I am especially grateful to the young men who have walked with me. We have learned a great deal from each other. We have also been able to think together about how we can collaborate to remake the realities other young black men like us. Each of these young men are already engaged in meaningful and varied efforts toward this end. Interestingly, Bilal, Greg, and Jimmy have all gotten involved in the world of film. Greg now lives in Los Angeles and has directed short films that have won awards. While currently still playing in the NFL, Bilal has started several projects related to different aspects of challenging stereotypical images of black men broadly, and athletes in particular. He and I are currently working together on a few of these projects. Our collaboration has grown out of this project in particular. Deshaun and Osiris are both educators now, mentoring young black men through youth sports and school. These are just

a few noteworthy efforts that not only point to the dynamic nature of these men's humanities, but more fundamentally to their desire to see all black men acknowledged as human. Your efforts are not in vain.

Finally, I want to thank my family for supporting me throughout this project. To Monica and Ella especially, thank you both for giving me life and keeping me motivated to keep pressing the issue no matter what. To my sibling and cousins who share my story of being black athletes, thank you for encouraging me to bring light to this topic. I am especially grateful to my late mother in-law, Patricia Ann Owens. You dropped everything to come help us with Ella when she was just born so that I could study for exams and begin writing this dissertation. Then, right as I am prepared to finish, you lost your battle with cancer. This work would not have been possible without your support. I love you and I thank you, and though you are not able to read this in print, I know you are reading it on my heart.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

"Run nigga run." This is the only encouragement Fudge could muster up in his attempt to raise Malik's consciousness to the bigger picture of what he was participating in as a star collegiate athlete. Fudge was the de facto mentor to the black students at the fictitious Columbus University. By nature of being an upperclassman, Fudge had the respect of younger students. He valued reading, knew his African history, and regularly challenged his peers to think more deeply about the racial issues in which they were all embedded. Malik was the superstar freshmen track athlete whose aloofness seemed to annoy Fudge at times, and – in this instance – Fudge did not "let him make it."[1]

As they sat across from each other at the card table shooting dice, Fudge began questioning Malik as to why he chose to go to Columbus, "Hey, why you going to this school?" Malik answers, "Well, because that's what they say you need to do to make it in the country." When Fudge presses him about what it means to "make it," Malik further explains, "You know, getting a degree, you know, making that long dough."[2] After further questioning Malik about his motives and his goals, Fudge illustrates a scenario for Malik to consider:

> Check out this situation. You at a football game; there's thousands of people there. All of em white. The American flag is right above your head. They bout to play the National Anthem. All these people turn around and look you dead in your eye. What do you do?[3]

Malik, as green as they come, stumbles through a seemingly thoughtless answer, responding, "I stand up. You know, I'd probably be so embarrassed, that, you know, I'd stand up, you know

[1] To "let him make it" refers to what would have been Fudge's decision not to press the issue to prove a point to Malik. Had he let Malik "make it" he would have decided to, essentially, let his aloofness slide, rather than challenging him to raise his consciousness. In this particular situation, trying to make a point was a battle Fudge felt he had to fight.
[2] "Dough" is a colloquial term that refers to money. The phrase "long dough" signifies a certain level of financial security and comfort.
[3] John Singleton, *Higher Learning*, Crime, Drama, Romance, Sport, Thriller (Columbia Pictures, New Deal Productions, 1995).

what I'm saying?" There is a long pause. Fudge, clearly dissatisfied with Malik's response, shakes the dice and looks at Malik with a blank stare. He then asks, "So they got you running for the school, huh?" To which Malik replies, "Yea, partial scholarship." Fudge, rhetorically, "And if you don't run you don't get no tuition, right?" Malik nods his head, saying, "That's the way the system goes." With a demoralized look of sarcasm on his face, Fudge ends the conversation with the now classic line, "Run nigga run."[4]

Unfortunately, "run nigga run" tells the story of far too many young black men in this country. To many, Malik is a picture of a young black man who has already "made it." He is in college, getting his tuition paid by doing something he presumably loves, and is lauded by many because of his extraordinary athletic talents. More problematically, however, Malik is caught. He is from "the hood," where his options are severely limited because of a confluence of a biased educational system, being profiled (and potentially arrested) due to the inherent suspicion of his blackness, socioeconomic circumstances preventing other avenues of paying for college or trade school, and the like. Hence, athletics is one of only a few legal options available for Malik to achieve the socially constructed definition of "success" in this country.[5] This dilemma is complexified by the reality that the percentages of persons who make it to collegiate and/or professional levels of participation are extremely rare.[6] Further, the education opportunity Malik

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[4] This scene is from one of John Singleton's classic films from the 90s, *Higher Learning*.

[5] bell hooks convincingly argues that mass media, particularly television, has successfully shaped the attitudes of poor and working-class people in relation to their view of wealth and riches. Whereas she learned growing up that being rich complicated one's existence and made it difficult to accumulate wealth without exploiting others, she talks about how television achieved seismic shifts in this mentality. hooks claims that, through mass media, rich populations were so thoroughly portrayed as heroic, inherently altruistic, and morally upright that broad populations began to idealize the idea of being rich, and their own possibility of becoming so. Additionally, socially constructed definitions of "success" became equated with riches and understood to be attainable through the consumption of particular status objects. Her analysis will contribute later to my discussion of neoliberalism, and its ability to create unique aspirations in young black men. See: bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 70-79.

[6] For some helpful figures regarding statistics of persons who eventually compete at collegiate and/or professional levels of athletic participation see: http://www.ncaa.org/about/resources/research/estimated-probability-competing-

received based on his athletic talents is limited by, and predicated on, his ability and willingness to play the game;[7] to, literally and figuratively, "run." If he is injured, or simply decides he no longer wants to participate, his scholarship is in jeopardy and his educational future in question. Moreover, whatever athletic "success" he does achieve will often be read in light of socially and historically constructed scripts of black men being physically dominant but lacking in other areas associated with full humanity. Knowing full well Malik's dilemma, Fudge's only encouragement is to "run nigga run."

In as much as this project is about Malik, it is also about Fudge. By settling for this encouragement, Fudge is essentially telling Malik to "play the game." He realizes that Malik's best chance at getting the education he needs is to subject himself to all that comes with keeping his scholarship and staying in school. As much as he so desperately wants to offer Malik other options, he knows there aren't (m)any (viable ones). So, he resigns to "run nigga run" as a necessary, though problematic, negotiation that will at least give Malik a fighting chance. And insofar as this sentiment illustrates the level to which Malik himself is caught, it also points to the way Fudge is similarly at a loss of words and options to provide his friend.

As a former collegiate athlete, I identify with Malik. I know what kind of pressure he was under and the kinds of costly decisions he had to make to give himself a fair shot at a "normal" life. I also know how he was seen; what it is like to be fetishized because you are an athlete, while at the same time treated with suspicion when "off the field."[8] Like Malik, athletics

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college-athletics and http://www.ncaa.org/about/resources/research/estimated-probability-competing-professional-athletics

[7] Athletic participation in college limits the majors one can choose because there are large segments of each day where certain classes are unavailable. In my own experience as an athlete at the University of Kansas, I could only take courses before noon or after 7pm every day. There were majors I would have explored but could not due to our full-time schedule. This does not include the travel necessary for competing against other universities.

[8] "Off the field" refers to those times when one it not actively participating in one's respective sport, whether in practice or a game. In other words, it is when an athlete is living under the "normal" circumstances without the protection afforded by being with one's teammates, coaches, or playing the game while fans accept your presence

provided for me an opportunity to pay for college and pursue life and livelihood. However, I was one of the young black men who did not have to lean on sports exclusively. Growing up, my family was middle-class, with enough security to consider other options if we needed to. College was an expectation more than a distant hope. My parents had attended, and my grandparents did as well. So, while I did rely on my athletic talents to pay for school, I knew that if all else failed I had a relatively strong support network that would hold me in ways many young black men cannot relate to. And yet, despite my relatively stable upbringing and my athletic (and educational) success, "run nigga run" applies to me too.

On one hand, as Michael Eric Dyson put it recently in a podcast interview on *Think*, no amount of perceived success can prevent a black male from being seen as "just another nigga," which too often results in circumstances that end with *containment* or *crucifixion*.[9] Kelly Brown Douglas has recently noted how societal fear of black men is used to justify such (mis)treatment. Douglas also notes how such fear is a product of socially and historically constructed stereotypes about the inherent threat of black male bodies. In doing so, she alludes to what I understand to be the historical rendering of black men as *subhuman*;[10] "beasts" that need to be controlled at all costs, even unto death. The familiarity of examples that illustrate this reality is troubling.

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because of your role as an athlete (read: entertainer). I define dilemmas related to "on" and "off" the field in chapter five, which is where I deal most specifically with issues related to young black men and sport.

[9] "A Conversation With Michael Eric Dyson," *Think* (blog), accessed June 7, 2017, http://think.kera.org/2017/05/08/a-conversation-with-michael-eric-dyson/. I use "crucifixion" intentionally to highlight both the public nature of premature deaths among young black men, and the extent to which state (sanctioned) violence is responsible for such deaths. African American males live in a historical shadow wherein the killing of black male bodies has often become a public spectacle (i.e. lynching, castrations, gang and/or police shootings, etc.). One could read this history in light of the function of Ancient Near Eastern crucifixions, which was to put on display the consequences of not cooperating with the State. Ironically, though, we see today examples of public executions of black men who have been "compliant." The seeming routine nature of these instances leaves one to presume a more fundamental correlation between black male bodies and state violence, regardless of one's embodied performance. More on this in chapter four.

[10] Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2015), 68ff. Also see: Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 45ff.

Trayvon Martin. Michael Brown. Philando Castile. Oscar Grant. Botham Jean. Ahmaud Arbery. George Floyd. Beyond these examples of the literal foreclosure of life, young black men are also disproportionately enslaved by the for-profit prison industrial complex.[11]

On the other hand, however, "run nigga run" discloses the extent to which young black men continue to be caught by circumstances that provide only narrow opportunities for survival;[12] how we must literally "run" for our lives. Further, "run nigga run" signifies how entertainment industries – particularly competitive sport – commodify young black male bodies in ways that seemingly afford them a *superhuman* status; "beasts" in a more "positive," yet *commodified*, sense. One example of such commodification is with the packaging, marketing, and selling of Marshawn Lynch's persona "Beast Mode."[13] Because of his talent, work ethic, and grit on the field, Lynch solidified himself as an elite running back who epitomized what it meant to be a "beast" on the field. Yet, despite Lynch's athletic achievements, and his philanthropic commitment, he was regularly portrayed off the field as a thug due to his appearance and his decision to protest the media during his tenure with the Seattle Seahawks. Lynch serves as one example among many of how the seemingly superhuman status afforded a high-profile young

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[11] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 230–32. Alexander argues that criminal justice reform efforts have been futile because of the failure to address the interlocking ways it is beholden to our economic and political system. She notes the ways many unionized workers rely on prisons for their jobs, as well as how broader employment in relation to current functioning of the criminal justice system is dependent on the continuation of mass incarceration. She also discusses the amount of money invested into prison systems, which benefits involved corporations, and the explicit awareness of stakeholders that such investments would be adversely affected by reform efforts. It is well known that the overwhelming majority of persons who are incarcerated are young men of color. Hence, the very stability and thriving of a large segment of economic and political capital in this country is derived from the continued incarceration of young black male bodies.

[12] Sports journalist William Rhoden argues how the space afforded black males in competitive sport, or more broadly and historically in performing other athletic feats (i.e. "lifting hogs-heads, picking cotton, cutting cane…"), allowed them a certain agency that often led to more options. He further argues how sport, both historically and in contemporary times, has become a literal means of survival for young black men whose circumstances do not offer a plurality of options. See: William C. Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete*, Reprint edition (New York: Broadway Books, 2007).

[13] Marshawn Lynch is a running back in the National Football League. The "Beast Mode" clothing line comes out of a nickname given to him because of his physically dominant style of play.

black male athlete is still not enough to keep him from being seen as "just another nigga" in the public eye.

Research Focus

This project is my attempt to address the complexity of young black male suffering and to contribute to pastoral theology's ability to imagine new and creative ways to care for young black men. Specifically, I analyze the image of "beast" as a totalizing stereotype that continues to fund the dehumanization of young black men in this country. I focus on two ways of understanding this image. First, I explore what may seem to be the more obvious historical ways in which "beast" was inscribed onto black male bodies as a justification for enslavement, Jim Crow, and criminalization in contemporary society. Secondly, I explore the more "benign" nature of this image, particularly as it is situated as a "celebration" in a broader neoliberal context that renders its death-dealing consequences either invisible altogether, or the fault of young black men themselves. In other words, I will analyze the historical and contemporary ways in which "beast" functions to foreclose life and livelihood for young black men.[14]

At its core, this project seeks to make legible the humanities of young black men. My central aim is to better understand the complexity of society's inability to "see" our humanities. It assumes that the dehumanization of young black men extends from the deeper reality that our humanities are not legible to society. No matter how we perform – whether loud or quiet; whether tender or aggressive; whether we demand recognition or resign to implosion – the fact of our humanities does not register in the public mind.[15] In addition to understanding this

[14] I refer to "life and livelihood" throughout this project to refer to the ways young black men's lives are threatened literally (in terms of "life") and in terms of economic stability ("livelihood").
[15] Gregory C. Ellison, *Cut Dead but Still Alive: Caring for African American Young Men* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013), 4–13. By referencing concepts like "demanding recognition" or resigning to "implosion" I am

complexity, this project is also intended to contribute to social transformation. As a work in pastoral theology, particularly the trajectory within the field that is increasingly concerned with conceptions of care understood publicly, *Playing the Game* is also about breaking open new possibilities for how pastoral caregivers and society more broadly can more adequately care for young black men in the United States.

Research Aims (by chapter)

To accomplish the aims of this project, I attend to three levels of analysis that will contribute to an increasingly complex (with each level) picture of the particular circumstances in which young black male suffering is situated. After situating my research in terms of existing pastoral theological literature (chapter one) and addressing the methods and methodologies that guide this work (chapter two), I propose a way of understanding human selves in/and society that informs a redefinition of care I offer later. In this chapter (three), I build on pastoral theology's relational trajectory to construct the concept of "relational performance" as a framework that discloses the "synergistic" way in which selves and societies are formed (and deformed).[16] A key component to this aspect of my contribution, and to the wider project, is the prioritization of performance as the mechanism through which human existence and the production of social identities and society happens.[17] This framework is more broadly grounded by my assumption

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referring to pastoral theologian Greg Ellison's analysis of "social dynamite" and "social junk," and the attending consequences therein. Ellison's work illustrates the depth of social psychological suffering young black men experience as a result of social and political oppressions.

[16] Barbara J. McClure, *Moving beyond Individualism in Pastoral Care and Counseling: Reflections on Theory, Theology and Practice* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 181–87. I draw from McClure's engagement with "synergism" within this trajectory, but foreground (an analysis of) performance as the productive mechanism through which selves and society relate synergistically in the ongoing construction of "reality."

[17] My attention to performance was initially informed by Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, several African American cultural critics' perspectives on the performativity of race, and my own understanding of human "performance" as a socio-political and relational way of being with constitutive effects. However, when constructing

that social constructionist theories are central to understanding the fundamentally relational and political ways in which human selves (and societies) are formed.

In chapters four and five, I turn my attention to critically analyzing "beast" in light of the framework constructed in chapter three. I do this in two ways that correspond to sub- and super-humanity as briefly mentioned previously. In chapter four, I analyze the historical ways in which "beast" – understood as sub-human – was inscribed onto black men's bodies in order to justify dehumanizing practices like enslavement, Jim Crow, and the like. Significant to my understanding of this history is both Walter Mignolo's analysis of "coloniality" and Willie Jennings' analysis of the way in which Christianity functioned as a centerpiece to the whole colonial enterprise. By putting these thinkers into conversation, I demonstrate how black men came to be quite literally be cast as the devil; how being black and male was to literally bear the "mark of the beast."

In chapter five, I turn the contemporary celebration of "beast" on its head to illustrate how even "positive" formulations of "beast" play out the deeper inhuman assumptions named in chapter four. I complement my analysis of coloniality with an analysis of neoliberalism, casting it as colonialism 2.0. In doing so, I demonstrate how young black athletes – and young black men in general – are "recruited" into performances of "beast" as a necessary means of survival and success; life and livelihood, as it were.[18] In this chapter, I also bring gender (and sexuality) into the already ongoing conversation about race (and class) in relation to young black men. I consider the role hegemonic masculinity plays in both the ways young black

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my theoretical framework, I find it more useful to turn to Performance Theory more broadly because of its attention to ritual, play, and the body. More on this in chapter three.

[18] I use "recruitment" intentionally to not only reflect the language of athletics, but more deeply to illustrate the means by which we are coerced into performances based on the appeal of "beast" amidst sometimes dire circumstances.

men are seen and the ways its norms are used to shaped young black male performances. Sociologist and gender critic Michael Kimmel notes the way "hegemonic" alludes to the normalization of whiteness, heterosexuality, and economic superiority in constructions of what being a "man" means.[19] I also highlight some characteristic norms often associated with normalized forms of masculinity. My attention here is shaped by the way a particular ideal for masculinity has been constructed to exclude black men, and yet has simultaneously been imposed on us as the standard to keep.[20]

It is noteworthy that while this project as a whole assumes intersectionality as a theoretical lens through which to pay attention to the simultaneity of socially constructed identities, it shows up more explicitly in chapter five.[21] Pastoral theologian Nancy Ramsay argues for intersectionality's usefulness for pastoral theological analysis due to its orientation toward emancipatory praxis. She also highlights its import for disclosing the ideological ways in which taken for granted realities accumulate truth status through unwitting performances.[22] This latter observation will be particularly central in my use of relational performance and its

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[19] Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 3rd ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3.

[20] Black men are denigrated when we do embody the characteristic norms for masculinity, while white men are praised for similar performances. This is particularly evident in the realm of competitive sports, where performances of hegemonic masculinity are a requirement for success. More on this in chapter five.

[21] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1, no. 8 (1989): 139-167. My use of intersectionality as a theoretical lens reflects its specific genealogy, arising within black feminism for the purpose of raising awareness to the social position of black women's struggles in the U.S. Black women have long been marginalized based on the intersecting reality of being black and female (and often economically oppressed). These intersecting social identities cause their struggles to be missed, particularly in any single axis analysis of privilege and oppression. Hence, on one level intersectionality is from, and for black women. On another level, however, other scholars who have seen its broader analytic potential have taken up intersectionality. I engage it with respect to this latter observation. This engagement, however, is not meant in any way to divert attention away from its specific genealogy and original purpose.
Also see: Evangelina Holvino, "The 'Simultaneity' of Identities: Models and Skills for the Twenty-First Century," in Wijeyesinghe and Jackson, *New Perspectives on Racial Identity Development*, 161-91.

[22] Nancy J. Ramsay, "Intersectionality: A Model for Addressing the Complexity of Oppression and Privilege," *Pastoral Psychology* 63, no. 4 (August 1, 2014): 453–69.

particular attention to what Patricia Hill Collins calls the "hegemonic domain of power."[23] My particular concern is not only with the ways "beast" is both written onto black male bodies, but also the extent to which its deeper assumptions are insinuated into American life more broadly. Considered together, these theoretical approaches can "thicken" pastoral theology's understanding of the complexities that young black men are faced with.[24]

The final level of analysis is in chapter six, where I demonstrate the theological depth of "beast" as it points to the ways in which the soul is implicated in the dehumanization of young black men. My analysis of human being (chapter three) and "beast" (chapters four and five) culminates in chapter six, adding theological depth and complexity to the already stark picture of suffering I paint in the previous chapters. However, chapter six is also where I locate hope in the midst of this complexity and offer a way of understanding care that can contribute to both the (re)humanizing of young black men and the (re)creation of realities that more adequately care for us. While chapter six does function to bring everything together, however, in many respects it is the beginning of a new conversation. My purpose in chapter six is to offer a new way of imagining "care" in light of the analysis I have done. That said, this project is more of an invitation to think creatively together and to strategize in new ways than anything final or definitive.

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[23] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Rev. 10th anniversary ed (New York: Routledge, 2000), 302ff.

[24] A key value among pastoral theologians is to provide a "thick" description – taken from Clifford Geertz's way of characterizing the kind of detailed analysis necessary for doing ethnographic work – of the particular form of suffering we seek to understand, and hopefully transform. See: Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

Rationale for Research

It should be obvious why I have written this dissertation. Anyone who lives in the United States has seen too many young black men killed, or incarcerated, or otherwise mistreated so routinely that it has likely lost its sting. I even find myself hearing about these instances and not being able to find the energy within myself to care as much as I want to, should, and know I truly do. This scares me. Every time I witness these atrocities a piece of my soul is diminished. As will become clear while reading this work, I believe *all* of our souls are diminished by these happenings. And yet, they keep happening. I write this to contribute to all the other efforts that similarly want to change this reality, both academic and otherwise.

As a project of pastoral theology, my hope is more specific. I want to construct a proposal that addresses society's public failure to recognize the humanities of young black men; a model of *care* that seeks to humanize young black men in public. While this project is intended for academic audiences, my primary audience is the community of caregivers in close proximity to young black men. However, this work is also for us: young black men. I want to invite us into conversation where we can raise our own consciousness, collaboratively, to the issues we continue to face. In as much as my research takes on a participatory nature, prioritizing our voices is central.[25] In this light, my project is dedicated to Malik, and Fudge, and the variety of young black men who relate to these issues in their own ways. It is meant help Malik recognize his own inherent worth, and to engage his own agency in critical and intentional ways. Yet, it is meant for more than that. This project intends to raise the consciousness of those around Malik, helping them recognize the ways he is caught, and inviting them to participate with us in remaking this world for the better.

[25] More on this in the Methodology section.

Chapter 1

Key Players: A Review of Literature

Playing the Game: Unmarking "Beast" from the Bodies of Young Black Men is a pastoral theological work that builds on the trajectory of black pastoral theologians seeking to address the particular concerns of black men. Within this broader trajectory, this project fits into the emerging stream of thought that focuses more specifically on the unique suffering of *young* black men specifically. While there have been significant works that have helped the field understand the politics of race, class, gender, and sexuality, few have considered the convergence of these issues in the lives of young black men. Concomitantly, pastoral theologians have neglected important (re)sources that reflect and better represent young black men's unique experiences. Popular culture is one such resource that has not been engaged in a sustained or serious way, which has prevented pastoral theologians from attending to the politics of sport, film, etc. as potential sources from which relevant insights can be born. It is out of the confluence of these concerns that this project is born.

To say that young black men in this country continue to suffer is an understatement. Young black men are routinely profiled, incarcerated, and killed at rates far exceeding any other racial group, while at the same time blamed for our own plight based on misguided representations of our existence in the United States. Stated plainly, young black men's lives continue to be foreclosed and we are regularly cast as the criminals who are ultimately responsible. *Playing the Game* is my pastoral theological attempt to offer an analysis that tries to lay bare the complexity of young black male suffering by demonstrating how the *reality* in which it exists is an ongoing product of ritualized cultural performances. One important goal in this project is to connect the unique suffering of young black men to society more broadly; to reveal

the extent to which we are all implicated in the foreclosure of young black men's lives. Specifically, I analyze the image of "beast" as a socially and historically constructed myth that intersects race, class, gender, and sexuality in ways that cast young black men as the quintessential threat in the United States. I also analyze sport as situated in a neoliberal context in order to complexify and critique how "beast" continues to fund a failure to recognize the humanities of young black men in contemporary culture.

Pastoral theology has not yet considered issues facing athletes in general, and young black male athletes in particular. Yet, sport continues to function as a primary space where the presence of black men's bodies is assumed while our voices are silenced. Several scholars have noted the racial history of sports in the United States and how sport has often functioned as a microcosm of broader racial politics.[26] However, scholars have also highlighted the ways sport has become a site where black athletes have challenged racism in ways that have helped to fund larger transformation movements.[27] Because pastoral theologians have failed to analyze the politics of sport, there has consequently been no consideration of the connections between issues facing young black athletes and broader patterns of dehumanization of young black men more broadly. In this sense, my project is original. Yet, its originality would not be possible without existing pastoral theological works that deal with issues affecting young black men and those that deal with masculinity, race, class, and theology, respectively.

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[26] See: P. Miller and D. Wiggins (eds.), *The Unlevel Playing Field* (2003) and *Sport and the Color Line* (2004); W. Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves* (2006); R. Wigginton, *The Strange Career of the Black Athlete* (2006).
[27] See: J. Long and K. Spracklen (eds.), *Sport and Challenges to Racism* (2011). Colin Kaepernick's protest of the National Anthem in football games is also a great contemporary example of this potential. Kaepernick, then the starting quarterback for the San Francisco Forty Niners, knelt during the National Anthem in several games during the 2016/17 NFL football season. When asked about why he chose to kneel, Kaepernick cited "police brutality" and other injustices currently taking place in the United States as his reason for his decision to protest the National Anthem. See: http://ninerswire.usatoday.com/2016/08/28/transcript-colin-kaepernick-addresses-sitting-during-national-anthem/ for a transcript of his interview, and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ka0446tibig for a link to the video of the interview.

Beyond what seems to be an emphasis on athletes, my contribution is situated more broadly in the trajectory of pastoral theological thinkers that highlight the particular struggles of (young) black men. My work seeks to develop this important trajectory in a few important ways. First, I bring an analysis of relationality and performance into conversation with the particular struggles of young black men to demonstrate how the "realities" of our suffering are produced via ritualized cultural performances.[28] I challenge conceptions of human beings that assume the origin of social identities is internal to human beings.[29] Rather, I argue that persons, communities, and "reality" are largely socially constructed as persons "perform" selves in relation to sociopolitical scripts.[30]

Secondly, I use "beast" as a lens to highlight how young black men are uniquely caught by sociopolitical circumstances that reflect an ongoing history of being rendered inhuman. I demonstrate how sport becomes a site where this plays out in a broader neoliberal world, while appeals to the ideologies of the Market mask its insidious and racist nature. Ultimately, I demonstrate how cultural ideals related to the "American Dream" are used to recruit young black men into aspirations and performances that participate in the construction of our own presumed inhumanity; a tragic cultural performance that forecloses young black men's lives under the guise of "equal opportunity."[31]

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[28] This claim is a primary theoretical framework for this project and is developed in chapter three.
[29] Conceiving of identities in this manner is also be grounded in a pastoral theological lineage committed to noting the social constructionist and relational nature of identities.
[30] While I resist notions of identity that assume a static core that emerges based on one's internal reality, I also do not assume that social constructionist arguments can account for the deeper theological complexity of human beings. Nor do I believe constructionist claims can fully grasp the extent to which race remains "ontological" even while being a mythic construction. Additionally, the claim that persons "put on" selves in relation to sociopolitical scripts is not meant to suggest a unidirectional constitution. Rather, I argue that persons perform out of, into, and against scripts. I do want to highlight the reality of scripts, however, because attention to them can disclose the consequences of ideologies and stereotypes in the lives of young black men. I develop this dilemma more fully later.
[31] I develop this more fully in chapter five.

Key Players: Concentric Circles (of conversation)

The image of concentric circles captures how I imagine my work to be situated in pastoral theology.[32] It begins, most critically and specifically, in dialogue with existing work that focuses on young black men. Because Greg Ellison is the only other pastoral theologian whose work hinges on this topic, I imagine myself, him, and the young black men who will knowingly and unknowingly contribute to this project to be sitting in the innermost circle in dialogue about how to contribute positively to the lives of young black men. The second circle is a broader conversation about men and masculinity, broken up into two groups. The first group is for those who have focused on the topic in relation to psychological disciplines and white cultural norms. The second group are those who deal with masculinity in interdisciplinary ways but are still squarely pastoral theological. This latter group is also where conversations about black masculinity are happening, which is where my contribution will be more specifically situated.

The third circle is dedicated to the interdisciplinary conversations from which my work will simultaneously draw and contribute. These conversations represent projects outside of pastoral theology that deal uniquely with social identities, scripts, and issues of legibility from critical race and/or gender perspectives. Many of the conceptions of gender and race put forth in these conversations have shaped the language and theoretical lens of this project. The final circle is theological. These conversations represent womanist and liberationist theological perspectives that address constructions of black bodies via ideo-theological productions. They include

[32] Greg Ellison also uses this image of concentric circles but does so differently. He opens *Cut Dead but Still Alive* (2013) with incisive imagery of young black men facing death, struggle, and misunderstanding, surrounded by concerned caregivers who struggle to truly see and hear their concerns. Ellison uses these two circles to illustrate the close proximity, and yet distant understanding, of the outer circle of concerned others to the inner circle of young black male plight. It functions as a way to highlight his audience, and the central issue of seeing and hearing young black men as a necessary step to adequate care for this population. See: Greg Ellison, *Cut Dead but Still Alive: Caring for African American Young Men* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013), xi-xv.

theologians in and out of pastoral theology and provide a trajectory of thought necessary to understanding how I have grounded this project theologically.

In many respects, my representation of each of these concentric conversations is incomplete. More could and probably should be included from each of them to adequately demonstrate their contributions to pastoral theology specifically and cultural life more broadly. A fair representation of these contributions requires much more depth, breadth, and a history of their development in relation to significant cultural transformations. However, because my project is pastoral theological, and uniquely interdisciplinary, I have only highlighted those conversations that address the specific themes of this project. Certainly, those included in these circles will still function as signposts for significant developments in their respective fields. However, performing a thorough review of each of their literary uniqueness falls outside of the scope of this work. As a pastoral theologian, I put these perspectives into conversation as a way to facilitate a new dialogue among theorists and theologians who may not regularly be conversant. The outcome of this dialogue can contribute to how scholars inside and outside of pastoral theology understand the particular struggles of young black men and others whose souls are negatively affected by constructed social and political realities. Ultimately, this project is theological and practical. My overall goal is to contribute to conceptions of care that can more adequately addresses the complexities of young black male suffering in the U.S.

Young Black Men

Greg Ellison is unique among pastoral theologians in his explicit attention to the concerns of young black men.[33] *Cut Dead but Still Alive* is a project that brings together cultural criticism,

[33] Outside of Ellison's work with young black men, Anne Streaty Wimberly has written about African American youth more generally. Wimberly raises critical questions about caring for black youth that are informed by her

racial analysis, and social psychology in a way that demonstrates the unique struggles of being muted and rendered invisible.[34] For Ellison, "muteness and invisibility" create circumstances where the four fundamental human needs of "control, self-esteem, a sense of meaningful existence, and belonging" are unmet in the lives of young black men.[35] Worse, for Ellison, is the way in which muteness and invisibility are undergirded by the racialized trope "criminalblackman" and attending assumptions of social inadequacy, which often give way to literal and figurative (read: economic) deaths.[36] While Ellison situates his work in a critical understanding of society's role in muting and rendering young black men invisible, his project relies heavily on social psychological perspectives. He is primarily concerned with identifying and mediating the social psychological effects of being "cut dead," a social-psychological term Ellison uses to highlight the complex ways young black men are muted and rendered invisible. He does not deal specifically with the role of masculinity in young black male performances, nor is he concerned with how such performances may be shaped by participation in particular sociopolitical spaces.

By contrast, my work deals specifically with the politics of gender in young black men's lives, in addition to much of what Ellison highlights in his critical racial analysis. I also bring the politics of competitive sport into the conversation, particularly as they intersect with class and

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proposal that the Christian Church needs to do a better job of "keeping it real" in relation to youth concerns. For Wimberly, the issue of authenticity is a crucial one in caring for black youth and reflects a model of care that arises from youth's own voices and their particular contexts. Noteworthy, several of the themes she touches on reflect themes also developed in Ellison's work, albeit more broadly situated. Yet, like Ellison, Wimberly's proposal for care hinges on interventions meant to empower black youth and highlight their internal resources. My project values these caring strategies, but ultimately seeks sociopolitical interventions that include, but transcend the agential capacities of black youth. See: Anne Streaty Wimberly, *Keep it Real: Working with Today's Black Youth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005).

[34] Ellison, *Cut Dead but Still Alive*.

[35] Ellison, xvi.

[36] Ellison, 12–14. This is a term he borrows from Michelle Alexander's groundbreaking work, *The New Jim Crow* (2011). Alexander herself borrows this term from Katheryn Russell-Brown (*The Color of Crime, 1998/2008*) in order to highlight the interlocking ways young black men are treated with suspicion, and then unjustly tried and incarcerated based on such treatment.

sexuality in the ongoing production of "beast." As noted earlier, competitive sport continues to function as one of only a few social spaces where young black men feel a sense of belonging, despite the problematic ways in which we are cast as "beasts." My project assumes one's understanding of masculinity to be central to one's social performance, especially in the context of the sports I consider. It also assumes that the existing normative forms of masculinity are narrow, and consequently contribute to many problematic societal performances for which the consequences for young black men are worse. I believe my work complements *Cut Dead* well and offers a model of care for young black men that can contribute (publicly) to forms of political transformation related to young black men's issues.

Men and Masculinity in Pastoral Theology

Psychological & Theological Perspectives

Earlier pastoral theological works related to masculinity reflect a certain indebtedness to psychological and theological perspectives, and to varying degrees a dialogue between the two. Differing slightly in focus, and orientation, each of these perspectives share themes in how they conceive of the uniqueness of men and masculine identities. Pastoral theologian James Dittes offered one of the earliest contributions to an intentional conversation about men in pastoral theology. While drawing on psychological insights, Dittes privileges biblical and theological perspectives in proposing an understanding of men for the purposes of liberating them from the constraints of masculinity. In *The Male Predicament*,[37] Dittes notes this early awareness, noting his goal of liberating men from the "stultifying burden of being manly."[38] He does this by rereading biblical narratives of patriarchs in way that shows how these men, despite being read

[37] James E. Dittes, *The Male Predicament: On Being a Man Today*, 1st ed (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985).
[38] Dittes, xi.

through a lens of patriarchy, are also simultaneously victims to the masculine "scripts"[39] imposed upon them.

Dittes clarifies and deepens his analysis in *Driven By Hope*,[40] where he locates the distinctiveness of men quite literally in our penises – more specifically, the erection. He casts male erection as having a kind of mind of its own, arguing that its elusiveness has an alienating effect on men that leaves them in a state of wanting. Such wanting is exacerbated by a second distinguishing reality: a boy's early separation from his mother, and the pressure to become a man. Dittes rereads Freud's Oedipus theory and the biblical narrative of Adam, claiming that their actions are best understood as arising from a deeper longing and victimization based on the clash between what makes men distinct anatomically (and psychologically) and what is expected of them culturally. These distinguishing factors, Dittes claims, explains the sometimes problematic male behavior in that it illustrates how such behavior is really a product of a deep longing and striving arising from a place of alienation and pain.

Pastoral theologian Philip Culbertson also offers a perspective on masculinity informed by both psychology and theology, albeit with a much more collegial tone than Dittes.[41] In his book *New Adam*, Culbertson responds to feminist critiques of patriarchy by exploring the distinctiveness of men's experiences in relation to problematic stereotypes and masculine

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[39] He uses this term throughout the book to describe the ways existing norms strangle male dreams and longings, transforming them into "chores" based on necessity. This term is important for this project as well but is used in a different way. Scripts, for me, function as ideological tropes that create a cultural milieu in relation to which young black male performances are read publicly. These scripts seek to over determine young black male lives and are largely responsible for the societal failure to recognize the humanities of young black men. Ultimately, these scripts need to be challenged, and rewritten for young black men to find liberation in the U.S.

[40] James E. Dittes, *Driven by Hope: Men and Meaning*, 1st ed (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

[41] Dittes displays a very defensive tone, particularly in *Driven by Hope*. He regularly notes that he is responding to male "bashing" on the part of feminists. Dittes' defensive tone is apparent in the claims he makes, especially when considering that he spends more time seemingly justifying problematic male behavior than calling for its transformation.

norms.[42] Ironically, a portion of Culbertson's conception of men is also informed by a psychobiological reading of the male anatomy. Yet, he goes further to suggest that men are predisposed to loneliness and lack the ability to accommodate because of the penetrating nature of the penis.[43] To this analysis, Culbertson also adds the early separation of boys from their mothers as a key experience that uniquely shapes men's lives.[44] Yet, Culbertson argues that when boys turn away from their mothers toward their fathers, their fathers are often not there. He makes the assumption that males are absent due to gender norms related to work and a presumed inability to nurture. His solution then, which is similarly informed by reclamation of what he sees as a unique masculine spirituality, is to be found in a re-appropriation of biblical norms often associated with femininity. In other words, Culbertson argues for communities of "sensitive" men wherein being "sensitive" is not assumed to be the antithesis of masculinity.[45]

The early separation of boys from their mothers was a theme most developed by pastoral theologian Donald Capps. Like Dittes, Capps was interested in exploring what he saw as the uniquely religious nature of men, but he grounds his analysis in more explicitly psychological interpretations.[46] For Capps, men became religious as a response to the trauma of having to separate from their mothers early in life. Such separation, argues Capps, causes men to be confronted with deep feelings of chronic depression.[47] Because of the deep pain of losing one's

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[42] Philip Leroy Culbertson, *New Adam: The Future of Male Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).
[43] He further argues the flip side of this claim; that women are inherently accommodating and more nurturing because of the "accommodating" nature of the vagina.
[44] He also includes his understanding of a biological shift from female to male in utero, and the cultural pressure of success found through a man's professional and vocational engagements, as two other significant experiences unique to men.
[45] Culbertson uses this descriptor for men throughout his work. He never quite defines it or problematizes it, but he does seem to equate it with traditional understandings of femininity.
[46] By this, I mean that Capps' analysis is less conversant – or concerned – with spiritual interpretations of the origin of gender differences.
[47] Capps prefers "melancholia" as a term that could capture the more fundamental and deeply disruptive nature of what he felt men deal with.

mother, Capps suggested that men possessed a fundamentally religious nature that was defined by two primary ways of dealing with the loss: 1. It informs men's "hyper moral consciousness" as a way to win her back through action. 2. Religion becomes a search for substitutions or consolations after realizing the lost object (mother) is irrevocable. Capps understood masculinity, then, as largely a religious journey among men to deal with the perceived abandonment by their mothers early on in life.[48] Capps' analysis of what he understood to be the phenomenological state of men informed his own subsequent works, and several others that built on the foundation he set.[49]

The aforementioned perspectives were useful in the ways they initiated necessary examinations among pastoral theologians about the unique needs of men. These works raised interesting questions about how certain life events may shape masculine behavior, in addition to their attempts to understand how men relate to religion. While helpful in these ways, though, none of them take seriously cultural aspects of identity that complexify how masculinity should be understood socially and politically. The generalizations they make only reflect the experiences of white men, a point only Culbertson acknowledges in *New Adam*.[50] Additionally, the foundation upon which their analyses are built – the early separation of boys from mothers – relies on gross heteronormative assumptions and conflations between sex and gender that have since been challenged. A more culturally complex analysis of masculinity would acknowledge the ways race, class, sexuality and gender complexify how we understand the social position of

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[48] Donald Capps, *Men, Religion, and Melancholia: James, Otto, Jung, and Erikson* (New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press, 1997). Also see: Donald Capps, *Men and their Religion: Honor, Hope, and Humor* (Harrisburg [Penn.]: Trinity Press International, 2002).
[49] Donald Capps, *Striking out: The Religious Journey of Teenage Boys* (Eugene, Or: Cascade Books, 2011).Also see: Dykstra, Robert C., Allan Hugh Cole, Jr., and Donald Capps, *Losers, Loners, and Rebels: The Spiritual Struggles of Boys* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007) and Dykstra, Robert C., Allan Hugh Cole, Jr., and Donald Capps, *The Faith and Friendships of Teenage Boys* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012).
[50] Culbertson, *New Adam*, 3.

men in this country, particularly young African American men. Additionally, each of the aforementioned texts take for granted the nature of human identities. They assume identities – especially one's gender identity – emerge from *within* a person based on some presumed essence. This way of conceiving the development of human identity does not take into consideration the fundamental role sociopolitical realities play in one's identity formation. Attention to these factors are a consistent theme throughout this work.

Before moving into pastoral theological perspectives that reflect more critical attention to the intersecting cultural politics related to masculinity, I want to highlight the significance of the late James B. Nelson's work.[51] Though Nelson did not identify as a pastoral theologian, his theological attention to embodiment and sexual ethics has been an important resource from which pastoral theologians have drawn.[52] Nelson's specific attention to men's embodiment is what makes him noteworthy for this project, particularly his early critical awareness of the socially (and politically) constructed nature of gender norms and his critique of their negative effects on men's lives.

While analyzing men's embodiment was a significant thread throughout Nelson's career, his work in *The Intimate Connection: Male Sexuality, Masculine Spirituality* is what relates most specifically to the concerns of this project.[53] In this work, Nelson investigates what he sees as an

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[51] I could have included Nelson in the following section, but he seemed to fit better here as a kind of bridge figure between predominantly white male perspectives and perspectives that reflect growing diversity in the field of pastoral theology. Nelson was particularly attentive to the politics of sexuality but did not analyze the politics of race in his work. Hence, I situate him here acknowledging also that his perspective does represent "critical theoretical and theological" awareness.

[52] See: James B. Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1978). Also see: James B. Nelson, *Body Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992). In each of these works, Nelson addresses men's issues within his broader engagement with embodiment understood theologically. While his focus is not centered on men as specifically in these works, his broader attention does reflect sustained critical engagement with the importance of men's issues throughout his scholarly work.

[53] James B. Nelson, *The Intimate Connection: Male Sexuality, Masculine Spirituality*, 1st ed (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988).

intimate connection between men's sexuality and their spirituality. His reading of this connection includes a critique of stereotypical masculine tropes that alienate men from their own spiritual and human fullness. Interestingly, Nelson also analyzes male anatomy in his proposal for a fuller embrace of masculinity, but he does so in a way that moves in the opposite direction than does Culbertson as named previously.[54] While Culbertson reads the penis as hard and non-accommodating, Nelson highlights the regularity of a "soft" penis to critique normalizations that follow the logic of gender assumptions that bolster associations of being "hard" and "manly."[55] Nelson builds on this re-reading of the penis to propose the possibility of a masculine fullness that can help men move beyond the trappings of patriarchy to reconnect with their own humanities.[56] I have included Nelson here because he set an early precedent for a disruptive sensibility toward and critical examination of the politics of gender in relation to men. This project also lives in the trajectory of Nelson's critique of patriarchy as necessary for men to experience spiritual wholeness.[57]In this sense, he provides a bridge into my review of perspectives that lean heavily on critical approaches to gender analysis in pastoral theology.

Critical Theoretical and Theological Perspectives

There has also been a trajectory of work in pastoral theology that has understood masculinity in more culturally critical and political ways. In many ways these perspectives reflect the widening scope of attention in the field, as well as the engagement with cognate

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[54] I am aware that Nelson's work predates Culbertson's. My decision to situate Nelson after Culbertson is due to my attempt to emphasize his critical work as a bridge into the following section.
[55] See: James B. Nelson, *The Intimate Connection*, p. 89ff.
[56] While I do not draw specifically on Nelson's work in this project, I do acknowledge that his influence has shaped the field's broader awareness of the ways politics of gender and sexuality converge onto the lives of men. His attention to these issues as socially constructed realities wrought via roles is especially illustrative of the trajectory of thought in relation to which I situate this project.
[57] While I do not articulate this explicitly, the spirit of this claim lives throughout my work. This is why I wanted to highlight Nelson with this level of detail in the document rather than a footnote.

disciplines outside of the more traditional focus on psychology as the primary conversation partner. The defining feature among these perspectives has been a more explicit and sustained power analysis, which reflects the extent to which critical theory has shaped pastoral theological analyses of gender in relation to men and masculinity. In this section, I briefly highlight some of these critical cultural perspectives, namely those that focus on the intersecting politics that complexify how pastoral theologians understand black masculinity.

One early shift in this direction can be found in the collaborative pastoral theological work of Christie Neuger and James Poling.[58] *The Care of Men* is a collection of essays edited by Neuger and Poling that is dedicated to providing resources for lay and professional church leaders, pastors, counselors and the like to address specific care concerns for men in the U.S.[59] While the book is situated in terms of broad questions of care for men, there is also an explicit focus on care that addresses sociopolitical issues related to race, gender, class and sexual orientation.[60] Within the volume there are two helpful essays that raise concerns of care for African American men. In "Love and Work Among African American Men," religious scholar and cultural critic Donald Matthews highlights the need to attend to the ways in which economic exploitation visit African American men uniquely. He raises this concern in relation to Freud's emphasis on the interplay of love and work, and how these interrelated social experiences are complicated by race and racism in the U.S. Matthew then calls for a form of ministry that connects spiritual care with sociopolitical transformative practice. In a second essay about

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[58] Poling published a book the year before that analyzed the nature of evil, and oppression based on race and gender. In it he developed helpful definitions of "evil" and "dominance" that prove useful for this project in many ways. Yet, because he does not spend as much time developing a conception of men and masculinity – even while persuasively defining oppression based on gender – I am leaving a review of this work for a later section in this project. See: James Poling, *Deliver Us From Evil: Resisting Racial and Gender Oppression* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

[59] Christie Cozad Neuger and James N. Poling, eds., *The Care of Men* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997).

[60] Neuger and Poling, 17.

African American men, Edward Wimberly connects societal norms related to masculinity to the egalitarian legacy of African and African American social and religious life. He draws on this legacy to challenge the ways masculinity is constructed individualistically in the U.S., and ultimately calls for a narrative approach to care that revalues African centered forms of worship and patterns of relating.[61]

In addition to *The Care of Men*, Poling and Neuger have also edited a volume that more narrowly highlighted the role men should play in preventing violence against women. This text raised concerns of care for male abusers, as well as attending issues of gendered power in relationships.[62] Poling followed this work up with *Understanding Male Violence: Pastoral Care Issues,* a collection of his previously published articles that deal with various aspects of male violence against women, children, and other men.[63] Poling and Neuger's contributions demonstrate a more critical conversation about gender, power, and oppression in our field. Consequently, they also reflect theoretical engagements with critical theory, and other disciplinary perspectives that shed necessary light on how we should understand men and masculinity more critically than traditional psychological perspectives.

While the perspectives I have just named represent attempts to complexify the field's understanding of various issues related to men and masculinity, unique attention to the politics of *black* masculinity are most fully addressed by black male pastoral theologians.[64] Black male perspectives within pastoral theology have not only contributed to the field's ability to imagine care in the political contexts of race and class, but more importantly have helped pastoral

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[61] More on Wimberly's specific contribution to this discourse below.
[62] James N. Poling and Christie Cozad Neugar, eds., *Men's Work in Preventing Violence against Women* (Binghamton, N.Y: Haworth Pastoral Press, 2002).
[63] James Newton Poling, *Understanding Male Violence: Pastoral Care Issues* (St. Louis, Mo: Chalice Press, 2003).
[64] I make this explicit because it reflects both the history of this field and my own commitment to the unique insights born from one's standpoint.

theologians recognize how race and class intersect with gender in the lives of black men. In turn, these contributions have created an ever-widening capacity for pastoral theologians to address the unique suffering of black men. Unfortunately, specific attention to black masculinity as a sustained conversation remains underdeveloped, though the threads of analysis that emerge from the thinkers I highlight in this section provide a foundation.

Edward P. Wimberly was the earliest black pastoral theological voice to shift attention to the concerns of black men, though Wimberly was not specifically addressing black masculinity. Wimberly's focus on the concerns of black men should be understood as situated in a broader concern about black families in a racist society. Beyond his broader contribution to the field's imagination of care in the context of the Black Church, Wimberly's specific concern with the black family shows up initially in his seminal work *Pastoral Care in the Black Church*.[65] He picks this thread up again in *Counseling African American Marriages and Families*, where he begins to offer critiques of patriarchy and the ways it shows up in black men's lives.[66] While written explicitly for pastoral practitioners in positions to care for black families, Wimberly's critique of male hierarchical leadership set the tone for black pastoral theological thinking about black men's issues.[67]

Similar to Wimberly, Lee Butler's initial concerns related to black men were situated in the context of a broader focus on black families. In *A Loving Home: Caring for African American Marriage and Families*, Butler continues in the trajectory of seeking to understand

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[65] Edward P. Wimberly, *Pastoral Care in the Black Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979).
[66] Edward P. Wimberly, *Counseling African American Marriages and Families*, 1st ed, Counseling and Pastoral Theology (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).
[67] It is noteworthy that Wimberly cites Nancy Boyd-Franklin as a critical (black psychological) voice who informed his pastoral theological reflection. Her influence in Counseling African American Marriages and Families is apparent when considering the Wimberly's increasing attention to the intersecting issues related to black masculinity. For her earlier work, see: Nancy Boyd-Franklin, *Black Families in Therapy: A Multisystems Approach* (New York: Guilford Press, 1989).

how pastoral theologians can respond to the cultural assault on black families.[68] However, he extends Wimberly's initial focus on black families by incorporating the insights of African spirituality and more critical attention to gender analysis.[69] Butler develops this thread of critical racial and gender analysis in *Listen My Son: Wisdom to Help African American Fathers.* In this work, Butler critiques traditional stereotypes associated with masculinity in general. However, he goes further to demonstrate how such tropes are differentially inscribed upon black male bodies. Whereas men were problematically assumed to be "independent, aggressive, and assertive" – traits that were also valued among (white) men – black men are simultaneously assumed to be incapable of managing ourselves and are punished for embodying the very traits that were thought to demonstrate such control. In other words, Butler shows how African American men were deemed "boys," which illustrates the extent to which America's ideal for masculinity is reserved for white men.[70] Other contributors within this volume highlight various aspects of African American fatherhood (i.e. parenting girls, gay sons, etc.). While Butler's work highlights important insights related to black men, the nature of this text being a collection of essays limits the depth it can give to particular aspects of black masculinity and sociopolitical realities.

In *Care for the Mental and Spiritual Health of Black Men*, Nicholas Grier demonstrates a more recent engagement with critical issues related to black masculinity and care.[71] In this work,

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[68] Butler preferred to use the term "genocide" to describe the cultural assault black families have to endure in America. See: Lee H. Butler, *A Loving Home: Caring for African American Marriage and Families* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2000).

[69] Butler's analytical work continues to develop in ways that shed light on the extent to which racism affects the process of identity development. See: Lee H. Butler, *Liberating Our Dignity, Saving Our Souls* (St. Louis, Mo: Chalice Press, 2006). While he does not focus on black men in this work, his analysis of "African American Genderism" in chapter five illustrates the critical attention he later exhibited in *Listen My Son*.

[70] I develop this idea more fully in chapter five. Butler's analysis of the racialized gender dynamics not only highlight the intersecting politics of race, class, gender, and sexuality, but it also has implications for how we might understand the developmental aspects of young black men. While I do take up the intersecting complexity of black masculinity in young men, I do not address developmental theory in a formal sense related to gender.

[71] Nicholas Grier, *Care for the Mental and Spiritual Health of Black Men: Hope to Keep Going* (Lexington Books, 2019).

Grier performs a critical analysis that addresses the intrapsychic struggles black men continue to deal with, but with a level of depth and complexity that takes sociopolitical issues seriously. Not only does Grier consider the intersecting ways in which race, class, gender, and sexuality come to bear on the intrapsychic experiences of black men, but he also helpfully addresses the ways these issues affect black men communally in relation to black women and each other. Grier's work is significant in that he paints a more complex picture of the psychological hurdles preventing black men from thriving, while also naming often overlooked factors necessary to care for the mental health of black men.[72]

I want to also highlight a black pastoral theological thinker who did not necessarily address issues related to black masculinity but provided *the* theoretical foundation on which *Playing the Game* exists. In *The Relational Self: Ethics and Therapy from a Black Church Perspective*, Archie Smith Jr. introduced the field of pastoral theology – via his analysis of race and concerns for the Black Church – to the idea that human selves are formed socially rather than (solely) intra-psychically. Building on George Herbert Mead's social psychological work, Smith recast the human self as a relational process that exists in a web of social, cultural, and political realities.[73] Smith's work not only provided the language of "relational web" to a field still committed to this metaphor, but it also laid the foundation for pastoral theologians who are particularly concerned with understanding the complex sociopolitical dimensions of suffering

[72] Michael Lee Cook, *Black Fatherhood, Adoption, and Theology: A Contextual Analysis and Response*, American University Studies VII: Theology and Religion, Vol. 346 (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2015). While Cook's work does address black men and fatherhood, he does so with the specific focus on adoption. He does not spend time dealing with the constitution of gender and race as much as he does with the politics of adoption for black males. Hence, I am only briefly mentioning his contribution in this part of the project.

[73] Namely, George Herbert Mead and Charles William Morris, *Mind, Self & Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist* (Chicago, Ill: The University of Chicago Press, 1934).

and care.[74] My project lives in this trajectory but seeks to fill *some of* the gaping hole that remains when considering the particular struggles of young black men.

There remains then, the need to continue conversations about black masculinity in pastoral theology. Whether these conversations relate to mental health and communal well-being, or broader sociopolitical realities, our field is only beginning to consider the many issues that affect young black men. And yet, the social and political urgency of this need continues to ramp up. This need, however, is felt. As mentioned, (black) masculinity is topic that has gotten attention in the field. Too often, however, that attention has either been too narrowly psychological, or has been treated in edited volumes that privilege a breadth of perspectives to the detriment of depth of analysis. Consequently, analyses often do not reflect recent literature that has raised critical concerns about how we understand human constitution and the formation of social identities. Gender analyses outside of our field, and conceptions of race within it, reflect a growing awareness of the extent to which identities are socially constructed and socio-politically informed. Yet besides the few works I have named, pastoral theological explorations of masculinity broadly, and black masculinity in particular, have not received the attention necessary to move in this direction. *Playing the Game* builds on the work that has been done to continue developing this vital trajectory.

Critical Gender Perspectives

There are a few additional social theorists outside of pastoral theology who are worth noting specifically. Their contributions are essential to understanding how my work fits broader discussions about black masculinity and social identities. Richard Majors is a psychologist who

[74] More on Archie Smith in chapter three.

addresses what he sees as the double bind of being a black male in America. He argues that black men are routinely denied the resources and opportunities to achieve normalized images of masculinity, even while they have widely bought into such images as the ideal. Caught in this dilemma, then, Majors suggests that the "cool pose" is a coping mechanism that can empower black men. It is a performance that portrays coolness in the face of anxiety inducing circumstances.[75] "Cool pose" offers a way for black men to perform their identities in more positive ways amidst few opportunities and inner turmoil. Majors, however, also acknowledges what he sees to be the negative side of cool pose. In addition to allowing black men a way to perform a dignified, stylistic, impenetrable self, Majors suggests it can also contribute to emotional pain, interpersonal conflict, and violence resulting in literal death. Problematically, both the positive and negative potential of cool pose are directly linked with the clash between constructed masculine norms and the sociopolitical circumstances of black men. The very content of performing "cool" is based on problematic masculine ideals of (self) control, emotionlessness, toughness, and the like. Beyond the consequences these presumed definitional performances have for all men, they are far greater for black men.

Majors' work is particularly helpful in the attention he pays to the lure of masculine scripts for men in general, and black men in particular. He demonstrates the ways black men are recruited into gendered performances that deny the fullness of their humanity in service to a an ideal constructed by, and for, white men. I also find his attention to "cool pose" as a form of "black acting" to be illustrative. Majors likens the routine performance of "cool" to actors playing a role night after night, even to the point where the successful rehearsal of their scripted lines become automatic. However, the implications of such performances, for Majors, never

[75] Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson, *Cool Pose : The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America*, Reprint edition (New York: Touchstone, 1993).

exceed concealment. In other words, putting on certain masks in relation to whiteness is only a way to conceal the reality of one's authentic (read: inner) self. Majors' work is founded on assumptions that the self one portrays in public is fundamentally separate from one's private (read: "real") self. In other words, Majors does not consider one's social performance to have any constitutive consequences on the self, despite his acknowledgement of how normalized such performances often are. I push the envelope in this direction further, arguing that there are constitutive consequences to routine performances.

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity is particularly important for what I am trying to do in *Playing the Game*.[76] While I engage the concept of performance with a different focus in the construction of my theoretical framework, Butler's work has been vital for my introduction to the idea that identities are products of performance. For Butler, gender is more appropriately understood as an ongoing production based on constitutive performances that take place in (rigid) regulatory cultural, political, and ideological contexts. By this Butler means that gender is performative in that it becomes "real" through repeat performances that are authorized by sociopolitical norms and laws. This idea is a direct challenge to notions of gender as expressions of something naturally emerging from one's sex.[77] Rather, as Butler puts it:

> That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. This also suggests that if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse, the public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body, the gender border control that differentiates inner from outer, and so institutes the "integrity" of the subject. In other words, acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality.[78]

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[76] While I approach performance differently in developing my theoretical framework, Butler's work was my introduction into the idea of performativity with respect to gender.
[77] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
[78] Butler, 136.

Butler is thus examining the ways societal norms provide scripts meant to shape gendered performance. Performing scripts, Butler would argue, is much more than a way of role-playing fantasy. Rather, she suggests that gendered performances have constitutive consequences for reproducing the perceived "reality" of the gender order.

One key theme that shows up in *Gender Trouble* and is further developed in her later works *Undoing Gender*[79] and *Bodies that Matter*[80] is the idea that bodies do not always conform to societal norms. Butler argues that there are always slippages in gender performances that, if authorized, can subvert the very idea of a gender norm arising from one's sex. She suggests that attention to bodies matter because their complexity of performances tells a different story than those found in society's regulatory scripts. My work picks up on this theme, and Butler's concept of "performativity," considering its import in the context of young black male suffering. I want to demonstrate how attention to young black male voices and bodies demonstrates complex humanities that disrupt their sub- and super-human rendering as "beasts."[81] Hence, my project extends performativity to my analysis of the ways race is also constituted through performance. I depart with Butler, however, by bringing theology and black cultural criticism to bear in ways that reveal persistent aspects of race that more accurately disclose the unique situations young black men must endure.[82]

Mark Anthony Neal is a cultural theorist whose approach to black masculinity was a key launching point for this project. In his book *Looking for Leroy*, Neal takes up the issue of societal

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[79] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004).
[80] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
[81] I explain these terms more in chapters four and five. They refer to two ways I have chosen to highlight the historical and contemporary aspects of "beast" with particular emphasis on colonialism and neoliberalism, respectively. Sub-humanity refers to the overly racist ways black men were rendered "beast" historically. Super-humanity refers to the ways our bodies have been commodified (and used) in the context of competitive sport – in a broader neoliberal context – based on the presumption of a superior physical existence.
[82] While I am aware of the problems with this term, I use it intentionally and explain my appropriation of it more fully in the dissertation.

legibility in relation to images of black masculinity. He raises this issue by critiquing the socially constructed normalcy of hyper-sexualized and criminalized tropes through which black men are regularly seen. Foregrounding Gene Anthony Ray's portrayal of Leroy in the 1980 film *Fame*, Neal makes legible an image of a black masculine performance that disrupts the normalized tropes routinely written onto black male bodies. Hence, similarly to Butler's attention to slippages, Neal is "Looking for Leroy" as a way to excavate images of black men that disrupt the social scripts of a racist society. Following his own precedent, Neal dedicates the rest of his book to rereading notable black men – those who have been portrayed by hyper-sexualized and/or criminalized tropes – in ways that demonstrate the failure of stereotypes for truly seeing any black man in society. In other words, Neal exposes the failure of racist and sexist tropes altogether, demonstrating the complexity of black men more broadly.[83]

Looking for Leroy is particularly significant to my project because it offers the language of "legibility" as a way to frame what I see as the problem visiting young black men.[84] It also highlights the performative power of stereotypes, and occasions rereading and re-presenting more complex images of black men as a key method for disrupting problematic images. Beyond focusing more specifically on young black men in sport, my project brings a theological analysis that demonstrates the depth of suffering caused by stereotypical representations. While Neal seems aware of problems that arise from failing to see black male complexity, he does not consider the ways theological anthropological analyses deepens scholarly understandings of the ways ideologies contribute to human suffering on micro and macro levels. My work also gives

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[83] Mark Anthony Neal, *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities* (New York: New York University Press, 2013). Neal's work is also significant because it demonstrates an engagement with sources (i.e. popular culture, hip-hop, etc.) that more directly represent the voices of black men. Engagement with these sources is important in project for this reason, and because it represents the academic usefulness of including cultural products endemic to young black male experiences.

[84] "Legibility" is a salient theme in this project. I develop it more fully throughout the entirety of this work, with increasing contextual detail from chapter three through chapter six.

more attention to the performance of gender and race, which further demonstrates how such norms for legibility develop and are maintained.

Womanist and Liberationist Theological Perspectives

Womanist theologians have led the way in highlighting the history, development, and continued proliferation of theologically informed images of black bodies in the United States. Kelly Brown Douglas is a significant early voice among them. In one of her earliest works, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, Douglas critiques the homophobia and silence about sexuality in Black churches.[85] She argues that much of what she sees as a reluctance among African American faith communities to have open and critical conversations about sexuality is a product of white cultural attacks on black sexuality. A significant feature in this work is Douglas' attention to the construction of theological and cultural myths about black female and male sexualities. She demonstrates how, through the imposition of white cultural norms during their first encounters with Africans, Europeans concluded that the dress, style, and appearance of black bodies represented a sexual nature that was inherently lascivious and out of control. This "nature," of course, was written upon black bodies in distinction from the Victorian ideals of white culture, and eventually used to justify the power-hoarding practices that protected white supremacy. Douglas further demonstrates how these images were grounded theologically by white cultural appeals to mind/body dualism, where whiteness was associated with things of the mind and blackness with carnality.[86]

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[85] Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1999).

[86] Douglas expounds on the ways associating blacks with the body was a theological way of rendering them less than human. She discusses how this mind/body split arose from Platonism, and incorporated by Roman Christianity, and eventually imbued in much of popular Christian thought. Associating blacks with the body became a way of naturalizing their inscribed inhumanity, while masking the fact mythic nature of such. In other words, it gave divine sanctioning to the creations of white cultural assaults on black bodies. Douglas, 25ff.

Most notable for this project is Douglas' analysis of the "violent black buck," a stereotypical myth about the threatening (sexual) nature of black men.[87] In a later work, Douglas links the construction of this myth to contemporary constructs of criminality inscribed onto young black men thought to be "thugs" in America.[88] In *Stand Your Ground*, Douglas demonstrates how the co-construction of American exceptionalism, the myth of Anglo Saxon superiority, and the ideology of Manifest Destiny created a foundation on which black male bodies were presumed to be inherently guilty, and justifiably killed. This theologically grounded ideology, Douglas argues, is what gives whiteness divine sanctioning as a fundamental conduit of American hopes and dreams. Simultaneously, it constructs black males as a fundamental danger that needs to be controlled at all times; the fate of American society depends on it.[89]

Like Kelly Brown Douglas, Dwight Hopkins offers a liberationist perspective that seeks to illustrate American Christianity's complicity in constructing black men as sexually out of control, criminal, and ultimately non-human. In "The Construction of the Black Male Body," Hopkins uses what he sees as a "triangle of desire" to highlight the ways white men cast black men as over sexualized beasts in pursuit of white women. Hopkins suggests that white men, through their presumed embodiment of Christianity's essence, cast themselves as heroes whose purpose was to save white women from the sexual violence of black men. He relates this trope of sexualized criminality to Rene Descartes' separation of mind and body, where black men were associated with the presumed carnality of the body, while white men were thought to be pure, logical thinkers, and therefore fully human. This argument is reminiscent of Douglas' analysis of mind/body dualism.

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[87] Douglas, 45ff.
[88] Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2015), 77ff..
[89] Douglas, Chs. 1-3.

In a different direction, however, Hopkins further grounds this connection with the fifth century Council of Toledo. Hopkins argues that this council was where constructions of Satan were increasingly rendered synonymous with imposed caricatures of black men. He highlights the ways depictions of Satan were increasingly darker, with muscular physiques, and extremely large penises. These characteristics reflected the mythic representations of black male features; they signaled the physical dominance and sexual lasciviousness thought to be endemic to our nature.[90] While Douglas successfully demonstrates the ways assumptions of black male inhumanity were built into the fabric of American society, Hopkins takes it a step further. In his analysis, black men were not only inhuman, but were the quintessential Satan that American Christianity was ordained to destroy.

My project fits well within the trajectory of Douglas' and Hopkins' works. I am concerned with the theologically informed ways stereotypical images are written upon the bodies of young black men, and how such images justify continued dehumanization. However, my concern goes beyond associations. Theologian Willie Jennings articulates the fundamental nature of these theological constructions. In his book *The Christian Imagination*, Jennings turns modern Christianity on its head by demonstrating its complicity in Europe's colonial imperialism. Complicity is actually an understatement. Jennings implicates Modern Christianity, and the performance of its theologies amid Europe's encounters with the "New World," as the origin of the very categorization of race based on skin color.[91] He further argues that these constructions

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[90] Dwight N. Hopkins, "The Construction of the Black Male Body," in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, 2nd Edition, Eds. Marvin M. Ellison and Kelly Brown Douglas (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 207 – 209.

[91] Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 15–64. In the chapter "Zurara's Tears," Jennings attends to the ways physical and spatial displacement, coupled with the prioritization of land possession as a means of authority, brought skin color to the fore as the primary content for categorization. Whereas one's geographical situation previously suggested ethnic and racial demarcations, Europe's colonial displacement of people from their land asserted whiteness with land possession and rendered the displaced non-white. Without geographical space, persons in colonized contexts were

of race were deeply theological because the whole enterprise was undergirded by what he calls "Christianity's diseased social imagination."[92] In other words, European encounters with Africans and persons of color around the globe were grounded theologically in an attempt to make sense of the New World in terms of God's created order. Hence, Christianity was not merely ornamental to European imperialism. Rather, Christianity was central to the very foundations of the whole colonial enterprise.

Because my project seeks to expose the role neoliberalism plays in the dehumanization of young black men, and the ways neoliberalism itself functions as a reproduction of coloniality, Jennings' work is crucial for understanding the theological trajectory of this project. His analysis not only provides a theological basis for recognizing the ways Modern Christianity is largely responsible for racism, it also points to the deeper cultural (and theological) logic of colonialism that neoliberal capitalism performs in our contemporary moment. My project considers the ways these continued performances take place in, and around the culture of competitive sport, as well as the extent to which the politics therein "play out" assumptions of young black male inhumanity more broadly. Of particular concern are the ways neoliberalism produces celebrated images of young black male athletic achievement that reproduce assumptions of young black men's inhumanity. Said differently, I highlight the celebrated suffering of young black men in relation to the hegemonic images that originate from colonialism and are reproduced via neoliberal capitalism.

Womanist ethicist and theologian Emilie Townes moves in this direction, though not focused on young black men or the role of athletics. However, she does illustrate the ways

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left to be identified based on their skin color in relation to that of Europeans. Hence, black/white became the standard, but included all the geopolitical weight of dispossession/ownership.

[92] Jennings, 9.

neoliberalism is able to incorporate mythic images, market them, and reproduce their presumed reality by rendering them commonplace in the public square. In this sense, Townes sets a precedent for the kind of work I am doing in *Playing the Game*. In *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, Townes illustrates how mythic histories are used to construct realities that serve the status quo.[93] She examines the image of Aunt Jemima (as portrayed on a syrup bottle) to expose the ways caricatures of black womanhood become "real" in the public imagination. Townes' treatment of neoliberal capitalism's role in this process is key. She notes the centrality of marketing, commodification, and consumption as performative vehicles through which Aunt Jemima takes on a reality that masks the mythic origins of her creation. Thus, the normalcy of her caricature becomes a lens through which black women more broadly are seen.

More specific to the field of pastoral theology, womanist pastoral theologian Chanequa Walker-Barnes is similarly concerned with the normalization of tropes placed on black women. Walker-Barnes focuses specifically on an image that is often *celebrated* within African American (faith) communities: the "StrongBlackWoman." In *Too Heavy a Yoke*, Walker-Barnes highlights the potential problems that arise from expectations of strength imposed on, and embodied by, black women.[94] She presents the StrongBlackWoman as an adaptive response to historical and contemporary oppressions, and as an oppositional performance that resists negative myths about black womanhood.[95] Though the StrongBlackWoman arose as a necessary tool for survival, Walker-Barnes argues, it has now become an unrealistic expectation imposed

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[93] Emilie Maureen Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, Black Religion, Womanist Thought, Social Justice (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 18ff.
[94] Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014).
[95] Walker-Barnes, 80ff. Walker-Barnes builds on Patricia Hill-Collins' analysis of controlling images that function as a part of an assault on black womanhood and sexuality. For her, the StrongBlackWoman is a way for black women to resist these myths, while also employing a plethora of survival strategies amidst oppressive sociopolitical circumstances. See also: Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000).

on black women that too often results in physical, emotional, and psychological pain. She further demonstrates how the taken for granted presumption of strength in black women creates apathy on micro and macro levels that prevent necessary transformation. Said differently, because black women are expected to be strong, our society (and the Black Church) neglects the personal, communal, and public recourse necessary to alleviate the circumstances requiring black women's strength. As a work in pastoral theology, Walker-Barnes not only critiques the celebration of strength imposed on black women, she also offers strategies of care for black women to engage the life-long process of healing.

I analyze the situation of young black male athletes in a way that reflects Emilie Townes' treatment of the ways totalizing images are used to normalize caricatures of black women. I also pay attention to the ways neoliberal capitalism transforms stereotypical myths, normalizes them in public, and ultimately masks the suffering they create. Like Walker-Barnes, I focus on a historical and contemporary image that has embedded within it racial histories, masculine ideals, and athletic aspirations. This image has been imposed on, expected of, and celebrated by black athletes in ways similar to the StrongBlackWoman Walker-Barnes highlights. And like Walker-Barnes' StrongBlackWoman, "Beast" produces death-dealing circumstances for young black men, while masking the sociopolitical realities responsible for young black male suffering. I focus on the culture of competitive sport because it provides a uniquely helpful context for seeing the ways young black men are recruited into their own suffering through hegemony, sociopolitical and professional pigeonholing, and false promises of success and security.

Chapter 2

Ground Rules for the Game: Methods and Methodology

Pastoral theology is well situated to address the needs of young black men. As a field, pastoral theology is unique in its attention to human suffering, its efforts for redress, and for its engagement with diverse disciplinary perspectives that shed light on the complexity of suffering. However, pastoral theological attention does not only include the claims of disciplinary perspectives. Rather, highlighting the voices of those who can speak from the cultural contexts in question is a priority among pastoral theologians. This project prioritizes the voices of young black men, as well as disciplinary perspectives that can shed light on their unique circumstances in the U.S.[96]

In many respects this project will follow Greg Ellison's example in his work with young black men. In *Cut Dead but Still Alive*, Ellison sets forth a methodology predicated on recognizing the subjective expertise of young black men, rather than view them as objects of research. Valuing research participants this way, for Ellison, is also connected to research that seeks to move beyond merely constructing alternative theories and theologies. He frames his method as a form of action research wherein the researcher collaborates with subjects in the construction of new knowledge that can contribute to social transformation.[97] I am similarly framing this project *as a form of* action research, with an explicit goal of transforming the sociopolitical circumstances in which young black male suffering exists. Before describing the

[96]This project is also autobiographical in that my own experience as a young black man (and former athlete) will contribute to my engagement with those young men thinking with me in this project, as well as shaping my engagement with disciplinary sources. See section on "Language" for a note on my use of "their/our" in this project.
[97] Ellison, *Cut Dead but Still Alive*, 39–40.

particularities of my method, however, I want to highlight a few key developments in pastoral theology that ground my approach to researching *with* young black men.

Pastoral Theology: A Brief Overview of Key Developments

Pastoral theology *is* and is simultaneously *a way of doing* constructive contextual theology that arises from and informs practices of care.[98] While pastoral theology is a field in itself, the pastoral theologies constructed therein are as varied as the problems to which the field and its scholars seek to attend. For this reason, much of pastoral theology's recent history has been defined by a struggle to embrace a clear identity as a discipline. At one point, our field was over-identified with psychological perspectives that eventuated in models of care that incorporated the healing methods of psychologically oriented therapies. A key assumption of this psychological focus was that human beings existed as individuals, which contributed to beliefs that their problems were internal to their selves. More recently the field has expanded its scope of attention beyond a more narrow focus on understanding the experiences of individual persons and communities to more complex analyses of wider sociopolitical contexts that complexify how we understand the origins and maintenance of various kinds of human suffering.[99] Reflecting this broadened attention, pastoral theology has also widened its goals beyond therapeutic engagement with individuals to also include more public forms of social and political transformation.

On one hand, a shift in the guiding metaphor informing how pastoral theologians understand what it means to be human is responsible for the widening scope of analytical

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[98] Nancy J. Ramsay, "A Time of Ferment and Redefinition" in Nancy J. Ramsay, ed., *Pastoral Care and Counseling: Redefining the Paradigms* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004), 5–6.

[99] Barbara J. McClure, "Pastoral Theology as the Art of Paying Attention: Widening the Horizons," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 12, no. 2 (October 2008): 189–210. McClure notes the ways pastoral theology's widened scope of attention is linked to increasing awareness of shifting theological and sociopolitical factors that shape how we understand human suffering, and the potential for flourishing.

attention. Anton Boisen's image of a "living human document"[100] formed an early foundation for what Rodney Hunter later refers to as the "therapeutic tradition."[101] Understood against a cultural backdrop defined by disillusionment due to the World Wars and social scientific challenges to the moralistic tendencies of religions, the focus on individual persons as legitimate sources of theological reflection became the norm.[102] Concomitantly, psychological disciplines took center stage for pastoral theologians who sought to construct theologies of care that more adequately addressed the internal complexities of human beings. Increasingly, however, pastoral theologians recognized the influence of families, communities, and eventually wider sociopolitical realities on individual persons. Bonnie Miller-McLemore's image of the "living human web" eventually became the guiding metaphor for pastoral theological conceptions of the human being.[103] Embedded in this image was the assumption that human beings were to be more accurately understood as existing in a web of relations, which shifted the subject matter of inquiry and care from individuals (exclusively) to broader sets of relations.

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[100] Anton T. Boisen, *The Exploration of the Inner World; a Study of Mental Disorder and Religious Experience* (Chicago, New York: Willett, Clark & company, 1936).

[101] Rodney J. Hunter, "The Therapeutic Tradition of Pastoral Care and Counseling," in Pamela D. Couture and Rodney J. Hunter, eds., *Pastoral Care and Social Conflict* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).

[102] E. Brooks Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 210ff. Holifield provides a detailed analysis of how the World Wars created a sociocultural context that placed psychological theories and therapies on center stage. He also explains how the same cultural shifts informed the increasing numbers of chaplains and other pastoral caregivers who adopted psychological methods for attending to their respective constituents.

[103] Miller-McLemore, "The Living Human Web: Pastoral Theology at the Turn of the Century," in Jeanne Stevenson Moessner, ed., *Through the Eyes of Women: Insights for Pastoral Care* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 9-26. Miller-McLemore's article was originally published as "The Human Web and the State of Pastoral Theology" in *The Christian Century*, April 1993, pp. 366-369. While Miller-McLemore was credited for coining this metaphorical conception of human beings, she does acknowledge Catherine Keller as a central voice in providing the language of "web" that Miller-McLemore adapted in her pastoral theological work. See: Catherine Keller, From a Broken Web: Separatism, Sexism, and Self (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986). Despite the extent to which Miller-McLemore is credited for this shift, both the image of "web" and the notion of "relational" – which is assumed in Miller-McLemore's use of "web" – were initially introduced to the field by pastoral theologian Archie Smith, Jr. roughly a decade earlier than Miller-McLemore's usage of the concept. See: Archie Smith, Jr., *The Relational Self: Ethics & Therapy from a Black Church Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982).

Beyond this shift in its guiding metaphor, pastoral theology's widened scope of attention is more foundationally attributed to the inclusion of minoritized voices. Women and scholars of color challenged the field's psychological indebtedness because of the many ways psychological sources privileged white (male) cultural norms. A key aspect of these critiques also contributed to the emerging conception of human beings as relationally linked with communities and publics. Prior to Miller-McLemore's articulation of the "living human web" metaphor, Archie Smith, Jr. and Edward Wimberly had already challenged the field's exclusive focus on individual persons as the primary subject matter for pastoral theological reflection.[104] Archie Smith, Jr. is especially worth underscoring here. His work in *The Relational Self* not only brought the concerns of black churches to the fore – as did Wimberly's before him – but he also demonstrated an early critical engagement with social constructionist perspectives in pastoral theological reflection. Smith's conception of the "relational self" offered the field a way of engaging political issues of care with a lens that acknowledged the productive power of relating and understanding social identities.[105]

Hence, beyond a revised conception of human beings, the inclusion of previously silenced voices also brought new disciplinary perspectives that highlighted diverse cultural experiences that were often outside the scope of psychological disciplines. This development is significant because a central goal of pastoral theological method is to construct theologies of care that adequately represent concrete cultural experiences. Cultural representation, then, has increasingly become a central concern for pastoral theology's larger goals of attending to the

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[104] See: Archie Smith, *The Relational Self: Ethics & Therapy from a Black Church Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982). Also see: Wimberly, *Pastoral Care in the Black Church*.

[105] Smith's work provides a foundation for Playing the Game for both of these reasons. As is reflected throughout chapter three, my concept of relational performance relies on the foundation set forth by Smith's understanding of human relational existence. However, my commitment to engaging a unique variety of sources – particularly cultural criticism, as is seen in the next section – is also inspired by the way social constructionist perspectives help me under the constitutive productivity of both embodied and linguistic performances.

complexities of human suffering and its intention to transform our world for the better. I would further argue that underneath these developments has been a struggle to identify which sources will be taken seriously as legitimate conversation partners in pastoral theological method. Because constructive pastoral theologies begin in cultural experiences there is critical engagement with a variety of disciplinary sources that illuminate the particularities of persons in context.[106] This not only serves pastoral theology's methodological goal of developing a "thick" description of the contextual issues involved in human suffering, it also prioritizes the perspectives of those who suffer in the construction of theologies of care meant to address their pain.[107] Hence, pastoral theology is unique in the attention it pays to human suffering, its ability to analyze the contexts that inform such suffering, and its prioritization of the voices that can provide an experience-near representation of their suffering.[108]

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[106] Carroll A. Watkins Ali, *Survival & Liberation: Pastoral Theology in African American Context* (St. Louis, Mo: Chalice Press, 1999). Watkins Ali critiques the patriarchal and racist history of pastoral theology, and the field's allegiance to one of the founding fathers, Seward Hiltner. She highlights Hiltner's theoretical and experiential blind spots and challenges our field to be more attentive to how cultural experiences shape how we understand human suffering, the cognate disciplines informing such understanding, and the interventions necessary for redress.

[107] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures; Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). Geertz developed the concept of "thick description" as a way to describe his ethnographic approach, and the goal of gaining an in-depth understanding of the complexity of a culture in question. Pastoral theologians have incorporated Geertz ethnographic goals in their prioritization of developing a complex understanding of the cultural practices that represent communities of concern.

[108] Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "Also a Pastoral Theologian: In Pursuit of Dynamic Theology (Or: Meditations from a Recalcitrant Heart)," *Pastoral Psychology* 59, no. 6 (December 1, 2010): 813–28. Miller-McLemore argues that attention to human suffering and flourishing is a distinctive feature that sets pastoral theology apart from practical theology. Practical theology, for her, is more concerned with integrating human experiences and practice for the sake of making generalized claims. Insofar as this is its primary goal, practical theology does not pay as close attention to the particularities of suffering, or the more complicating details of the "web" of forces that inform such suffering. Also see: Miller-McClemore, *Christian Theology in Practice*, 2012. In her essay "The Living Web and the State of Pastoral Theology," Miller-McClemore presents a revised version of her landmark essay (1993) wherein she argued that the primary subject matter of pastoral theology should no longer be the individual. Rather, she proposed the "living human web," as a way of adjusting our vision to see the confluence of forces and identities that inform how a human person is situated in the world. Care, then, should account for the web in which a person exists, not merely the individual.

Embracing the Image of Cultural Critic

Pastoral theologians are cultural critics. Our socio-theological position situates us as scholars who are better able to engage sources in ways more traditionally located theorists are not positioned to do. Barbara McClure notes this unique position when arguing for the moral and ethical responsibility of pastoral practitioners to move beyond narrowly understood pastoral interventions, an argument that reflects the widened scope of attention mentioned previously. McClure argues that pastoral interventions, by nature of the field's more recent awareness of the sociopolitical aspects of human suffering, should embody more critical, public, and participatory modes of engagement.[109] Such engagement, however, requires interdisciplinary knowledge unique to the training of pastoral theologians. She suggests, "Pastoral caregivers and counselors stand in-between, at the intersections of multiple disciplines including (but not limited to) psychology, ethics, medicine, ministry, business, sociology, and anthropology."[110] Hence, for McClure, pastoral theologians are rightly understood as "those uniquely situated *between* disciplines," being better able to respond to human suffering with a complex awareness that might escape the purview of any one discipline.[111]

Yet despite this unique position, our field has largely overlooked cultural criticism as a source for theological reflection. Cultural Criticism is a discipline closely related to broader cultural studies, but with a more explicit focus on engaging popular culture as primary subject matter. bell hooks argues that this serious engagement with popular culture is a defining feature of cultural criticism, and that it distinguishes cultural criticism from other cultural studies such as Black Studies or Women's Studies. hooks further argues that cultural criticism's engagement

[109] McClure, *Moving beyond Individualism in Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 227ff.
[110] McClure, 225.
[111] McClure, 227.

with popular culture has revolutionary potential. She suggests that it is equipped to "decolonize minds and imaginations," and to potentially "move intellectuals both out of the academy and into the streets where our work can be shared with a larger audience."[112]

Beyond the prioritization of popular culture as primary subject matter, hooks also defines cultural criticism by its interdisciplinary impulse. She depicts it as kind of "messy" in that it goes against the grain of academic decency by transgressing disciplinary boundaries as is necessary depending on the questions being addressed.[113] Because of this interdisciplinary norm, Arthur Berger resists defining cultural criticism as a discipline at all. For him, it is something more:

> Cultural criticism is an activity, not a discipline per se, as I interpret things. That is, cultural critics apply the concepts and theories addressed in this book, in varying combinations and permutations, to the elite arts, popular culture, everyday life, and a host of related topics. *Cultural criticism is, I suggest, a multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, pandisciplinary, or metadisciplinary undertaking, and cultural critics come from, and use ideas from, a variety of disciplines*.[114] [my italics]

Whether a formal discipline or not, Berger and hooks agree that cultural criticism is useful for addressing questions from interdisciplinary perspectives. Whereas singularly focused disciplines fall short in highlighting the complexity of a particular cultural experience or generating a "thick" description of one's suffering, cultural criticism's interdisciplinary engagement positions it well for these kinds of research goals.

It is the transgressive quality of cultural criticism that I believe makes it ideal for a pastoral theological embrace. As mentioned briefly, pastoral theology has struggled in the past to identify a clear disciplinary identity. While internal debates about the scope of our work has been one primary reason for this, I believe that this confusion was also occasioned by attempts to

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[112] bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 4.
[113] hooks, 3–6.
[114] Arthur Asa Berger, *Cultural Criticism: A Primer of Key Concepts*, Foundations of Popular Culture, vol. 4 (Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications, 1995), 2.

embrace the interdisciplinary necessity of accomplishing our transformative goals.[115] If pastoral theology is to adequately address human suffering, then an integration of disciplinary perspectives that discloses the complexities of such suffering is necessary. The interdisciplinary nature of our field should not be cause for confusion. Rather, I suggest it places us in a position of scholarly advantage. Pastoral theologians are not bound by disciplinary restraints that require us to adhere to one particular set of rules. Rather, as Robert Dykstra suggests, we enjoy a certain "latitude of inquiry" that other disciplines do not have.[116] Hence, pastoral theology and cultural criticism share an interdisciplinary norm that could potentially make them great conversation partners.[117]

In addition to the utility of cultural criticism's interdisciplinary norm, I recommend it to pastoral theology for three interconnected reasons. First, cultural criticism can strengthen pastoral theology's attention to *voice* by granting access to previously marginalized populations of thinkers. As noted previously, the inclusion of previously silenced voices is a central aspect of contemporary pastoral theological method. Our field recognizes the benefits of local expertise and privileges the perspectives of those who can speak from their own cultural experiences. Cultural criticism, in its commitment to critically engaging popular culture as a legitimate source

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[115] Rodney J. Hunter, "The Future of Pastoral Theology," *Pastoral Psychology* 29, no. 1 (Fall 1980): 58–69. Scholars in the field debated about the extent to which pastoral theologians should appropriate individual and cultural detail in their theological constructions. One camp, following Don Browning, approached such detail with phenomenological intention. That is, their goal was generalizability for the sake of representing cultures based on points of shared experience. The other camp, those following Seward Hiltner, approached theological reflection in ways that cohered much more with case studies. Rather than seek generalized conclusions, they believed a focus on complexity and detail – a "thick description" – more accurately represented pastoral theology's attention to suffering and care.

[116] Taken from Nathan Carlin, "The Sayings of Jesus in Family Guy: A Pastoral Reading of 'I Dream of Jesus,'" *Pastoral Psychology* 61, no. 4 (August 1, 2012): 533–34. Carlin drew his inspiration from Dykstra's work, and a specific conversation Dykstra had with a colleague in another field. When a colleague expressed the unfairness of pastoral theologians getting to study whatever they "damn well please," Dykstra reflected on the statement by acknowledging that pastoral theologians do enjoy a "latitude of inquiry" unique to our field. The original citation is found in Robert Dykstra, *Discovering a Sermon: Personal Pastoral Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001).

[117] Though pastoral theology is defined by its latitude of inquiry, many pastoral theologians still privilege psychological disciplines as a primary conversation partner in seeking to understand human beings in context.

for reflection, pluralizes the voices that can speak on a given topic. hooks illustrates this while describing her collaborative reflection on a painting with young girls of color:

> We talk about the jet black color of their bodies and the bright red of the table next to them. Already they know about color caste, about the way dark black color makes one less desirable. Connecting all these pieces, we find a way to understand Jacob Lawrence, desire and passion in black life. *We practice culture criticism and feel the fun and excitement of learning in relation to living regular life, of using everything we already know to know more.*[118] [my italics]

Such is the democratic nature of cultural criticism. This approach to learning tears down the wall separating the "Ivory Tower" from common folks. It brings a given topic to the public square for all to analyze it. Only systematic theologians may know the details of Reinhold Niebuhr's conception of sin, but if we talk about "sin" in relation to a movie, or song, or significant current event that arises from cultural experiences, more voices can offer critical perspectives that could revise even the way renowned scholars understand Niebuhr. Cultural criticism is a tool that utilizes the language of everyday life to analyze and understand the ideas that find highfalutin expression in the "Ivory Tower." It grants access to *the people* by privileging their language and the cultural products they create.

Secondly, cultural criticism invites *critical engagement* with popular cultural sources in its analysis. While granting access to diverse voices helps us hear from those with local expertise, it is also important to recognize the limited nature of all perspectives. In other words, while one might honor the epistemological advantages of social location, one should also acknowledge the ways social location can also blind persons to other ways of seeing the complexity of their own circumstances. Critically analyzing the products that arise from particular cultural experiences allows us to scrutinize them from perspectives outside of the experience. In his critique of the assumption that there is an authentic African American cultural

[118] hooks, *Outlaw Culture*, 2.

experience, Michael Eric Dyson describes the utility of allowing black cultural experiences to be critically analyzed from those within *and* without:

> In broad compass, an oppositional African-American cultural criticism is concerned to examine the redemptive and unattractive features of African-American culture, to pass fair but critical judgment on a variety of cultural expressions and historic figures, from popular music to preaching, from black nationalist politics to the political economy of crack, from Jesse Jackson to Michael Jordan. It promotes the preservation of black culture's best features, the amelioration of its weakest parts, and the eradication of its worst traits.[119]

Dyson not only highlights the role of popular cultural sources in cultural criticism, but he also describes the critical lens through which such sources should be engaged. The public nature of cultural criticism's sources positions it well to invite critical analysis with diverse perspectives. Pastoral theologians have long demonstrated a commitment to such analysis and embracing cultural criticism (and its engagement with popular cultural sources) can help the field continue to develop this trajectory in potentially transformative ways.[120]

Thirdly, cultural criticism can help pastoral theologians take seriously the emerging commitment to doing the work of public theology and sociopolitical transformation. Miller-McLemore notes how pastoral theology's turn toward the public stems from two concurrent developments. On one hand, liberal theologians sought to address theological questions of belief that arose as awareness of religious plurality increased. The correlational method of theological reflection was developed, wherein Christian ideas were put into conversation with other beliefs and disciplinary claims. The impetus behind this development was in large part shaped by an attempt to keep Christianity – and its theologies – relevant amidst a world becoming increasingly

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[119] Michael Eric Dyson, *Reflecting Black: African-American Cultural Criticism*, American Culture, v. 9 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xxv.

[120] This critique is not meant to be all-encompassing. There are pastoral theologians who have engaged various sources creatively, and from whom I have learned much. Carrol Watkins-Ali, Greg Ellison, Edward Wimberly, to name a few. My point, however, is that – in as much as express our commitments to public theology, local expertise, criticality, and hearing the voices of the people – cultural criticism should be held engaged with the same rigor and regularity as we do psychology, sociology, and the like.

suspicious of any theories or religions presumed to have a monopoly on truth. Don Browning is credited for developing the revised correlational method in terms of pastoral theological reflection, and for most explicitly urging pastoral theologians to engage these conversations publicly.[121]

On the other hand, and more consistent with the trajectory of this project, liberation theological movements have shaped pastoral theology's increasing attention to public theological engagement. Rather than an "Ivory Tower" conversation about Christianity's relevance in relation to science or other religious beliefs, liberationists' push for theology to be done in public is motivated by the need to address social injustice theologically. Miller-McLemore notes the ways liberal theologians came under scrutiny for their elitism, which is highlighted by their inattention to the sociopolitical circumstances of those who were never invited into their correlational conversations in the first place.[122] The shift was also wrought by the early voices of African American pastoral theologians responding to the communal and public needs of black communities. As early as the late 1970s and early 1980s, African American pastoral theologians were already pushing for redefinition of the field's predominant conceptions of care.[123] For practices of care to more adequately address black suffering they needed to be conceived of communally because of the ways in which individual and communal pain was connected to systemic oppression. In other words, black pastoral theologians challenged the field to recognize

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[121] See: Don Browning, *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983); Browning, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies: A Critical Conversation in the Theory of Culture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987); Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

[122] Bonnie Miller-McLemore, "Pastoral Theology as Public Theology: Revolutions in the 'Fourth Area'" in Nancy J. Ramsay, ed. *Pastoral Care and Counseling: Redefining the Paradigms* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 47-50

[123] See: Edward P. Wimberly, *Pastoral Care in the Black Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979); Archie Smith, Jr., *The Relational Self: Ethics & Therapy from a Black Church Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982).

the communal and sociopolitical aspects of human suffering in opposition to conceptions that presumed problems to be internal to individuals.

More sustained engagement with cultural criticism can address both of the above trajectories within pastoral theology's emerging public orientation and can do so in a more democratic way. Cultural criticism encourages public conversations similar to the (liberal) prioritization of the correlational method, but ultimately changes the subject matter for debate. As mentioned previously, cultural criticism allows more persons and communities to have access to the content of conversation, allowing a diversity of perspectives to contribute critical insights that can fund transformation. However, this kind of engagement with more accessible sources moves past mere debate. It *performs* the kind of transformation that liberationist and pastoral theologies hope to achieve, precisely *because* of the democratization of conversation. Oppressive norms are often maintained by a failure to include the voices and bodies that become the objects of social policy. By democratizing the conversations that undergird what we think we know about the world – which extend to theories and the construction of policies – pastoral theologians can embody the kinds of transformation the field hopes to achieve, even while continuing to pursue such goals by offering proposals that call for revised policies and practices.

Finally, my recommendation for pastoral theologians to embrace cultural criticism in their analyses is informed by my own embodiment as a young black man. Since I was a child I have known where to look to find others like me; where to see representations of young black men; where to find myself, so to speak. I knew that if I looked to the sports world, I could see myself. I knew I could see myself represented in Hip-Hop, or John Singleton movies (among a

few others).[124] Fortunately, because I was raised in a middle-class family where athletic participation was the norm and attending college was expected, I was never tempted to look in places deemed "criminal" or illegal to see myself; though I knew I was there too. All my life I have been painfully aware that being an athlete or entertainer were the most viable options for me. Unfortunately, norms for young black male representation have not changed much. The normalcy of "positive" (yet still problematic) young black male representation continues to be uniquely found in athletics and popular culture.[125] Therefore, in addition to the qualitative voices that will guide this project, I analyze popular culture (as a cultural critic) in order to simultaneously problematize this norm for young black male representation while highlighting the visceral truths that these sources reveal about God, humanity, and being a young black man in America.[126]

Understanding my Contribution: Method and Methodology

This project fits within the pastoral theological trajectory that has widened its focus to include analyses of the historical, socioeconomic, and political origins of inequality, where interventions of care are also concerned with addressing the systemic dimensions of particular experiences of pain. As stated previously, the field seeks to pay unique attention to various forms of human suffering. Yet, pastoral theologians now increasingly recognize that human suffering is

[124] John Singleton is a filmmaker who has become known for writing and directing movies that depict the lives and struggles of young black men specifically, and African Americans more broadly. Some of his notable films that fit this category are: *Boyz n the Hood*, *Poetic Justice*, *Higher Learning*, and *Baby Boy*.
[125] To be sure, there are plenty young black men creating and contributing in other realms, but these representations are not easily found.
[126] I use "America" here as a nickname for the United States. This usage is not meant to privilege the United States as uniquely America, nor does it negate the significance of South and Central America. Rather, my choice to use this term is merely meant to resonate according to common parlance among those in this society.

always linked with broader cultural and political life. Pastoral theological analyses and proposals for care must also reflect this widened scope.

Methodologically, pastoral theology begins in the messiness of concrete cultural experience and human practice. It seeks to understand the particularities of pain by engaging the voices representative of the contexts in question, sources that arise from these contexts, and theories that help us interpret the norms of these contextual sources. This engagement helps pastoral theologians get a "thick description" of what exactly is going on, and how various aspects of life are linked in the form of suffering we hope to address.[127] There is, then, a mutually critical dialogue between existing theories and theologies, revising both where necessary to better represent contextual voices in the construction of new theologies that can better address forms of suffering unique to these particular voices. In this way, pastoral theological method shares similarities with liberation theologies that begin "from below" and eventuate in emancipatory praxis.[128]

The emancipatory praxis model of theological reflection is foundational to contemporary pastoral theology. While reflection continues to be important to pastoral theologians, our work is judged by the extent to which our proposals contribute to the liberation of persons and communities from. In other words, one key criterion for theological adequacy is found in the question, "Will it liberate?" Pastoral theologians Elaine Graham, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward suggest that the praxis method of reflection understands theology itself to be a kind of

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[127] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures; Selected Essays*. As noted earlier, Geertz developed the concept of "thick description" as a way to describe his ethnographic approach, and the goal of gaining an in-depth understanding of the complexity of a culture in question.

[128] "From below" is a phrase associated with liberation theology's method of beginning reflection in the cultural experiences of previously marginalized persons. It is an intentional challenge to the traditions of theological reflection that begin with more philosophical, and often confessional points of entry.

"performative knowledge," a way of knowing that is inseparable from doing.[129] Noting this method's specific links to Christian Marxism, Critical Theory, and the pedagogical work of Paulo Freire, Graham et. al. also highlight the extent to which emancipatory praxis relies on the (critical) collaborative participation of persons in context:

> Thus Freire's pedagogy needs to be seen as both the means toward, and the anticipation of, the new social order of justice and equality. There is an explicit link between literacy, empowerment and humanization. We might therefore locate the distinctiveness of his [Freire's] pedagogy as resting in a process of literacy, linking to knowledge, leading to agency, facilitating community development, resulting in collective work for social change. *Praxis* for him entailed a constant dialectic of experience and action with reflection and learning. Methodologically, he was committed to the permanent process of harnessing critical knowledge – acquired through reflection on experience – towards empowerment and change.[130]

The praxis method for theological reflection described above is central to the goals of this project. It is not enough for theological analysis to contribute to new ways of more clearly *seeing* the situations in which young black men are caught. Such situations demand redress. Therefore, praxis is necessary in as much as it urges pastoral theologians to take continued steps toward emancipation and justice rooted in critical reflection and empowerment.

Qualitative Frame: "Action" Research

As stated, I am utilizing "action" research as a qualitative frame to accomplish the methodological and transformative goals of this project. My project follows a similar trajectory as Greg Ellison's method for his engagement with young black men, albeit with different questions, methods, and conclusions. Ellison prioritizes research *with* young men as opposed to

[129] Elaine L. Graham, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward, eds., *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM Press, 2005), 170.
[130] Graham, Walton, and Ward, 184.

more traditional methods that do research *on* participants as *objects* of study.[131] This is a critical issue when researching with young black men because they are routinely silenced in myriad way. I similarly prioritize the importance of doing research "with" young black men in this project, even while engaging their "voices" in different ways.[132]

Practical theologians John Swinton and Harriet Mowat suggest that participatory research functions on the assumption that the best people to do research on a given topic are those with the most experience of it. They also note that participatory research is often meant to promote some kind of change and is often engaged in conjunction with action research.[133] I assume the two go together based on their underlying social constructionist underpinnings, which suggests that my reference to "action" research more deeply assumes a "participatory" nature.[134] Qualitative research methodologist Corinne Glesne argues that participatory action research is explicitly connected to Paulo Freire and the critical theory tradition, a mode of inquiry that includes consciousness raising as a primary strategy for social transformation.[135] This project is born at the intersection of these commitments, prioritizing research *with* young black athletes that is explicitly *action* oriented with a focus on consciousness raising related to issues affecting young black men more broadly.

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[131] Ellison, *Cut Dead but Still Alive*, 39. *Cut Dead* also moves in the direction of action research as a pastoral theological frame, seeking to produce change through collaborative engagement with young black men. Ellison examines the lives of young African American men through a series of case studies that use interviews to highlight their voices in relation to the themes of his project. Like the praxis model highlighted earlier, Ellison's use of this method is not only meant to collect data. Rather, it performs the transformation he has in mind by providing space for what he sees as the necessary introspection that pushes back against the experience of being silenced and not seen. The goal is to enliven the internal resources of these young men, as well as collecting the data necessary to revise theoretical and theological perspectives for changes in their communities.

[132] Ellison uses case studies to analyze the issues that affect the young men in his project. As I show later, I use a blend of interviews, a case for reflection, engagement with various aspects of popular culture, all of which I also integrate into the interviews for the sake of collaborative reflection. See: Ellison, 1–6, 39ff.

[133] John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 227–28.

[134] I explain this connection below.

[135] Corrine Glesne, *Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction*, 4th Edition (Boston: Pearson, 2010), 23.

The Complexity of "With"

There is no one way to engage (participatory) action research.[136] There are a variety of models meant to address a diversity of issues. However, one unifying theme among action researchers is the priority of researching "with" persons as the experts of their own experience as opposed to "on" (or "about") them as objects of an outsider's gaze.[137] This theme is central to the life of this project. Consistent with my pastoral theological commitments, the voices of young black men – inasmuch as they narrate their own complex experiences – are the primary content on which *Playing the Game* relies. The notion of "with," however, remains a complex political term that I want to unpack in order to clarify my use of it in this project.

On one hand, "with" refers to a key tenet in action research that signifies the shift I noted above; a revision that takes seriously the subjective expertise of every human being. More than replacing "object" with "subject," however – both of which some level of an outsider's gaze – this revision is often materialized by using the language of "co-researcher."[138] The deeper political commitment built within this shift is a critique of objectifying assumptions (and practices) that discount the voices of persons representing cultural experiences different from that of the researcher.[139] In other words, there is an element to this research method that centers the need to protect persons – usually representing historically marginalized communities – from being *used* as data that contributes to research purposes that may not have their best interest at heart. What previously functioned as acts of silencing – even in well-meaning situations –

[136] Reason and Bradbury note a "family of approaches" when reviewing the variety of ways scholars have used action research. See: Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury, eds., *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*, 2nd edition (London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2007), 7ff.
[137] Reason and Bradbury, 7–9.
[138] Reason and Bradbury, 8.
[139] Reason and Bradbury, 8–9, 15–30.

became a commitment to centering voices based on the deeper awareness that they can narrate their own experiences better than an outsider can capture without their input. In this project, I center the voices of young black men, as represented by current and former athletes because of their ability to speak to the duality of being criminalized and fetishized simultaneously. My emphasis on these "voices," however, also includes my own.

On the other hand, then, "with" also functions in this project as a way of acknowledging its autobiographical element in connection with the young men who participated. Herein lies another layer of complexity in this qualitative approach. By nature of my being the primary researcher in this project, there will always be a level of separation between myself and my co-researchers. Regardless of my level of transparency with them, the extent to which their insights have shaped the themes of this project, or how much they agree with its conclusions – all of which are true in our work together – my name alone will be acknowledged when one inquires about the "author" of *Playing the Game*. At the same time, I consider the men in this project to be my peers, both from prior relationships and by nature of the bond we share as black athletes with unique stories to tell.

This complexity is often mitigated in action research projects by conducting multiple interviews with participants throughout the entirety of the research process. This strategy is grounded by the intent to include voices so as to ensure honesty and an egalitarian approach to the final project.[140] In this project, as I detail later in this chapter, I have instead chosen to curate a composite picture of the complexities herein by drawing on a number of sources that variously represent the voices of young black male athletes. To be sure, one of these methods is with interviews. However, I also draw from other sources that – alongside the interview data – help to

[140] Honoring the authenticity of my co-researchers' voices and perspectives is something I take seriously. However, I ensure this using other means that I describe later in this chapter.

develop a complex representation of the issues in question. To further curate this picture, I invited my co-researchers to tell parts of their stories by reflecting on the specific content represented in the other sources used. This blended approach allowed me to think with my co-researchers about our collective stories in relation to other perspectives outside the immediacy of our conversations.

The Priority of "Action"

The other distinguishing feature in action research that is central to this project is its explicit orientation toward social transformation. Action research prioritizes practical engagement as the logical end to its interpretative work. Culminating in transformative praxis is a defining feature that distinguishes it from other approaches to research. One cannot say they are doing action research if the goal is merely to contribute to the existing world of theories and theologies. Rather, the priority of participation in the process of social change is vital to all variations of this research method(ology). This project unfortunately does not include a specific practical component that is written into the final report and carried out in a formal sense. While my co-researchers and I began this study with explicit transformational intentions, and while we do plan to engage practical strategies for responding to the invitation I issue in chapter six, I have chosen not to include a formal action component for political reasons.

As I describe later in this chapter, several of my co-researchers are still competing professionally on a variety of teams. They are each under contracts with teams and agents, which complicates the kinds of publicity they can have (without potential consequences to their livelihoods).[141] Additionally, as will be seen throughout this work, several of them exhibit

[141] The situation surrounding Colin Kaepernick being ousted from the NFL comes to mind and was a discussion point in several of the interviews I conducted. While I am confident that some of the young men who participated in

sustained critical reflection on the racial politics in their sport; a few of them outright criticize, justifiably, the executive leadership of their respective teams. Given the potential ramifications of having their names associated with critiques of their organizations, I have chosen to keep any action-oriented projects we collaborate on separate from the work of this project. I use pseudonyms throughout this project as an additional level of protection for their identities (and careers).

Despite this (practical) omission, I have still chosen to frame this project as a form of action research. Beyond its explicitly action-oriented intent, I framed my work this way by nature of its deeper philosophical connection to social constructionist thought. Contemporary constructionist theory lives at the convergence of critical theory, rhetorical (and linguistic) analysis, and claims for the social and relational nature of knowledge.[142] These independent but overlapping theoretical perspectives, in their own way, challenge notions of research that assume a positivist posture toward the world.[143] By integrating the insights of these disciplines, social constructionist thought has developed an approach to research that recognizes its political, relational, and inherently productive nature. Social constructionists assume that the process of knowledge production is just that: a relational process whereby knowledge is *produced* in relation to existing political systems and norms of social practice. There is no neutrality.

Yet, it is constructionism's broader orientation toward the world that informs my decision to frame this work in terms of action research. Social constructionists approach (the topic of) reality differently. Whereas positivists assume reality to be a fixed realm in relation to which all

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this project would have been willing to risk their livelihoods in order to speak truth to power, I did not want to dictate that possibility for them collectively.

[142] Reason and Bradbury, *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research*, 160–64.

[143] Positivism refers to approaches to research that are based on assumptions of scientific neutrality, "objectivity" in research, and a view of knowledge as something that can be achieved apart from values rather than something produced politically. See: Reason and Bradbury, 164–67.

humans live (and learn), constructionists conceive of "reality" as something that is produced based on the political and relational synergism of persons in context and the (worlds of) meaning they bring to relationships, research, and life itself. This orientation toward "reality" reveals a deeper connection to action research that informs the foundation, framework, and the way this project *performs*.[144] Social psychologists Kenneth and Mary Gergen locate the kinship between social constructionism and action research not only by the ways they each assume knowledge to be something produced, but also based on the deeper conviction that such productivity alters the realities of those involved in the research process. Though they nuance this acknowledgement with a caveat that guards against conflating the respective agendas of these two approaches, I see an inevitability in this kinship that should be underscored.[145]

Regardless of the ways they may be shaped by different methods, arguments, or theoretical conclusions, action research and social constructionism are concerned with reality-making. Considering their commitment to the production of knowledge in a political world, plus the assumption that the research process itself produces changes in participants' realities, one can argue that both of these approaches to research assume a transformative posture toward reality. This insight is vital for this project, particularly in lieu of my ability to write collaborative strategies for practical engagement into it. *Playing the Game* is grounded explicitly in constructionist thought, which is intentional to accomplishing its goals. As noted briefly, and as I explain more fully later, consciousness raising in relation to the complexities of young black men's issues is a primary goal. This goal, however, is not just accomplished by making claims that lead to transformative efforts. Rather, my intention is also that this project *performs* this goal

[144] As will be seen in the next chapter and throughout the remainder of this work, the idea of performance as a productive mechanism through which reality is produced is a lynchpin that holds this project together.
[145] Reason and Bradbury, *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research*, 159–60.

with the intention of awakening readers to previously hidden aspects of the dehumanization of young black men. In other words, this work plays out[146] the process of remaking reality in what it says *and* what it does.

Beyond the dual focus on the complexity of "with" and the priority of "action" in my research methodology, action research aligns well with my pastoral theological commitment to understanding the complexity of human suffering in cultural contexts. This approach to research also provides a way to do theological reflection with the goal of emancipatory praxis. Within this broader research frame, there are three more specific methodological commitments worth noting that further ground my research methods: standpoint epistemology, critical theory, and my commitment to having a "trustworthy" study.[147] In the following section I describe each of these methodological commitments and highlight their usefulness for my work with young black men.

Standpoint Epistemology

Standpoint epistemology prioritizes local expertise. It assumes that persons in particular contexts are the best resources from which to learn about their lives. Standpoint epistemology challenges enlightenment ideas that presume an ability to learn *about* another in *objective* ways. Rather, standpoint epistemologies assume knowledge is best constructed from the unique social location of those with first-hand cultural experience; that there is an advantage to having a standpoint as an insider. Early conceptions of standpoint epistemology assumed the

[146] I use this phrase intentionally to refer to the definition-specific productivity of "performance." More on this in chapter three.

[147] Pastoral theologians remain committed to the significance of social location in understanding one's perspective. Human beings are shaped by our social identities, which are always situated in particular cultural contexts that occasion and limit what we can see. Various lenses within critical theory (race, gender, class, intersectionality, etc.) are useful in our field given our attention to human suffering and our hope for emancipatory praxis. Critical theory's method of change also complements nicely the limitations often associated with one's social location. I describe this more below.

advantageous nature of standpoints arose from one's essence (i.e. women knew best about women's experiences by nature of their being women). Yet, increasing awareness of intragroup diversity (i.e. the variety of cultural experiences within the group called "women"), plus postmodern critiques of "truth" and "reality," urged standpoint theorists to revise their understandings.[148]

Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins has been a significant voice in these revisions. She has demonstrated the ways black women are simultaneously insiders and outsiders in relation to feminist discourse, and how their social position grants them a unique perspective on the politics of knowledge.[149] Following black feminist revisions, and postmodern critiques, Caroline Ramazanoglu and Janet Holland note attention to the relations of power and knowledge as one key characteristic of contemporary standpoint theories. This approach sees commonality in shared experience, but not in the sense that persons share an essence. Rather, standpoint is more critically grounded as an advantageous perspective that arises from shared experiences based on where one is located socially in relation to existing power dynamics. For example, though young black men are not a monolith, there are shared cultural experiences among them in terms of their social positioning in the U.S.

Standpoint epistemology will be important for this project for two reasons. First, it echoes my pastoral theological commitment for prioritizing the voices and sources of young black men.[150] It privileges their local expertise and seeks to learn about their experiences from

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[148] Caroline Ramazanoglu and Janet Holland, *Feminist Methodology: Challenges and Choices* (London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage, 2002), 63ff.

[149] Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," in *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research*, edited by Mary Margaret Fonow and Judith A. Cook (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 35–59.

[150] Prioritizing young black male voices is crucial because – as Greg Ellison has helped us realize – we are regularly muted. Hence, the very process of highlighting their voices will contribute to their empowerment and liberation, even while the product of research attempts to do the same.

the unique social position they occupy.[151] More importantly, it accomplishes this on their own terms. Hence, attention will be given to sources endemic to their experience, as they deem significant, and will potentially critique other theories used in the project. Secondly, standpoint epistemology informs my involvement in this research. As a young black man who has participated in collegiate athletics and endured some of the racialized mistreatment many of my co-researchers have experienced, I have a perspective to offer this project. Additionally, I am familiar with significations and colloquial ways of communicating shared by many young black men, which positions me as one who can interpret and translate the depth and complexity of meaning in the perspectives my co-researchers share. While this project is not autobiographical in the formal sense, there is an autobiographical element that I hope will strengthen it.[152] However, by nature of my position as the primary researcher, and the fact that I have not competed in competitive team sports for a decade, I remain – to some extent – an outsider. My status as an outsider, however, will make it easier to maintain critical distance from the subject matter and can enhance my attention to theories that might help illuminate young black male experiences where closeness to this experience may inhibit.

Critical Theory

While standpoint epistemology reflects my commitment to understanding the local expertise of young black men, my commitment to critical theory would seemingly contradict

[151] Ramazanoglu and Holland, *Feminist Methodology*, 126. Ramazanoglu and Holland speak of women's unique knowledge of gendered social relations as an example of the potential for new knowledge arising from the social position of women. Young black men not only occupy a unique gendered social position, but it is also informed by the unique racial history in the U.S. Hence, being young, black, and male in the U.S. represents a social position only young black men can disclose with insider perspectives.

[152] Glesne, *Becoming Qualitative Researchers*, 23. Glesne notes these advantages, particularly when used in participatory action research. She suggests that insiders can develop a collaborative mode of collecting data, and of working together for social transformation.

this. One key feature of critical theory that I find useful is its assumption of the limited nature of human agency. Critical theory's ability to contribute to liberation hinges on its capacity for "conscientization," which describes the process of "consciousness raising" with persons caught in normalized cycles of oppression.[153] Following social constructionist claims, critical theory also recognizes the limited, and political nature of all knowledge. Critical theorist Stephen Brookfield notes Michel Foucault's influence on critical theory in this way:

> According to Foucault knowledge is socially produced by a number of connected mechanisms. He writes that there is "an administration of knowledge, a politics of knowledge, relations of power which pass via knowledge" all of which combine to label some knowledge as legitimate, some as unreliable. These mechanisms determine how knowledge is accumulated by prescribing correct procedures for observing, researching, and recording data and for disseminating the results of investigations. Such mechanisms of knowledge production are really control devices, and those with the greatest command of them are able to create dominant discourses and regimes of truth (two terms very much associated with Foucault).[154]

This project assumes this conception of knowledge and believes all knowledge to be constructed out of the creative engagement between social location and information. Hence, young black male voices have something unique to contribute to what we know about the world, race, and masculinity, regardless of what dominant cultural ideologies would suggest.

However, in referring back to the limited nature of knowledge, and the need for conscientization, this project also assumes that young black men – and all human beings – are continuously in need of being awakened to realities our social locations may prevent us from seeing. All perspectives are limited in some sense, and therefore require the challenging work of

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[153] Stephen Brookfield, *The Power of Critical Theory: Liberating Adult Learning and Teaching*, 1st ed, Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005). Brookfield describes the ways in which persons are often caught in patterns of relating that become normalized, and are then taken for granted as just the way things are. Central to Marxist critiques, and eventually critical theories more broadly, is a recognition of the necessity of education to empower persons to work toward their own liberation. "Conscientization" is a concept coined by Paulo Freire (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1970), and refers to the process of raising critical consciousness of the oppressed so they can first recognize their own oppression, and eventually discover their agency for change.

[154] Brookfield, 136. Brookfield takes a piece of this directly from Foucault. See: Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, 1972-1977 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 69.

critical theory to help persons recognize previously hidden angles of vision. In this way, my commitment to critical theory in this project will be held in tension with my commitment to the local expertise of young black men.

Trustworthiness

As a way of doing a project that seeks to be ethical in its attention to the various politics of qualitative research, I will follow guidelines that ensure my project is "trustworthy." "Trustworthiness" refers to a way of maintaining rigor in qualitative projects.[155] This term was substituted for "validity" used in quantitative work, as well as assumptions of truth and generalizability found in the natural sciences.[156] Rather than the criterion of *validity*, *reliability*, and *generalizability* found in quantitative work, trustworthiness appeals to *credibility*, *auditability*, and *fittingness*.[157] While I find these terms generally helpful, they do not do justice to my view of how political the research process is at every stage. Therefore, I will instead use the terms *politics of representation*, *politics of transparency*, and *politics of relevance*.

Politics of representation, like credibility, relies on a complex understanding of the research participants and their circumstances – or, "thick description" as referenced previously. Further, it seeks to ensure that the data collected resonates with the research participants in a way that they feel accurately represents their experiences. This is particularly important in my work with young black men because of the extent to which they are routinely misrepresented and spoken for, rather than heard. One of the ways I prevent this from happening is with "participant

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[155] Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills, Calif: Sage Publications, 1985).
[156] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 121ff. Swinton and Mowat do note how this remains a subject of debate even among qualitative researchers. Some continue to use "validity," while others do not. I situated this project with the latter. Appeals to "validity," for me, are fraught with baggage from the sciences. "Trustworthiness" serves the purposes of my research while making explicit my decision to resist assumptions I find problematic.
[157] Swinton and Mowat, 115–17.

validation."[158] All data and significant interpretations were returned to the participants for validation before being published. However, rather than just taking this step at the end of the research process, I made it a habit of checking in with them regularly throughout the entirety of our work together. I shared my findings with them in ongoing dialogical ways and invited them to read specific sections where they were quoted to give them a chance to revise anything I used from their perspectives.[159]

Politics of transparency is similar to politics of representation but refers to the level to which my work will be held accountable by others who are involved but may not be research participants. This primarily includes my dissertation committee, and others who may be more informally engaged with me throughout the process (i.e. mentors, editors, etc.).[160] I will encourage these persons to maintain a critical posture toward collected data and my interpretations of it, and to regularly ask questions that will press me when necessary. The goal of this strategy is to ensure my own accountability to my research participants, but to do so by including others who have different angles of vision than those participating; to maintain checks and balances to my work.

Politics of relevance will be the most difficult to assess but is perhaps the most important. My commitment to the politics of relevance is to make sure that the results of the study resonate with the participants, as well as the broader situation they are in. I want to make sure that my research data both resonates with their unique experiences and that it is also relevant to the goals of this project. Again, since this project will be participatory in nature, my co-researchers will be

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[158] Swinton and Mowat, 123.
[159] John Creswell uses the term "member checking" to describe this strategy for ongoing feedback. See: John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 3rd ed (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2013), 252.
[160] It is important to note that the identities of my co-researchers will be protected through the use of pseudonyms. Maintaining their confidentiality is of utmost importance in this project.

involved in the conversation throughout the process. Yet, since this project is explicitly action-oriented, part of its relevance will be found in its ability to produce change. This will need to be assessed in an ongoing way, which means part of this project's adherence to the politics of relevance will only be realized through hindsight reflection. Hence, the question that undergirds this strategy of trustworthiness, and for the project more broadly, is, "Will it liberate?"

Research Protocol

This project relied primarily on data collected through in-person and Facetime interviews with current and recently retired young black male athletes. My goal was to recruit between four and eight voluntary collegiate and/or professional athletes involved in competitive team sports.[161] To further narrow my sample, I focused exclusively on perspectives from within football and basketball as the relevant competitive sports to draw from.[162] I recruited research participants primarily through my existing network of collegiate and professional athletes. As a former competitive athlete at the collegiate level, I have remained in contact with current and former

[161] Brian Pronger defines competitive team sports based on those that are uniquely constructed around the absolute goal of defeating an opponent, where a larger organizational body is closely tied to team success. He also defines them by the ways in which they are uniquely constructed around patriarchal heteronormative sexual and gender norms. Pronger reads competitive sport through the lenses of sexuality and desire to illustrate the socially constructed nature of competitive team sports. He also seeks to illustrate how patriarchy functions as an essential foundation on which these sports are built. He uses the sexual metaphors of penetration and protecting one's anus to argue that the link between forceful penetration and winning reveals the thoroughly patriarchal nature of competitive team sports. I have also chosen these two sports because they are the only competitive team sports where the majority of participants are young black men. This creates a homosocial environment among young black men that provides a sense of belonging. See: Brian Pronger, "Outta My Endzone," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 23, no. 4 (November 1, 1999): 373–89.

[162] In addition to competitive team sports, I will also limit my investigation to those sports where African American males are the majority of participants. Studies show that in 2012 African American males made up 66% of players in the NFL, and 78% in the NBA. Because of the regularity of young black men in the NBA and the NFL, as well as on collegiate football and basketball teams, younger boys who aspire to athletic success often focus primarily on these sports as potential avenues for success. The NBA and NFL are also the only two team sports that regularly market black male bodies as one of their primary recruiting tools, and merchandise selling points. Because this project is concerned with the ways black male bodies are treated as commodities without humanity, focusing on the NBA and NFL in this way will provide the most advantageous way to highlight the themes of this study. See: "2012 Racial Breakdown of Major, U.S. Professional Sports by Ryan Shollar - Infogram," accessed December 21, 2017, https://infogram.com/2012-racial-breakdown-of-major-us-professional-sports-1g8djp9o0xykpyw.

athletes who could offer valuable perspectives to this work. This network was also useful for enlisting the help of my peers to recruit other potential participants. However, because football and basketball have such demanding in- and out-of-season schedules at both the collegiate and professional levels, this project features engagement with young black male voices found in other second-hand sources. Therefore, I also collected data from significant public interviews, commentaries, and the like to supplement the gaps left by whatever in-person/facetime interviews I was not able to secure.

Working with Athletes (purposeful sampling)

My immediate focus for data collection is with young black male athletes. Why athletes? A major goal of this project is to uncover the ways in which young black men are seen as inhuman, evinced through lenses of sub- and super-humanity. I want to expose the ways society has failed to recognize our humanities by inviting young black men to reflect on experiences of being feared based on historical tropes, while also being fetishized based on presumptions of extraordinary physical (and athletic) abilities. Young black athletes have a unique closeness to this dual experience. They are black men in public, which – due to contemporary recapitulations of historical stereotypes – often renders them "sub-human," leaving them vulnerable to the ramifications of racial profiling, unjust and brutally violent policing, assumptions of criminality, etc. Yet they also occupy a unique social position where presumptions of physical and athletic prowess have at times afforded them a kind of "super-human" status most young men do not experience. Hence, young black athletes can uniquely reflect on the experience of being both marginalized based on racist assumptions of subhuman existence and valued based on assumptions of exceptional talent (read: the economic and entertaining utility of their bodies).

Interview Protocol

I facilitated one (recorded) in-depth interview with each participant that lasted between 45 minutes and an hour and a half. The interviews include three parts and were guided only insofar as my questions reflected attention to the themes of this project.[163] First, I gather demographic information that helps to provide a profile of each participant's background, years of involvement in sport, and the level to which sport has functioned for them as a primary means of social (and economic) mobility. I wanted to get a sense of how invested each of them was in needing to "make it" in sport as a means to stability for their selves and their families. The second part of the interviews are dedicated to gathering data from each participant about their experiences of sub- and super-humanity, respectively. I provided some additional context about my investigation into the "positive" and negative aspects of "beast" at the onset of the interviews, which was a focus I communicated with them during the consent stage of this process. This way of examining "beast" seemed to resonate with them collectively because it shed light on an aspect of their mistreatment that is usually hidden because they are deemed "successful." They were collectively energized to name the ways they continued to deal with racism as black men, despite the amount of "positive" attention they received because they were – to some degree – celebrities.

There were no official follow-up interviews in this project. However, my co-researchers and I began our collaborative conversations with the intention that we would continue to imagine (and potentially work) together on future projects related to raising public awareness to the issues

[163] It is important to note that while I came to this project with ideas about certain themes, the interviews shaped, deepened, and revised these themes throughout the process. What shows up in the final (published) work reflects these changes.

we discussed in our interviews. Therefore, several of them took me up on my offer to contact me if they had any emerging thoughts or new ideas related to their interviews. We also created a group text message thread (and occasional Facetime) that has become a kind of ongoing forum for us to continue our conversations about these issues. These subsequent conversations were not recorded. However, they have further validated the themes of this project, which I experience as an affirmation its goals and attention. In other words, it is clear that this work continues to resonate with my co-researchers, which remains a priority for me as the primary researcher.

This project was born out of my own reflection on common interactions I have had with peers in the sports world, some of whom participated in this project. In this way, the very questions I came to this project with represented an awareness that young black athletes have about the image of "beast." Hence, I fully expected each participant to be familiar with the uses and meaning of this image in enough detail to offer rich perspectives on the issues embedded within, particularly as they have shown up in each of their experiences.[164] After providing this context, I invited each participant to reflect on experiences they may have had where they felt they were treated as *sub-human*. I also invited their reflections on experiences of being treated as super-human based on their athletic talent and participation. Finally, I invited them to reflect on possible connections they see between the image of "beast" and significant masculine norms they found to be operative – and potentially formative – in their respective sport. This final aspect of the interview confirmed my sense that there is a connection between hegemonic masculine norms and (required) performances built within "beast" that are necessary for success in their sport.[165]

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[164] For example, racial politics in sport, the normalcy of commodification, and the like are all realities athletes often ignore out of the necessity to protect one's participation (read: livelihood).

[165] As a component of my commitment to conducting a trustworthy study, and to ensure I am representing my co-researchers' responses fairly, "member checking" and "negative case analysis" were built into all of the interviews I

Starting Lineup: The Men I Interviewed

I interviewed five athletes in this study: Deshawn, Greg, Jimmy, Bilal, and Osiris.[166] At the time of the interviews, Deshawn had already retired after a short stint in the NFL. Currently, he is a teacher and coach at the middle school level. Greg was on "IR"[167] in the NFL during our interview and was contemplating whether he would attempt a return to full participation, or if he would pursue a career in film. He ultimately decided the latter and has already directed several award-winning short films. Osiris was playing in a new professional football league, the Alliance of American Football (AAFL), at the time of our interview, after having been cut by his NFL team due to injury. Like, Deshawn, he is coaching and teaching and has a heart for working with younger athletes whose circumstances pose a threat to their futures. Jimmy and Bilal are both currently still playing in the NFL. Jimmy has experienced some injuries, which has resulted in his being traded a few times in the last few years. At the time of our interview, he was still with the original team that drafted him, with hopes of making a career there. He has since made a connection between his decision to kneel in solidarity with the Colin Kaepernick protest of police brutality and being traded amid "concerns about his injury." Bilal has a similar story. He too was traded to another team (coincidently) right after he decided to join the protest. Bilal has

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conducted. Corrine Glesne describes "member checking" as a way to provide interview transcripts, analytical thoughts, and/or drafts of the final report to participants to make sure they agree with the way they are being represented. She describes "negative case analysis" as a "conscious search for negative cases and unconfirming evidence so that you can refine your working hypothesis." See: Glesne, *Becoming Qualitative Researchers*, 49. I came to this project with a hunch that my co-researchers would identify with the central theme of "beast." Our conversations before, during, and after our interviews confirmed this hunch. However, the other significant themes of the project – and my scope of theoretical attention – were shaped by the content of our conversations and my own autobiographical reflection.

[166] I used pseudonyms to protect their identities, which is especially important in this case due to the high-profile nature of their professions. Given the topics we discussed, there could be consequences similar to what Colin Kaepernick experienced if my co-researchers' names were associated with much of what this project highlights.

[167] "IR" stands for injured reserve. It is a status that holds a player's participation on the team until they can rehab and return to full participation.

seemingly found a home with a team that is more welcoming to his commitment to humanitarian issues, particularly those that involve raising public consciousness about issues affecting other black men.

This project is my attempt to allow these young men to tell a significant part of their stories, which is also a big part of my own story. More importantly, though, the purpose is to allow our stories to disrupt the narrative America continues to tell itself: that young black men are not human, and therefore dispensable. Disrupting this narrative, as I argue throughout this project, is a crucial step in reconstituting the routine ways young black men are seen, and (mis)treated. Each of my co-researchers shared this concern. They were critically aware of the ways they were misread as "thugs," "dumb (black) jocks," or "beasts." They shared stories about thei experiences of being profiled and pulled over by the police. They spoke to the ways students at their respective colleges interacted with them on the presumption that there were only there *because* they were athletes. They even told horrific stories about the depth of commodification that takes place in the NFL, an insight that challenges societal tendencies to appeal to the image of "rich black athlete" as a rationale for denying the persistence of systemic (and economic) racism in this country. Their stories are rich, complex, and revolutionary. And they are human.

Engaging Popular Culture

In addition to interviews, this project relies on data collected through my own critical engagement with popular cultural sources that variously represent young black male experiences. In keeping with my argument for the usefulness of cultural criticism in pastoral theology, I prioritized popular cultural sources that complement the voices of those young men participating in the project. These sources include films and music, public interviews and documentaries. The

materials focused both on black athletes and young black male experiences more broadly. I used these second-hand sources as dialogical content in my interviews to invite responses in relation to this project's specific themes. My engagement with popular cultural sources also shaped the language of this project. I drew on significant phrases, meanings, and norms from these sources, and my interviews, as a way to simultaneously prioritize the language used by young black men and demonstrating the depth of meaning in such language.[168] This method is a way of performing my commitment to young black male voices by requiring academic and public audiences to orient themselves, at least in part, to some of the linguistic norms of the young black men represented in this project.[169]

Learning from "Beast Mode": Marshawn Lynch as a case for reflection

Another important strategy in my research method is my (case) analysis of Marshawn Lynch, an NFL superstar on whom the themes of this project uniquely converge. Lynch epitomizes both the appeal and problematic (racial) nature of "beast." He was nicknamed "Beast Mode" because of his dominance as a running back in the NFL and subsequently became the

[168] Colloquialisms have the potential to offer depth and complexity to many ideas found in academic circles. However, because young black men's language is often not understood on its own terms, the underlying meaning of significant phrases and critiques is often missed. Therefore, one of my tangential goals in this project is to disrupt academic jargon by utilizing significant phrases and meaning offered by my co-researchers and considering theories and theological perspectives on the grounds set by such language. In other words, I want to make sense of the theories and theologies that shape this project in relation to broader themes dictated by my co-researchers.

[169] This strategy builds on Greg Ellison's work in *Cut Dead but Still Alive*. Ellison's emphasis on the extent to which young black men are unseen and unheard successfully captures what I too believe to be true about the ways young black men are seen problematically and denied opportunities to speak. Our language is often assumed to reflect illiteracy, which bolsters stereotypes of young black male ignorance. Evidence of this can be seen when persons exhibit shock when talking to a young black man who is "so articulate." These ignorant comments reveal an expectation that black men – by nature – are ignorant. Such comments also reveal the extent to which broader standards of literacy have been constructed around white cultural norms, which further illustrates the ways white privilege (and assumptions of supremacy) plays out linguistically. By privileging young black male language, I am performing my methodological commitment to the highlighting the value of young black men's voices (on their own terms).

face of "beast" amid the Seattle Seahawks' playoff successes.[170] While "beast" was already a common term used by athletes at the time,[171] Lynch's persona as "Beast Mode" popularized the image in ways that made it something (marketable) to aspire to.[172] Despite all Lynch's success, however, his (mis)treatment amid his protest of the media and the National Anthem reveals complexities of race and class that disclose both the commodifying and dehumanizing nature of this image when associated with young black men. I use Lynch as a case for reflection because of its usefulness for explicating the complex ways in which the themes of this project converge on young black athletes. However, reflecting on Lynch's situation also illustrates how the synergism of racism, the (political) culture of sport, neoliberalism, and societal ways of seeing reproduce stereotypes about the presumed nature of young black men more broadly.

Interrogating "Beast"

To focus attention on both the sub- and super-human aspects of the assumptions of inhumanity that are written onto young black men, I invited my co-researchers to reflect on the common use of the term "beast" in their social and professional spaces. My analysis of "beast" is vital to the entirety of this work. "Beast" has become common parlance in the realm of athletics (and outside of sports) to describe a higher level of dominance in one's performance. Watching any competitive football or basketball game, one will almost certainly hear the phrase, "He's a beast!" This phrase refers to athletic prowess built on a deeper assumption of extraordinary (i.e. "God-given") talent. It is used widely in sport, even when referencing dominant performances in

[170] Lynch was actually given this nickname in high school, but it became a household name during his stint with the Seattle Seahawks.
[171] I can remember the regularity of this term when I was playing football in college. However, I also remember how much more pronounced it became once Lynch's persona as "Beast Mode" started getting marketed after the Seahawks' success while Lynch was on the team.
[172] I develop this argument in chapter five.

women's sports.[173] The problem, as I demonstrate, is that this trope has historical baggage that is continuously performed into reality in contemporary contexts; and it is uniquely associated with black athletes.[174] Despite the fact that this image is often used as a compliment, when associated with young black athletes it reproduces assumptions associated with black male inhumanity that serve as justifications for our mistreatment.

Analyzing "beast," then, also offers me a way to explore the connection between "positive" uses of this trope "on-the-field" and its negative consequences "off-the-field." This is central to this project for two primary reasons. First, making this connection helps me illustrate the inherently destructive nature of "praising" (read: fetishizing) black men in other-than-humanly terms. More specifically, I highlight how America's pornographic consumption of black male physicality – being presumptively big, strong, and overpowering – contributes to societal fear based on presumptions that we pose a (physical) threat to society. Secondly, this connection helps me demonstrate the extent to which neoliberalism in American society rationalizes the suffering of young black men by casting the "positive" aspects of "beast" (i.e. riches, fame, etc as evidence of post-raciality, which further masks the ongoing production of dehumanization.

My attention to "beast" is also informed by my desire to focus on the role of masculinity in this project. Beyond the associations of this trope with the sexualized racism imposed on black male bodies, I demonstrate that there are also hegemonic masculine norms embedded in its contemporary use. To be a "beast" is a goal in the realm of competitive sport because it means

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[173] I have heard tennis star Serena Williams called a "beast" on a few different occasions. Interestingly, there is likely still a unique racial component between black female and white female athletes. This question is outside of the scope of this project.

[174] This was an unforeseen connection my co-researchers and I made during our interviews. I came to this study with the hypothesis that the consequences of "beast" uniquely targeted young black men. I did not realize, however, the extent to which even the ascription of "beast" was uniquely held out for black athletes. Despite the occasional way in which white athletes are called "beast," the impulse to ascribe this title is unique to references of black athletes.

one has achieved a status that affords a sense of security and other socioeconomic benefits.[175] Presumably, such status is accomplished through overt physical and mental dominance over one's opponent, where the exertion of force (and violence) is praised as "manly." A key part of my interviews, then, assesses the extent to which my co-researchers associate this trope with such masculine norms. The goal here is to examine the level to which performing hegemonic masculine norms is a necessary means to success in their respective sports. By exploring this aspect of "beast," I was also inviting my co-researchers to reflect on the potential consequences of performing masculinity in these ways, particularly for black men.[176]

Language

Before noting the delimitations of this project, I want to mention a few important notes on language:

"Their"/ "our"

As previously mentioned, this project has an autobiographical element to it that is central to its claims and its goals. As the primary researcher, I recognize the level of separation I have with my co-researchers. At the same time, however, the themes we are considering hit home very personally for me. Therefore, I regularly go back and forth between my use of "their" and "our," and other variations of such, as I make arguments, explore concepts, and provide examples of how this trope affects young black men's lives. My involvement in this project also shapes how I have chosen to represent some of the visceral, emotional, and problematic aspects of what my

[175] For college athletes this entails certainty of having one's school paid for, the safety of one's position, and the like. For professional athletes this means financial assurance that one will be "set for life," and will be able to take care of one's family. It also ensures a lengthy career, barring injury.

[176] For many young black men athletic success is about more than fame or money. It is a means of survival. It is often perceived – I think rightfully so in many cases – as the only way out of circumstances that literally threaten one's existence.

co-researchers and I uncover. Hence, there are uses of profanity at points throughout. This is intentional and meant to represent the honesty of my conversations with the participants, my own way of relating to these ideas, and the seriousness with which I hope readers will consider these insights.

"Reality"

Central to this project is also a critique of the way persons typically understand the nature of culture, systems, and "reality" in the United States.[177] I perform this project's social constructionist underpinnings by challenging assumptions that "culture," "society," and social systems exist as apriori and ahistorical "realities" that are too often taken for granted. In other words, I resist the tendency to assume that "reality" just is. Rather, I argue that cultures, societies, and the notion of "reality" more broadly are ongoing products born from relational performances that happen in routines.[178] Hence, I play on the language of "reality" throughout, using it with quotations at some points and leaving them off in other instances. I have tried to be intentional with each use as a way to problematize these concepts, while at the same time demonstrating their relatedness. My hope is that my intentional use of language in this way performs the very ideas I argue in this project.

"Young" Black Men

I could have framed this work around the concerns of "black men" more generally, but I have chosen to qualify this group with "young" intentionally. There is a different level of threat

[177] I am constantly reminded in everyday conversations of the extent to which many people assume reality's existence as something presumably "out there." Persons speak of "reality" as a fixed realm within which they exist, as opposed to something wholly constructed based on routine ways of performing in relation. It is my contention that continuing to think this way, particularly as the idea of race gets cast similarly, will prevent persons from taking their own participation in the re-creation of problematic realities seriously enough to revise their performance.
[178] I propose "relational performance" as a lens for interpreting in chapter 3, expounding on the consequences it reveals throughout chapters 4, 5, and 6.

that is assumed among young black men. While "beast" is sometimes ascribed to black athletes even at the elementary school level – which in itself points to a broader issue that should be explored in other works – it is rare that older black men are given this status. To be sure, black men across the lifespan are uniquely targeted in a variety of racist ways in this country. My emphasis on "young" does not downplay this. However, by focusing on young black men ages 15-35, I am also trying to treat the depth and complexity of the cultural onslaught that targets a group of men who are simultaneously infantilized as "boys," while assumed to be mature enough to be sexual predators, physically threatening, and the like.[179] The whole range of stereotypical ways in which we are dehumanized culminates in the ways "beast" is uniquely inscribed on those of us who are young enough to be an imminent threat, while old enough to be held responsible for such.

Delimitations

While this project addresses the depth and complexity of one significant aspect of young black male suffering, there are a few delimitations worth noting. First, the narrow scope of my project leaves room for research into social spaces outside the realm of competitive sport where the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality converge on young black men. For instance, a larger project could also consider constructions of masculinity, race, class, and sexuality in the culture of Hip-Hop in relation to problematic tropes. To challenge the pigeonholing of young black men in realms of sport and entertainment more generally, projects that focus on young black male participation in education, business, medicine, etc. could also highlight significant aspects of young black male experiences that are outside the scope of this project. This

[179] This is also the age range that represents the only population in the United States for whom homicide continues to be the leading cause of mortality. More on this in chapter four.

delimitation is further grounded by the fact that young black men and their experiences are diverse, complex, and certainly not monolithic. A variety of young black male voices from a myriad of social spaces will increasingly add complexity and value to similar projects that incorporate a broader array of curiosities and investigative research questions that lead to rich discoveries. I hope other researchers will continue to explore such projects.

Secondly, this project focuses primarily on hegemony as a specific domain of power that creates, maintains, and exacerbates young black male suffering via the image of "beast."[180] Other projects could consider how analyses of structural, disciplinary, or interpersonal domains might shed light on young black men's circumstances.[181] While I do highlight specific aspects of these domains, and their entanglement, I focus on hegemony as a specific way of understanding the effects "beast." Certainly, these domains of power are not mutually exclusive. To the contrary, they work together to create complex suffering for marginalized populations based on constructed social identities. Focusing narrowly on the function of one, however, allows its functioning to be considered with depth in ways that could reveal other potential interventions of care for pastoral theologians. For example, a project that focuses on hegemony occasions strategies that deal with images and narratives as avenues for resistance and change. A study in the structural domain could address specific policies that create suffering in the criminal justice system, prison industrial complex, etc. While I do highlight specific aspects of these domains, and their entanglement, my emphasis on "beast" as a hegemonic production is intentional.

My methodological approach points to a final limitation of this study. Beyond interviews with young black men, and critical reflection on my own involvement with this culture,

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[180] Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

[181] These categories are in keeping with my decision to ground "beast" in terms her engagement with "hegemony" as a domain of power. For a fuller description of how Hill Collins understands these categories, see chapter 12 in *Black Feminist Thought*.

ethnographic research into particular communities and subcultures could reveal other data that could unearth new themes worth considering. I have chosen to prioritize interviews because of my pastoral theological commitment to privileging concrete cultural experience – as revealed by persons situated in such experiences – as a primary source. However, other aspect of these experiences could also be highlighted through observation, journaling, and immersion in particular communities where other questions are being investigated. Ethnographic research could also be useful when reading the embodied performances of young black men in homo-social spaces in which they participate. While these methods are not necessary for answering the questions that I am raising in this project, they would certainly add value to larger projects that include them.

Limitations

One limitation to this study is that all the research participants are football players. There were two current NBA players who agreed to participate, but an injury and other off-season responsibilities prevented them from taking part in the project. Consequently, there are no first-hand accounts from the perspective of basketball players in relation to the themes of this project. I made attempts to supplement this void by drawing on commentary from sports talk shows, interviews, and other second and third-hand perspectives, but this project would have been strengthened by more variety of athletic perspectives.

Chapter 3

The Makings of "Beast": Relational Performance and the Production of Selves and Society

In the previous chapter, I described the uniqueness of pastoral theological attention to human suffering and the field's explicit orientation toward redress. Central to this task is a method of theological reflection that better represents specific human needs by attending to the particularities of (persons in) cultural contexts and learning from suffering in ways that evince possibilities for care. More critical threads of pastoral theology within this general methodological frame include the trajectory of pastoral theologians who engage this method in order to redefine and redeploy care in ways that address its sociopolitical dimensions.[182] In this sense, pastoral theological reflection – particularly its emerging "public" trajectory – begins from "below"[183] and eventuates in a variety of care interventions that better address contextual needs.[184] In as much as the field has broadened its scope of attention, "care" remains the primary reason for pastoral theology's existence. Better understanding how to care for suffering persons-in-context is the primary motivation for pastoral theological reflection. The meaning of "care," however, cannot be understood until one has an understanding of *who* one is caring for. Understanding the depth and complexity of human existence is a first-order task in constructing pastoral theological conceptions of care. From a disciplinary perspective, pastoral theology is

[182] This thread of public pastoral theology has contributed to a broadening understanding of "care" since the late 20th century and continues to develop. This project fits well within this trajectory. For a description of some of the key shifts that occasioned what is now a fairly mature "public" focus, see: Ramsay, *Pastoral Care and Counseling*.
[183] This phrase refers to Latin American and Black liberationist methods for theological reflection that begin "from below" as a way to prioritize the theological value of context and communities (of color) as a primary source of theological reflection.
[184] Pastoral theological method is unique in that it prioritizes the contextuality and complexity of human suffering. There is specific attention paid to developing a thick understanding of persons in context, which recommends strategies of care that better attend to previously hidden aspects of suffering (i.e. the ways racism or other forms of sociopolitical oppression manifest in "personal" ways but get expressed as something "internal.").

significantly shaped by various theories and theologies that highlight important aspects of what it means to be human.

The purpose of this chapter is to continue this trajectory of (theological) anthropological analysis and to propose a way of seeing (human experience) that more fully discloses the extent to which young black men are *caught* in the United States. I propose *relational performance* as a theoretical lens through which pastoral theologians can better understand the persistence (and consequences) of societal assumptions that young black men are not human. Relational performance builds on the pastoral theological trajectory of understanding the relational nature of human beings as a way to more critically ground analyses of the sociopolitical, cultural, and theological aspects of particular forms of suffering. In this case, the suffering I am concerned with is the continued foreclosure of young black men's lives. More specifically, relational performance will demonstrate how the historical image of "beast" continues to justify the *containment* and *crucifixion* of young black men, while also exposing the celebration of their bodies (via sport) as a *commodified* valuation that further reproduces the very image that undergirds such dehumanization. In addition to this specific goal, relational performance can also account for the extent to which racial politics today reflect colonial politics and the ways such politics are reproduced through constitutive cultural performances that construct reality around historically racist norms.

Relationality: A (Black) Pastoral Theological Trajectory

There has been an evolution in the way pastoral theologians have understood human existence, which in turn has informed a broadening definition of care that more intentionally embraces sociopolitical analyses and practice. A common way of noting this shift in pastoral

theology is by holding the works of Anton Boisen and Bonnie Miller-McLemore in tension as two pastoral theologians whose proposals held definitional weight in the development of the field. Boisen's image of the "living human document" was revolutionary in its time because it was one of the first (officially acknowledged) times human beings were cast as a primary source for theological reflection. Rather than simply impose presumed theological truths onto persons dealing with psychiatric struggles, Boisen prioritized those struggles as the stuff from which theological insights could be realized. As revolutionary as Boisen's view was in its time, however, it arose from assumptions that mental interiority existed separate from cultural experience.[185] This way of understanding the self invigorated a view of individual persons that was primarily informed by psychological disciplines. Miller-McLemore challenged this traditional focus on the (psychological) individual. She proposed a way of understanding human beings not only as individual "documents" to be read, but also as existing in a "web" of relations.[186] This perspective became a new guiding metaphor in pastoral theology and has remained a primary way for contemporary pastoral theologians to understand human existence.

Alongside these developments – and in some ways, prior to them – there was a tradition of African American pastoral theology wherein communal understandings of human selves were already an existing norm.[187] Black pastoral theologians as early as 1979 were considering theologies and practices of care that addressed politics of race and class within black communities, doing so with a focus on how black communities (rather than just individuals) could most effectively care for themselves.[188] These considerations were occasioned by the field

[185] Boisen's view was not necessarily that the (internal) self was unaffected by cultural life, but rather that its existence and development emerged – at best – in relation to cultural life. There was no assumption that the self, both internal and external, were constructed out of the mutuality of "internal" and "external" realities.
[186] See chapter one in: Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering a Discipline* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2012).
[187] See chapter two.
[188] See: Wimberly, *Pastoral Care in the Black Church*.

of the field's failure to consider how traditional models of care overlooked the political concerns of black communities, which effectively impeded African and African American persons from receiving the kinds of care they needed.[189] More specifically, the idea of human beings existing in a relational "web" was introduced before Miller-McLemore's writing by Archie Smith, Jr., an African American pastoral theologian responding to explicitly political concerns in relation to care in the Black Church.[190] While his work is situated broadly in the trajectory of African American pastoral theology, it is unique in that it moved beyond merely a communal understanding of human beings to analyzing the concept of relationality in particular. Smith's work accentuates the explicitly political nature of human existence in ways that – when also considering performance – can uncover new ways to understand the complexity of young black male suffering.

Understanding (the politics of) Relationality

The basic claim of relationality is that the human self is fundamentally social, coming into being through interactive relational processes that involve persons in their relational and cultural context. Archie Smith Jr. is one of the earliest and most helpful pastoral theological voices to highlight this view of human beings. In *The Relational Self: Ethics & Therapy from a Black Church Perspective*, Smith shifted pastoral theological attention away from understanding human beings as autonomous, independent, and ultimately *possessing* a self from birth.[191] This

[189] On one hand, caring practices were structured around whiteness in a way that reserved therapies for those who fit certain racial and economic norms. On the other hand, this structure presented "care" in a way that did not address the political nature of black suffering. Beyond the practicality of receiving existing forms of care, then, "care" itself was construed in grossly incomplete ways that – even if received by African Americans – would not adequately address the kinds of suffering blacks were experiencing. Hence, new definitions of care were in order.
[190] Archie Smith, *The Relational Self: Ethics & Therapy from a Black Church Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 56ff.
[191] Smith, *The Relational Self*.

view, which was at the time the prevailing (psychological) understanding of human beings, assumed that individual persons possessed the capacity to develop naturally into healthy selves as long as there were no significant disruptions to the process.[192] While there may have been awareness of interpersonal engagement, it was assumed that relationships functioned only to occasion the "actualization of innate endowments and latent possibilities" in becoming a self.[193] In other words, interactive relations were not assumed to be necessary or constitutive to one's identity as a human being.

It is important to note that the view of the self that Smith was resisting followed a (psychological) trajectory wherein the terrain on which the process for becoming a self was assumed to be completely internal to individual persons. This turn inward began with Sigmund Freuds revolutionary challenge of the Enlightenment confidence in rationality. Rather than assume one could master their contextual environments and subdue nature, or even one's own body, Freud argued that the human self contended with internal forces that were shaped by one's early familial experiences and were beyond one's conscious (read: rational) control. Freud's id, ego, superego not only disrupted the rational sensibilities by illustrating just how out of control persons were, but more importantly shifted the focus of human selves internal.[194]

The trajectory set by Freud eventually took on a more optimistic view of the internal reality of human selves, culminating in Carl Rogers' humanistic approach.[195] This understanding

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[192] McClure, *Moving beyond Individualism in Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 92–93.
[193] Smith, *The Relational Self*, 57.
[194] Anthony Elliott, *Psychoanalytic Theory: An Introduction*, Third edition (London: Palgrave, 2015). Elliot's presentation of Freud is helpful for understanding the cultural and political context in which his writings should be understood. The revolutionary quality of Freud's proposals is best seen when situating his work this way. However, one can also see how he continued to be bound by his context; as evidenced by the fact that – despite critiquing the commitment to rationality – the ultimate goal of the ego's negotiations was rationality. Also see: Peter Gay, *The Freud Reader* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989), 628-660.
[195] McClure, *Moving beyond Individualism in Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 88–94. McClure offers a nice summary of the historical developments related to this trajectory, with a particular focus on pastoral care's engagement with social scientific approaches to therapy.

reflected the deeper assumptions highlighted above – that, if not interrupted, persons would develop naturally into healthy selves, regardless of broader political realities. Hence, therapeutic approaches in the Rogerian tradition sought to help person's *realize* their own potential in a way that would presumably unlock their inherent ability to self-actualize in the world.[196] While this view moved away from the focus on inner turmoil that Freud presented, the terrain of the self's development ultimately remained internal. Smith challenged this view by recasting the terrain for the self's development in thoroughly social terms. His goal was to help pastoral theologians take seriously the ways "psychological reality and social structure" were linked in the constitution (and suffering) of human beings, namely that of African Americans. Hence, he centered the relational process *as the terrain* out of which the self is constructed, which better addresses the connection between sociopolitical realities and personal experiences of suffering that traditional therapies (i.e. person-centered approaches) often missed. Resisting "modern liberal interpretations," then, was the crux of Smith's critique, which occasioned his proposal for a thoroughly relational view:

> My position, by contrast, seeks to establish the social, historical, contextual, and, hence, the relational character of the self. The notion of sociality or the underlying relatedness of reality is the web which is the primary constitutive condition out of which social and personal reality emerges, and it thus becomes the basis for critical reflection. The idea is that reality is fundamentally interrelated and social and perspectival or plural in character, and it is ever differentiating and evolving. It is this idea that sets the tone for exploring the connections between the self, therapy, and Christian social ethics.[197]

For Smith, human selves emerge relationally based on social interactions in interpersonal, cultural, and societal contexts. No person or self exists independent of their relational context.

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[196] Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America*, 259ff.
[197] Smith, 57–58.

Rather, Smith argues that every human being is an ever-evolving product, born of their interactions with their world.[198]

Smith's analysis of role-taking is a central aspect of his proposal that I find helpful for this project. While demonstrating the extent to which human beings are fundamentally social, and reflexive, Smith argues that self-consciousness is a product of taking on the perspectives of others. He wanted to demonstrate how thoroughly shaped by role taking human beings were:

> By taking the role of others, the agent is able to transcend his or her own standpoint and come back to himself or herself. This capacity for reflexive thought, memory, and imagination is the basis for the development of self-conscious selfhood. The self that returns to itself in imagination and through the response of another is not exactly the same self that originated the act. In other words, the self not only unfolds and differentiates in experience, it may also become a more universal self as it acts and reflects upon its relations with others and integrates the past with the present. The self evolves through discourse and continuous activity and reflection in the process of role taking.[199]

Smith is suggesting here that the ability to imagine and play the role of another is central in the process of becoming a self. Because selves are products of communicative relations, he argues, engaging with others has the effect of shaping all involved. In other words, persons are formed via relating and communicating. Smith's analysis about the ways the human self emerges socially as result of communication, interaction, and role-taking provides a theoretical backdrop to what I will later argue are the deeper cultural consequences for young black men who are recruited into playing roles based on presumptions of their inhumanity.

Reclaiming Smith's contribution, pastoral theologian Barbara McClure takes the concept of relationality to its logical end in her proposal for a more socially adequate theological anthropology. In *Moving Beyond Individualism in Pastoral Care and Counseling,* McClure

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[198] Smith grounded his perspective in George Herbert Mead's work, *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), namely Mead's analysis of the "I" and the "Me" and the ways the self is born out of relational process of communicating and role-taking.

[199] Smith, *The Relational Self*, 62.

critiques what she sees as a persistent theoretical commitment among pastoral theologians to conceptions of human selves that reproduce an underlying self vs. society worldview. The persistence of this worldview, McClure argues, reveals two contradictory trends in pastoral theological thought. On one hand, it highlights the ways pastoral theologians have tried to better attend to society's role in human lives, particularly related to the ways social norms inform human suffering. In this sense, McClure acknowledges pastoral theological attempts at moving toward relational understandings of human beings. On the other hand, however, pitting selves against society ultimately reveals the ways even well-meaning attempts at a relational turn in pastoral theology reproduce a view of human beings as individual; affected by, but ultimately separate from, society.[200]

Seeking to take the development of selves as an interplay of person and society seriously, McClure proposes a theological anthropology that understands human beings to exist in "synergistic" relationships with one another, the world, and God:

> By synergistic I mean the interactive, cooperative, and mutually-changing engagement of persons and other persons as well as persons and their sociocultural environments. This is a theological anthropology that understands developing persons as significant agents in their own development, changing and being changed by the world around them in a process that incorporates integration and rejection, struggle, support and reinforcement, and co-creative achievement.[201]

McClure further depicts the human person as coming into being as a result of the accumulation of relational experiences, where one's uniqueness is a product of increasing layers of complex socialization, not some pre-discursive internal essence.[202] She argues that the self one experiences as "true" is only such because it is the self that is approved (and authorized) by those

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[200] Barbara J. McClure, *Moving beyond Individualism in Pastoral Care and Counseling: Reflections on Theory, Theology and Practice* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 181–86.
[201] McClure, 187.
[202] McClure, 187ff, 200–201.

in one's relational and cultural context. Hence, she posits a radically social self that brings sociopolitical reality and the "innermost" parts of human beings together.[203]

McClure's commitment to highlighting the co-creativity of a person and their social context is ultimately what distinguishes her concept of synergism from previous pastoral theological theories of relationality. Expounding on the person-society relationship, she says:

> …a synergistic relationship between selves and their environments is one in which something new is constantly being created in the reciprocal relationships that structure human interaction and activity and sociocultural contexts. Indeed, selves take shape within the sociocultural systems and the interpersonal relationships they help generate and sustain. The "self" is the new dimension created in this mutual, synergistic exchange. (Similarly, "society" is the result of ongoing exchanges between persons and the historically-informed existing structures.)[204]

Whereas the self vs. society motif allows cultural critics to single out systems and social norms as the unilateral progenitors of oppression, viewing selves and society in synergistic cooperation implicates all who participate. It disrupts the idea of "the system" as a thing and instead renders it an ongoing product of interdependent human relating. The logic of synergism is fundamentally relational, then, because it links all participants together in a web of human activity that is simultaneously shaped by, and constitutive of, social norms, systems, and reality as we know it.

The synergistic nature of relationality, however, should not be misconstrued to assume all who participate do so equally. Asymmetries of power are insinuated in every social relation. One example that is especially relevant to this project can be seen when considering the politics of race and relationality. Preferring the language of a "dialogical dance," pastoral theologian Cedric Johnson highlights the relationality of race that relates to selves in contemporary African

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[203] McClure, 196–199. A unique feature of McClure's argument is that she demonstrates how human emotions – and even the somatic aspects of such – are in large part products of culture and society. Space does not allow me to incorporate this part of her argument, but persons interested in her line of thinking should look into this. See Barbara J. McClure, *Emotions: Problems and Promise for Human Flourishing* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019), chapter 6.

[204] McClure, 190–91.

American contexts. He argues that, in a neoliberal age, black identities are born from a "transaction" between "black subjects shaped by the human psyche, mediating spaces, and market driven structures and discourses, even as these structures and discourses are transformed by struggling and resisting black subjects.[205]

Though Johnson does not use the specific language of relationality, his perspective reflects McClure's awareness of the mutuality of persons and society. Specific to the racial experiences of black Americans, however, Johnson deals critically with the extent to which white supremacist discourses and racist capitalist practices function as the relational milieu out of which black identities are formed. While acknowledging that these forces do not overdetermine or presume the existence of an essentialist black identity, Johnson is also clear that racial politics do create a unique material struggle with which every black American must contend. Hence, "synergism" related more specifically to black Americans should be understood as a political reality wherein white supremacist discourse functions as a primary voice in the relational dialogue out of which black selves emerge.

Code Switching: A Hint at Performance

One especially helpful aspect of Johnson's engagement with the relationality of racial politics is his focus on the *intentionality* of black identity development. Black subjects do not only engage and emerge differently because of racial politics, but they also do so strategically as a way to survive. Johnson's presentation of "code switching" illustrates this point well:

> The ability of African Americans to navigate multiple identity commitments in a matrix of market-driven systems in the neoliberal age is often referred to as *code switching*. Here, various identifications can emerge—various configurations of black subjectivity, various degrees of self-consciousness in relationship to political, economic, cultural, and

[205] Cedric C. Johnson, *Race, Religion, and Resilience in the Neoliberal Age* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 56.

> social behaviors, and practices. Code switching signifies that in the neoliberal age, black subjects are composed of multiple "selves" positioned in relation to the different "worlds" they encounter.[206]

I highlight the idea of code switching because it illustrates two crucial points. First, it underscores the idea that *selves* are constantly being articulated intentionally, relationally and politically. There is no fixed self, per se. Rather, human beings are multilayered, with identities that can be accentuated differently according to what a situation calls for. In other words, human beings are adept at performing their selves based on relational and political norms they must negotiate in particular contexts. Persons essentially *put on* different (aspects of their) selves pragmatically, at times even without conscious awareness of doing so. To some, this idea of putting on selves in different situations may seem disingenuous. When considered in the context of African Americans trying to survive, however, I suggest that it reveals the ways political constraint calls forth the creative capacities of human beings to survive. Code switching – and its political necessity – reveals the slippage in any presumptive claim that there is such a thing as an "authentic" self.[207]

Secondly, code switching underscores the agential aspect of relational human existence. This point may seem obvious but claiming that human beings exist relationally in a "synergistic" world can begin to sound like persons are caught in a loop that is beyond their control; that the trajectory of who they can become is, in a sense, (over)determined (solely) by circumstance. This would especially be the case when the focus is on the peculiar existence of blacks living under multiple forms of oppression. Code switching, however, highlights the existence of agency even for those who seem to be without political power. To intentionally employ aspects of one's self in strategic ways to accomplish necessary ends means one is always – to some degree –

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[206] Johnson, 64.
[207] I will come back to this later in this chapter.

agential.[208] Johnson does acknowledge that there are differing levels of consciousness revealed in code switching, which suggests various levels of agency. Agency exists, nonetheless, and can be empowered for the sake of subversion and resistance.[209] Johnson's attention to the racial politics of relationality, and specifically his description of the intentionally of code switching, provides a bridge to another aspect of (black) human existence I want to highlight: performance.

Performance: The Missing Piece to the Puzzle

Performance is an underdeveloped thread that weaves throughout pastoral theological understandings of relationality. I want to tease out this thread and develop it in a way that foregrounds the centrality of performance in the constitution of selves *and* societies. To varying degrees, performance is found in each of the previously named conceptions of relationality. While Archie Smith does not name performance explicitly, he assumes its function when analyzing human agency. He suggests, "Relationality implies that the agency of the self, the "I" as a conscious center of activity and creativity, of unity and power can be recognized."[210] The assumption in Smith's analysis is that human beings are the performing actors at the center of their relational formation. McClure's awareness of performance is more explicit, though she refers to it as "habits and practices."[211] Despite existing in a synergistic web of relationality, McClure recognizes that a person's habitual enactments disclose their participation in the larger web. In other words, she alludes to the function of ritual performance as the vehicle through which persons participate in the formation of their selves.

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[208] I more fully highlight the complexity of agency in young black men in chapter five.
[209] This idea will be developed more in chapter six.
[210] Smith, *The Relational Self*, 63.
[211] McClure, *Moving beyond Individualism in Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 192–93.

I have already mentioned how Johnson's analysis of code switching alludes to performance, but the importance of this insight should not be overlooked. Johnson sees black identity development as necessarily intentional *because* of the racist relational milieu out of which black selves emerge. Code switching, or *performing* different selves situationally, functions in many ways that are politically necessary. Whether one is interviewing for a job, entertaining guests at a party, or simply trying to display a positive attitude after a bad day, persons regularly "put on" (read: perform) according to situational need. In this sense, code switching is a common form of role play in which we all engage. Performance is far more common and central to human life than is often acknowledged, particularly for those whose lives depend on strategic embodiments.[212] However, this kind of intentional performance takes on a different importance for a young black man who is being pulled over by the police. Fearing for his life, a black man must present the most non-threatening self possible – despite the kind of day he may have had – in order to increase his chances of returning home to loved ones.

Performance: A Commonplace Phenomenon

Performance, as I have conceptually linked it with relationality, is the mechanism through which human beings relate to themselves, others, and the world. It is the participatory aspect of relational human existence. While relationality describes the *nature* of human existence as a web of synergistic relating, performance highlights the ways these relations are *nurtured*; the "how" of human relationality. On the surface, I define performance quite simply as the act of doing:

[212] There are other pastoral theologians who have dealt variously with theories of performance, namely performativity. For example, Elaine Graham in *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* and William Roozeboom in *Neuroplasticity, Performativity, and Clergy Wellness: Neighbor Love as Self Care* (see note 30). However, performance theory more broadly has not been treated in pastoral theology. My analysis of performance will draw on Judith Butler's theory of performativity, but ultimately will deal with performance theory proper.

accomplishing a task or executing an action. This broad definition captures what are seemingly the most menial tasks of human activity: walking, bending one's arm, sitting, talking, etc. Each of these actions is a kind of performance in that they accomplish some specific task toward some predetermined – or hoped for – end. We are all performers, whether knowingly or not. We are each constantly engaged in acts of doing. Even when we believe ourselves to be doing nothing, there are performances going on in our minds and our bodies.[213] The reality of performance is fundamental to human existence.

On a deeper level, my attention to performance is meant to highlight human participation in the synergistic formation of selves and society; *the parts we play* in the ongoing construction of reality. As noted previously, a synergistic anthropology conceives of the social origins of human constitution.[214] It suggests that we are formed as human beings in a complex web of human and societal interdependence. Performance is the vehicle by which a person's relational enactments form their selves *and* their world. The etymology of "perform" points to this deeper reality. The word stems from the French "per," which means "completely," and "fornir," which connotes "to provide" or "furnish."[215] The connotation of the word in its original – and contemporary, if considered critically – usage suggests something that is brought to fruition, completely. On the surface this could refer back to the menial performances named in the previous section; simply accomplishing a task. However, in this project performance understood this way also refers to the ways our enactments "bring to fruition" our selves and society.

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[213] Our cellular activity, thoughts, and all that constitutes our makeup is in motion, constitutively, with the continued remaking of our being. One could argue that "performance" is occurring even at the cellular level. I will develop this more in chapter six when dealing with "equilibrium."

[214] McClure, *Moving beyond Individualism in Pastoral Care and Counseling*, chapter five.

[215] "Perform | Origin and Meaning of Perform by Online Etymology Dictionary," accessed September 6, 2018, https://www.etymonline.com/word/perform.

Performance, however, should not be understood in a vacuum. Rather all performance is culturally rooted and relationally linked. Developmental theorist Barbara Rogoff is helpful here. She uses the concept of "cultural participation" to describe the way in which human development happens in mutually formative ways with others and one's cultural environment. Rogoff critiques developmental theories that suggest human beings develop according to universal laws arising from biology. Rather, she argues that human development is thoroughly cultural. She writes, "In my view, human development is a process in which people transform through their ongoing participation in cultural activities, which in turn contribute to changes in their cultural communities across generations."[216] The similarity between Rogoff's claim and the foregoing analysis of relationality are stark. Her analysis reflects McClure's concept of synergism and what Cedric Johnson's awareness of the dialogical transaction between black subjects and neoliberal society. In other words, human beings and the cultures in which we participate exist in a mutually constructive way based on an underlying relational impulse. Rogoff understands human development to be the result of personal and cultural interaction. Her view is rooted in the assumption that human beings are "biologically cultural" and that we are all "born with a self-regulating strategy for acquiring knowledge by human negotiation and co-operative action," which is essential for survival.[217] In other words, human beings are born ready to perform, culturally, and such cultural performances facilitate our development as a means of survival.[218]

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[216] Barbara Rogoff, *The Cultural Nature of Human Development* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 37.
[217] Rogoff, 68.
[218] Rogoff provides an example of a culture where children as young as three years old are adept at wielding machetes as a common cultural practice that contributes to farming and other agricultural necessity…

Performance Theory: A Peek Behind the Curtain of "Reality"

Performance theory is an underused tool for analyzing the constitution of human selves (and societies) in pastoral theology. When pastoral theologians *have* turned to performance theory, they typically have engaged Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity as a way to disclose the constitutive nature of performance.[219] And while Butler's work related to gender is *a* theory of performance, performance theory (proper) is broader. A key distinction is in order. Butler's theory of performativity prioritizes *discourse* in its analyses of performance. This approach renders (gender) identity a social construction that is largely the product of discourse, held in place by social and cultural norms that effectively *script* human performances.[220] Butler's work is helpful in the way it reveals how ideologies and sociopolitical norms are inscribed, then normalized via the performances they recruit (read: require).[221] Though Butler does not engage race, this insight is important for considering the ways assumptions of inhumanity are written onto black bodies and played out publicly. Yet, (the performance of) black bodies – and the societal (mis)treatment visiting them – cannot be understood only by discourse.[222] Therefore, my

[219] See: Elaine L. Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1996); William D. Roozeboom, *Neuroplasticity, Performativity, and Clergy Wellness: Neighbor Love as Self Care* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), to name just a few pastoral theologians who are doing similar work.
[220] I refer to the theme of "scripts" throughout this project but develop it more fully in the next two chapters.
[221] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). In this landmark text, Butler conceives of gender as an ongoing production based on constitutive performances that take place in rigid regulatory cultural, political, and ideological contexts. Butler's description of gender as "performative" means gender becomes "real" through the effects of repeat performances. Butler's critical attention to the ways politics seeks to shape human performance, and thereby human (gendered) selves, is helpful for highlighting the synergism of laws and norms with the formation of human identities. In this way her argument also reflects McClure's attention to the synergistic relationality of selves and society. Seeking to fill in the gaps left by this work, Butler does give more treatment to the body in *Bodies that Matter* (1993, 2011). Despite this move, I still find it more helpful for this project to engage performance theory and its explicit focus on roles and the body.
[222] It is noteworthy that Butler's later work takes up the issue of materiality in relation to discourse. After being challenged for the ways her analysis of discourse seemed to miss the reality of material bodies, Butler published *Bodies the Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (2011) as a way to fill in the gaps on her working theory of performativity.

engagement with performance theory focuses on its broader range in order to examine the material aspects of (performing) bodies in addition to discursive (analyses of) performances.

Performance theory can be understood as an umbrella category that includes theories of performativity, but also analyzes theater, sports, and everyday performances.[223] It is a broad theoretical approach that discloses the normalcy of performance in everyday life as well as performances that are more easily bracketed off from everydayness (i.e. theatrical performances, athletic competitions, etc.). In this sense, performance theory helps me challenge the boundary between the supposed "fantasy" of performing on stage and the presumed "reality" of performing the mundane.[224] I have chosen to engage performance theory in this broader sense because it uniquely discloses how the creation and maintenance of "beast" (as *played out* on black men's bodies) is an ongoing product born from the confluence of these various types of performance; how "beast" is performed into existence on film, on stages, in sport, in discourse, and through relational interactions in daily life. Additionally, examining performance theory beyond a specific focus on discourse helps me analyze the role of black men's bodies – both as performing and a performance – in the production of "beast." Understanding the complexity of this trope and its consequences requires an integrative study of performance that highlights the ways formal fantastical performances and routine performances alike participate in the re-creation of an image used to dehumanize young black men. Beyond this particular focus on young black men, however, performance theory – particularly when considered alongside other relational theories of selfhood – can help pastoral theologians better understand how human selves and cultural realities "come to fruition" via performance.[225]

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[223] Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 2nd ed (New York: Routledge, 2006).
[224] I develop these notions of "fantasy" and "reality" with respect to performance later in this chapter and in chapter six.
[225] "Come to fruition" is a specific way of defining performance that I will describe later in this section.

Performing Roles: Playing Out (the Politics of) Relational Existence

Performance theory offers a way of engaging public life through the lens of theater, which sheds unique light on the normalcy of role playing in everyday life. In this sense performance theory gives a peek behind the proverbial curtain of reality, revealing the ways our relational existence can be seen as a production dependent on relationally linked cultural performances. Beyond this attention to the normalcy of roles, performance theory can also help pastoral theologians better understand the constitutive nature of roles via an analysis of "play" and "ritual." Recalling Archie Smith's analysis of "role-taking" is instructive here.

Smith is aware of the constitutive possibilities in taking the role of another. He focuses on human reflexivity as the enabling factor that allows persons to take on other roles. Smith suggests that taking the role of another is a constitutive process because it facilitates self-awareness by allowing one to become an object to one's self; to see one's self from the outside. Hence, for Smith, self-conscious selfhood is wrought via role "playing." Smith's analysis, however, focuses exclusively on "self-conscious selfhood" as the crux of the self. This reveals the extent to which Smith misses the significance of the body in (role play) performance. Additionally, his analysis considers "taking" on roles in a more serious – presumably less "playful" – way as the means by which one becomes a self. He does not use the word "play," nor does he theorize its closeness with role (taking). "Play," however, is embedded in the very process of taking on the role of another. In my engagement with performance, I analyze more deeply the centrality of "play" and "ritual" in role-taking with an explicit focus on the body as the locus of performance. Ultimately, this analysis serves my broader argument that selves and

society are constituted through ritualized performances that are relationally linked and politically calibrated.

Role "Play": (also) A Commonplace Phenomenon

Thinking about roles is a fascinating exercise. Roles are engaged by many for various purposes. Couples use role play to spice up their sex lives. Actors and actresses use it to rehearse their lines for films and plays. Students even use it as a learning tool in classrooms. Consider too, role models or persons we emulate out of respect or uncertainty about how to navigate significant life transitions. As a father, I regularly find myself using phrases with my daughter that sound eerily similar to things my father used to say to me when I was a child. And while I do aspire to be the kind of father to my children that my father has been to me, my performance of these imitating roles is often involuntary. Roles (and role modeling) are commonplace performances engaged by all human beings. Whether "playing" as a seemingly inconsequential exploration or emulating as an explicit attempt to embody modeled behavior, roles are ever-present in our lives.

Let me press the issue further. In a real sense, all human performance takes place via roles. Performance theorist Richard Schechner argues this when analyzing the "everydayness" of human performance:

> There are no clear boundaries separating everyday life from family and social roles or social roles from job roles, church ritual from trance, acting onstage from acting offstage, and so on. I separate them for teaching purposes. Furthermore, a person can "jump" from one category to another – from daily life to trance, from ritual to entertainment, from one everyday life role to another.[226]

[226] Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 2nd ed (New York: Routledge, 2006), 171.

Schechner is highlighting the ways in which all social performances are enacted in terms of a role. This may seem obvious, but the idea becomes more complicated when considering his analysis in terms of the foregoing conversation about synergistic selves. Developing his argument further, Schechner acknowledges the slippage between roles persons embody intentionally and those occasioned by demand:

> Usually, a person knows when she is playing a role and when she is "being herself." To "be myself" is to behave in a relaxed and unguarded manner – but to another, even this kind of easy demeanor may come across as a performance. To "perform myself" means to take on the appearance (clothes, demeanor, etc.), voice, and actions of Mother or Friend, Plumber or Doctor, and so on. Some people work very hard to enact one of society's "great roles" such as Judge, Senator, or Movie Star. Others have a great role thrust on them, such as Survivor of Catastrophe, Grieving Parent, Lottery Winner, or even King.[227]

The deeper significance of what Schechner is doing here is important to note. First, his presentation of these "great roles" in relation to "performing myself" in the context of everyday life demonstrates the commonality of roles (as performances). By capitalizing "Mother" and other such embodiments typically not thought of as "performances," Schechner shifts readers' attention to the ways all actions can be understood as "bringing to fruition" (read: performing) some social reality; even when I am simply "being myself." In other words, Schechner illustrates how every enactment is socially and relationally bound in terms of whatever part one plays in a particular context. There is no existence outside of roles, nor are there embodiments that are not performances.

While Schechner does not name it explicitly, the relational nature of all roles is implicit in his thought. A Mother is a mother by nature of her relationship with a child. A Judge is such because of the way she or he relates to others involved with court proceedings. A Doctor only has a job because other human beings have ailments. Not only are roles common to everyday

[227] Schechner, 171.

human experience, and not only are they performed, but they are fundamentally relational. Roles bind us together endlessly, constituting our selves in a synergistic web of relating. Furthermore, taking seriously the relationality of roles also requires attention to their political nature. The very floor on which Cedric Johnson's "dialogical dance" takes place is wholly political; it is occasioned by the racialized tension between black subjects and a racist market. This way of understanding human relationality demonstrates the sociopolitical depth of role-contingency. It not only foregrounds the ways we are constructed through connection, but it also acknowledges that these connections are riddled with power dynamics that produce forms of privilege and oppression that demand care in the form of redress.

However, the influence goes both ways. Schechner's presentation of roles frustrates the idea that embodying one's "self" is in some way not a performance. In this sense, performance theory can deepen pastoral theological analysis of relational existence. Many tend to associate "performance" with inauthenticity, presuming that those who perform are being "fake." The problem with this line of thinking is that it has embedded within it a deeper assumption that there exists a "true" self that can be embodied "authentically." This poses a number of problems when considering human relations broadly, and black experiences more specifically. Assumptions of an (internal) "authentic" self give way to theoretical perspectives that have tried to render black cultural experiences monolithic. Such assumptions eventuate in essentialisms that marginalize aspects of blackness that do not fit whatever authenticating rules have been determined.

As cultural critics such as Victor Anderson and Michael Eric Dyson have demonstrated, blackness is too dynamic and robust to boil down to something measurable or monolithic.[228]

[228] See: Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: As Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1995); Michael Eric Dyson, *Reflecting Black: African American Cultural Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

Furthermore, as one can see when recalling Cedric Johnson's analysis of "code switching," to ignore the presence and performance of multiple "selves" as occasioned by circumstance is to also foreclose black people's continued need to survive creatively. The idea of performance, then, has import for pastoral theology's ability to understand the complexity of agency in young black men. A serious analysis can deepen pastoral theology's understanding of young black men's "caughtness" in a web of competing roles and the consequences for performing them. Before developing this trajectory in relation to young black men specifically, more needs to be said about the role of play in the idea of performance.

Performance and the Politics of Play and Ritual

Performing is often assumed to be inauthentic because it more explicitly participates in "play." As an activity that is assumed to be distinct from work, play registers for many as something other than serious, or meaningful. This demarcation highlights the difficulty some might have in recognizing one's "real" (read: authentic) self as a performance. As Schechner highlights, to be one's "real self" typically represents an easy demeanor or a certain effortlessness, which is then connected to a sense of authenticity. I suggest that this tendency is directly connected to the way "play" is cast as the antithesis of anything meaningful, thereby rendering (intentional) performance as something to be avoided.

There is an imaginative quality to play; a sense of freedom and latitude to explore that one does not experience the same way during more "serious" moments. For instance, being too "playful" during a wedding, or funeral, would likely offend people and potentially damage relationships. After all, these are "serious" moments, right? However, even separating what is considered "playful" and what is "serious" – or, presumably, not playful – is challenging. Indeed,

defining "play" itself is more than difficult. Play is always present in every moment of life, seemingly lurking just beneath the surface waiting to be invited in. One moment, I can be "seriously" engaged in a work assignment, and in the next, throwing paper clips at a co-worker. We know play when it shows up, and we all participate in it, but it is not easily understood.

Educational psychologist Anthony Pellegrini attributes much of the confusion surrounding definitions of play to what he sees as a widespread tendency to conflate children's social *and* non-social behavior, categorizing them both as play. He also claims that play is overwhelmingly defined by what it is not, or by its function, rather than what it actually is.[229] This is due to play's pervasive and slippery nature. Play is not a thing that can be named, but rather a spirit that imbues all human activity. Pastoral theologian Jaco Hamman argues that play should be understood as a way of being that is best described in terms of its attributes:

> Play is voluntary, and it is pleasurable. It creates freedom from time and preoccupies and diminishes consciousness. Play awakens imagination, creativity, improvisation, and problem-solving. It is contextual and appropriates contexts. Play can be disruptive, and being autotelic, it follows its own goals. Furthermore, play helps one adapt to changed circumstances. It is crucial in the development of interpersonal skills and fostering community, and it instills the wisdom of holding on and letting go. In addition, play is a form of knowing.[230]

Hamman's list casts play as an approach to life rather than something to be grasped. It describes a way of being that can inform everything we do as human beings. Yet, in addition to the difficulty of defining play, its centrality in the performance of selves is also misunderstood.

Perhaps this misunderstanding is because play is often relegated to the world of children. Much of the literature that deals with play is situated in the context of child development and does not consider its constructive possibilities outside children's lives. When play is considered

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[229] Anthony D. Pellegrini, *The Role of Play in Human Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 8–9.
[230] Jaco J. Hamman, *Growing Down: Theology and Human Nature in the Virtual Age* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2017), 126–27.

in the lives of adults, it is often bracketed off as wasted time or "the weekend," where it can be enjoyed as a "break" from what presumably matters more.[231] "Work" is regarded as essential, while play is rendered unproductive altogether. However, this tendency to underappreciate the productive value of play – or even the felt need to privilege *productivity* in general – is more deeply rooted in the cultural and religious history of this country.

The assumptions that "play" and "work" can be separated, and that play represents a lack of productivity, are false constructs with a fairly recent history. Hamman locates this way of understanding play with religion, namely Christianity. He uses theologians such as Hugo Rahner and Jürgen Moltmann as examples to illustrate the seriousness associated with "original sin" and a "strong work ethic," claiming that such beliefs are responsible for a general disapproval of play.[232] Cultural anthropologist Victor Turner more explicitly connects the denigration of play to the prioritization of the Protestant Ethic in America. He argues that the Protestant Ethic contributed to a collective sensibility that play is reserved only for children because "work" was associated with morality and Christian values, a point alluded to by Hamman.

Turner further suggests that this separation of work and play is a unique product of Western industrialist values that were not previously reflected in other cultures around the world.[233] He argues that in pre-modern cultures, play and work existed mutually and were both assumed to be present in every moment. Even during deeply meaningful events such as rite of passage ceremonies, play accompanied the seriousness of the rite as something that participates equally in the completion of the ritual. There was not an assumption that work and play were separate because neither term had been understood solely in terms of productivity. While play

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[231] Hamman, 127.
[232] Hamman, 128.
[233] Victor Witter Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York City: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), 35–39.

was thought to (playfully) "invert" in a way that created space for revelry or leisure, its playfulness was not understood to be negative – or unproductive – because "work" was understood differently. In modern societies, on the other hand, spaces designated for "play" and "work" were separated in ways that followed the Protestant Ethic's prioritization of work (as productive and "serious"). Turner suggests that this attitude was further materialized during Western Industrialization, where spaces that were informally designated for "work" or "play" were increasingly formalized with the construction of buildings based on such designations. In other words, the modernization of societies around the world – namely the Western world – institutionalized the belief that work and play existed as opposites that should be kept separate.[234]

Whereas all social spaces could include work and play in pre-modern societies, modernization is uniquely responsible for the existence of spaces believed to be designated purely for entertainment, or play (i.e. sports stadiums, playgrounds, etc.). Hence, play got demonized and reconstructed as a waste of time. Cultures built on this separation presume a fundamentally subversive and anarchic quality to play and therefore seek to maintain the status quo by controlling it. In this sense, play gets bracketed off (from reality) as something set aside to be engaged in presumably inconsequential ways.[235] Turner further suggests that this modern separation simultaneously contributes to, and assumes, deeper separations of sacred/profane, subjective/objective, and rational/embodied. He even alludes to the ways these separations might contribute to oppression based on the resulting denigration of the body.[236]

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[234] Turner, 40–41.
[235] Turner, 52–56.
[236] …where persons who are associated with the body are devalued and treated as if they are a lower quality (read: animal), while persons associated with the mind are granted full humanity. See: Turner, 54–59.

Schechner's development of performance theory builds on Turner's critique of the ways play and work have been separated. He defines performance in a way that challenges this modern separation and reclaims their constructive mutuality:

> Playing, like ritual, is at the heart of performance. In fact, performance may be defined by ritualized behavior conditioned/permeated by play… Ritual has seriousness to it, the hammerhead of authority. Play is looser, more permissive – forgiving in precisely those areas where ritual is enforcing, flexible where ritual is rigid. To put it another way: restored behavior is playful; it has a quality of not being entirely "real" or "serious." Restored behavior can be revised. Playing is double-edged, ambiguous, moving in several directions simultaneously. People often mix bits of play – a wisecrack, a joke, a flirtatious smile – with serious activities in order to lighten, subvert, or even deny what is apparently being communicated. "I was just kidding" reflexively claims that the "for real" action was in fact a performance.[237]

Shechner's description of play is telling, particularly when he speaks to the difficulty of distinguishing between what is "for real" and what is "just kidding." He develops this idea by highlighting the impossibility of separating ritual (read: work) and play and how such an impossibility can be seen regularly in both work and play spaces.[238] Considered in the context of human identities, Schechner's view of the inseparability of ritual/work and play points to the improvisational nature of constituting the self via ritualized/playful performances.

Incorporating these ideas about ritual and play into the consideration of performance highlights the productiveness (and everyday normalcy) of play in the formation of selves. If ritual performances are those that are scripted in the sense of being rehearsed and repeated, playful performances are more of an improvisation based on freedom to explore (seemingly without consequence). However, when considering the extent to which all performances,

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[237] Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 89.

[238] Schechner, 91–92. He gives examples of how persons regularly find time to "play" while they are "at work," and how "play" spaces often take on the seriousness of "work" spaces. The impossibility of distinguishing between the two is due to the fact that "play" can take place anyplace and at any time. Play is more of a state of mind than an actual thing, so that one can be seriously working and yet being "playful" at the same time. In this project we will see how space designated for "play" among young black men is treated more like work in that one's life and livelihood is fundamentally affected by serious participation.

whether in everyday life, on stage, etc., are accomplishing something – or bringing some "reality" to fruition – one realizes that there are consequences to all performances. Let us consider this idea in terms of Johnson's analysis of code switching. Imagine being certain of your identity because your regular (read: ritualized) performance of self is welcomed in the contexts you frequent. Now imagine going to a new space where you are not welcomed based on the color of your skin, gender, or some other marker of social identity; and yet, this is a space you feel you must navigate in order to achieve some necessary end. You must "code switch" to make sure you fit in. In other words, you must improvise a new (aspect of) self that aligns with the norms of the context and renders you a part of it. Code switching, then, can be seen as a kind of strategic play of identity/self that, if proving advantageous, may become a ritualized performance that becomes (a part of) the self. What began as an improvisational "play" gets incorporated into a ritualized means of survival and eventually becomes a second nature performance of the self that is continually reinforced *as the self* via the repeat performance of it.

Role Play Performance and the Constitution of the Self

Considering attention to roles and play/ritual together can help reveal the constitutive function of role-playing as a key aspect of performance. The above analysis suggests that role play is a fundamental step in the construction of the self, especially when the exploratory aspects of "play" become "ritual" by nature of their regularity and/or routine necessity. This is not a new idea. Psychologist Sarah Bowman argues that one central function of role-playing games is identity alteration. She highlights specifically how "pretend play" and "storytelling" are two central practices among children that allow them to develop their identities in two directions simultaneously. First, pretend play allows children to explore social roles and aspects of their

emerging selves in a way that is "free from the rigors and pressures of socialization."[239] In other words, they can "play" with selves without consequence. On the other hand, building on the work of psychologist Sook-Yi Kim, Bowman notes that storytelling allows children to enact roles that reflect involvement with the norms of social life. They can become better oriented to the "moral standards, lifestyles…" etc. that help them imagine their future roles.[240] In essence, Bowman argues that role playing games are central to the construction of children's selves in a way that allows them to become acclimated to their immediate context without the pressure of doing so. In other words, role playing games offers children a low pressure – but no less productive – environment wherein they can play out their emerging identities in relation to the norms and rules of their environments.[241]

As commonplace as role-playing games are in children, Bowman argues that it is an essential practice for adolescents as well. She does acknowledge, however, that it takes on a different level of seriousness as children mature. In early childhood, Bowman notes, "the child's sense of self maintains a flexibility and plasticity" that allows them to engage their explorations of self in more non-pressured ways.[242] During adolescence, however, she suggests that children experience an increasing need for coherence. Drawing on Erik Erikson's developmental theory, Bowman argues that developing a stable and consistent sense of self is crucial for a child's ability to avoid identity and role confusion later in life.[243] A key distinction is in order. One's "sense of self" is not necessarily the same thing as one's "self," as it were. Persons possess an integrating creativity that allows them to perform different selves without a sense of feeling

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[239] Sarah Lynne Bowman, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co, 2010), 128.
[240] Bowman, 128. Also see: Sook-Yi Kim, "The Effects of Story-telling and Pretend Play on Cognitive Processes, Short-Term and Long-Term Narrative Recall," *Child Study Journal* 29, no. 3 (1999): 175-192.
[241] Like a dress rehearsal of sorts.
[242] Bowman, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games*, 128.
[243] Bowman, 134–35.

fragmented. By this I mean that the coherent sense of self that ideally develops during adolescence is not antithetical to the presence and performance of multiple selves in adulthood. Bowman makes this point:

> Even if the mature adult achieves a sense of a stable ego identity, the "self" as a singular, coherent entity remains an untenable concept, especially in postmodernity. The self is a fragmented and contradictory mélange of images, concepts, and memories. Though the ego would like to believe that identity remains stable throughout the myriad of experiences and challenges faced in a lifetime, each presentation of self represents an unconscious construction, pieced together through trial and error.[244]

Bowman is acknowledging here the fundamental incompleteness of human selves. The process of becoming a self is never complete. Rather, the self – as mentioned previously – is an ongoing production informed by experiences, improvisation, and routine. By juxtaposing one's "sense" of stability with the routine fragmentation of the self, Bowman rightfully challenges persistent (Western) commitments to (identity) certainty.

The ability to integrate the dynamic fragments of the self is a capacity that is ideally present in all persons. Human beings are meaning making creatures who exist with a creative capacity to blend life's disparate parts into a meaningful whole.[245] The *impulse* to do so, however, is wholly unnatural. The very idea that we *must* integrate our selves into a singular whole, and be certain of "who we are," is a product of modern politics unique to Western epistemology. This tendency is also closely related to conceptions of the self that assume human beings exist fundamentally as individuals separate from others; the "modern liberal interpretations" that Archie Smith, McClure, Johnson, and others have challenged. Modern

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[244] Bowman, 136.

[245] Emmanuel Lartey, *Postcolonializing God: An African Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2013), 25–37. Lartey highlights several traditional African spiritual and cosmological beliefs that undergird a integrative orientation toward the cosmos, founded upon deeper assumptions of the sacredness of all life and a refusal to categorize and separate experiences in ways endemic to Western modernity. I will have to take up the important work of making an argument for the myriad ways African thought and spirituality have influence contemporary thinking (in unacknowledged ways) in another project. Space will not allow it here, unfortunately.

perspectives of the self prioritize certainty, fixity, and consistency, all of which – when held against sociopolitical norms – contribute to pathologizing discourses related to persons whose performances are cast as inconsistent (read: inauthentic).[246]

Embracing fragmentation as normal in understanding the self can challenge modern tendencies to prioritize individual certainty, which connects to the fundamental relationality with which human beings exist. Developing the work of social psychologist Erving Goffman, Bowman argues:

> Social convention dictates that individuals obfuscate their inner motives, passions, and fears in order to adopt their necessary and respective roles as circumstance dictates. Humans learn these scripts through the socialization process of youth and become invested in them, internalizing the rules of each role and *playing them out* as if they were natural. Though we battle to perceive ourselves as independent entities, unaffected by the sway of public opinion and expectation, our brains are hardwired to seek acceptance, approval, and integration with others.[247]

Bowman's awareness of the politicization of roles brings attention back to the politics of relationality, but it also situates such political relationality in terms of the consequences of role-play performances. Despite the ways one may resist the norms that color the roles they must *play,* circumstances require such performance of roles in ways that one cannot always avoid. The

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[246] The prioritization of certainty, fixity, and consistency that follow modern conceptions of the self can pathologize persons (and their performance) that are deemed "inconsistent" in significant ways. First, when persons act one way in one context and another way in a different context, they are often deemed inauthentic or lacking integrity. Casting strategic performances in this way misses the way politics and social norms often require certain performances of self because of the way in which that particular context has been structured around specific performances and cultural identities. Recall "code switching." By nature of the inherently political nature of human relations, social spaces always reflect cultural norms that fit some and exclude others. Learning these norms and performing in relation to them is a normalcy that should not be read as a deficiency on the part of one the performer. Rather, the "code switching" should invite critical reflection on the systems and cultural norms themselves. Secondly, there may be mental health diagnoses that are inscribed onto person's experiences of internal inconsistency; of their tendency to embrace the variety of their performances as different entities within their selves. Persons who experience their own (internal) variety as evidence of the existence of multiple selves without submitting to the impulse to integrate them can be labeled with diagnoses that pathologize (such as dissociated identity disorder). The human mind, as Bowman highlights, possesses an ability to perform a number of necessary coping mechanisms that broadly relate to dissociation. This innate capacity, however, is often misinterpreted as something needing to be treated due to the ways it resists cultural and political norms. Hence, persons are too often pathologized (in various ways) due to their failure/refusal to heed the rules set forth by modernist appeals to "authenticity" and coherent certainty of the self.

[247] Bowman, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games*, 136.

problem with this reality is that our performance of roles – and thereby the relational politics embedded within them – function to produce selves and the broader social order.

This analysis points to my overall argument that there are always constitutive consequences to playing a part/role. Relational – and even more specifically, synergistic – understandings of the self's development and maintenance highlights this fact. A deeper engagement with "play" and the political relationality of roles, however, demonstrates how even "playful" engagements with selves produce reality. In addition to the way performance theory highlights the role of play and ritual in my analysis of performance, it more importantly situates the body as the primary locus of investigation. Focusing on the (performance of) the black body in particular can reveal the synergistic ways racist discourse and materiality play out on the bodies of young black men.

Strange(ly) Fruit(ful): The Black Body as Performance

The black body is a unique site wherein racial politics and agential performances converge in the constitution of (black) selves. This is a point in pastoral theological understandings of how selves come into being (and are maintained) that can be further developed, particularly when considering how selves are formed via relational performance. In many respects, Archie Smith's proposal for understanding the relational constitution of the (black) self was ahead of its time. His awareness of role-play performances as the vehicle through which selves were formed relationally had a revolutionary quality to it, though it was not appreciated as such until decades later. Smith's understanding of selves, however, did not consider how the body was implicated. His analysis of human constitution focused primarily on "self-conscious selfhood" as the relational product of persons' reflexive ability to take on the role

of others. In doing so, Smith prioritized the mind – albeit more socially understood – as the seat of the "self." My theoretical approach centers on the (black) body as integral to (the formation of) the self as well.

Examining the black body via performance theory can shed unique light on the nature of race. Black performance theorist E. Patrick Johnson's engagement with the black body is helpful here. I situated his analysis in relation to broader conversations about the nature of blackness because it reveals the extent to which the black body's complexity transcends discursive and essentialist (read: materialist) racial arguments.[248] Johnson's treatment of the body is occasioned by his attempt to challenge the ways blackness has been commodified as a cultural currency that relies on notions of authenticity.[249] By this, Johnson is referring to the ways monolithic constructions of blackness have been essentialized (and idealized) in opposition to whiteness. Once constructed this way, certain signifiers and cultural performances are assumed to represent the "authentic" black experience, which negates performances among black people that do not reflect particular cultural expressions. In a sense, Johnson is thus (rightfully) critiquing the idea of (black) authenticity altogether.

Interestingly, Johnson notes how such assumptions of black authenticity are largely products of white culture's construction of blackness, both as a way to stigmatize it for the maintenance of white supremacy and to appropriate it for their own capitalist benefit.[250] Johnson's goal, then, is to analyze blackness in a way that takes seriously the way constructed

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[248] I use "discursive" and "discourse" to refer to linguistics related to a topic. In other words, discourse highlights ongoing debates, theories, and the like that seek to understand a topic intellectually. "Material," on the other hand, refers to the circumstances "on the ground" that persons must interact with. A helpful way to distinguish these is to think of discourse as a "conversation about" something, while material tries to refer to "the reality of" something. Discourse refers to ideas of the mind and material highlights realities of the body, in a sense.
[249] E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 2–4.
[250] Johnson, 4–6.

notions of authenticity highlight the discursive myth of race in general and the very "real" experiences black Americans face in relation to such constructions.[251] In other words, he prioritizes the body as the analytical tool that brings essentialist and discursive perspectives of race together. His analysis helps me connect my foregoing analysis of role-play performance to the unique racial politics that shape the relational milieu out of which young black men are formed in the U.S.

For Johnson, considering the black body *as performance* highlights the mutual interplay of material/embodied presence and racial discourse. He uses Marlon Riggs' presentation of his own suffering body in the film *Black is… Black ain't* to illustrate how the mere appearance and presence of the black body performs beyond the intention of the black subject. Dying of AIDs, Riggs presents himself in this film running naked through the woods as a way to demonstrate the kind of vulnerability he believed was necessary for black people to live in solidarity with each other. Adding to the vulnerability of his presentation, Riggs narrates much of the film while lying in a hospital bed, announcing his own declining T-cell count throughout. Yet despite Riggs' intention, Johnson is aware of the ways the very presence of Riggs' naked black body in public signifies according to racist (stereotypical) discourses that "read" him according to images of "the lurking, bestial, and virile black male threatening the white race…"[252] In other words, Riggs' attempt to perform the vulnerability of his humanity is instead read in the light of tropes that assume black men are oversexualized "beasts."

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[251] Johnson, 6–16, 18–20. Johnson believes that viewing blackness through the lens of performance, and performance theory through the lens of blackness, can evince the mutual constitutive relationship between discursive and essentialist views of blackness. Refer to note #207 of this manuscript regarding works by Victor Anderson and Michael Eric Dyson. These works highlight much of the internal debates about the discursive and essentialist nature of blackness.

[252] Johnson, 42–43.

The mere presence of the black male body in public is the problem, despite Riggs' (or anyone else's) rationale for its appearance. In this sense, the visibility of the black body can be understood to perform beyond its intention. "On the one hand," Johnson writes, "Riggs' visible black male body is exposed as fragile and vulnerable." On the other hand, however, his naked body registers publicly in terms of historical tropes that connect images of fugitive slaves running to contemporary representations of hyper-masculine black male athletes.[253] This dilemma highlights the way in which material reality and discourse converge on the black male body. Society's reception of the very presence of the black body is always already shaped by dominant discourse. Black men are seen according to stereotypical myths that are continually inscribed onto our bodies, regardless of the intentions, meaning, or goals of our performances. By simply becoming visible, our bodies perform. Unfortunately, by nature of the society in which we live, such performances often do not align with our hopes. This is why Riggs' performance of vulnerability fails. His presence is enough to signal (and signify) an assumed "reality" that is (presumably) known all too well: that black men are "beasts." In this sense, then, the (materiality of the) black body performs beyond its scope in ways that register in terms of existing racializing discourse.

However, the black body is a performance in a deeper sense. The materiality of black bodily presence transcends racializing tropes altogether. It confronts us in a way that holds out the possibility of disrupting discourse, even while potentially reinforcing it. Additionally, and potentially more troubling, the material presence of the body reveals suffering that often originates from – or at least interacts with – the very discourses that seek to define it. In other words, the performance of black bodily presence does not contribute to discourse as something

[253] Johnson, 43.

that is merely subject for debate (read: discourse). Rather, these racist discourses produce the (material) realities in which black people must live. If what someone thought about me was the only consequence, there would be no need for this analysis. Analyses such as this are necessary because of the extent to which racializing discourses such as "beast" produce, bolster, and justify dehumanizing practices that literally play out on the bodies of young black men. In this sense, cultural realities perform on/in the black body.

Recall Riggs' example. Johnson notes how Riggs' embodied suffering functions as a "site of corporeal trauma" that recalls both histories of trauma among black Americans and connections between such traumas and "institutionalized racism."[254] Contemporary examples abound. Young black men in the United States suffer forms of mistreatment that are invigorated by discourses that assume our inhumanity. A variety of racializing performances in relation to young black men are the mechanisms through which such mistreatments take place: "stop and frisk" based on racial profiling, incarceration at astronomical rates, being killed based on baseless suspicions of having a weapon, etc. These examples illustrate the material productivity of discourses that render black men "beasts." Further, those performances that presumably *follow* discourse also reproduce them, creating a synergistic loop that continues to re-create young black male suffering. Hence, analyzing the body as performance highlights the relationality of discourse and materiality as they uniquely interact on, in, and arise from the black body.

Beyond Fantasy "or" Reality: Reclaiming the (Political) Relationality of Race

Analyzing the black body as performance also discloses what I suggest is the blurry boundary between fantasy and reality. This aspect of my analysis also mitigates debates about

[254] Johnson, 44.

the nature of blackness; it moves beyond attempts to understand blackness as *either* discursive *or* material. Discursive conceptions of blackness rely on the knowledge that constructions of race based on skin color arise solely from myth.[255] Scholars that emphasize this approach recognize race as a fantasy that was concocted to serve political purposes. They argue that race only becomes "real" through discourse, and that there is nothing biologically "true" about being "black."[256] This view became more explicit amid critiques of black essentialist perspectives, which conceive of blackness as a qualitatively different experience based on certain social, cultural, and even quasi-biological markers of identity. The problem with essentialist views is that they define black identity based on political categories that become normalized in a way that renders particular performances as the "essence" of what it means to be black. This way of defining blackness excludes those expressions that that do not fit the constructed ideals essentialists assume to be "authentic" to the black experience. Discursive perspectives, then, function as a radically inclusive approach to understanding blackness in that they seek to value all performances of blackness (read: all performances of black people) based on a deeper conviction that blackness is as varied as the number of black people in the world.[257] What essentialist views do offer, however, is a serious attention to the materiality of blackness that discursive perspectives have not always fully captured. In other words, essentialists try to take

[255] Much of chapter four is dedicated to describing the historical construction of this myth. In chapter five, I demonstrate how the myth has transformed to fit contemporary society in ways that make it less overtly recognizable.
[256] See again: Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 1995 and Dyson, *Reflecting Black*, 1993.
[257] In many respects, this debate between discursive and essentialist views of race/blackness can be understood in terms of pragmatics. Each of their conceptualizations have been grounded by strategy in relation to trying to contribute to well-being for black Americans. Essentialists' primary concern was mobilizing in solidarity for the sake of advancing Civil Rights. Discursive theorists grounded their arguments in a different historical context and have been more focused on decentering taken for granted assumptions about blackness that have functioned exclusively toward black women, black LGBTQ folks, and others who did not fit into particular constructed ideals of what it means to be black. In essence, different ways of theorizing race have been grounded by pragmatic concerns for how persons within the Black community see and treat one another.

seriously the qualitatively different political circumstances in which black people are often forced to live, regardless of how persons might conceive of blackness theoretically.

Approaching blackness via the black body as performance moves beyond these debates by demonstrating how mythic constructions interact with embodied reality mutually. As mentioned, this approach challenges the separation of fantasy and reality. Womanist ethicist and theologian Emilie Townes offers one of the best ways of seeing how this plays out racially and politically. In *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, Townes constructs a theoretical framework that highlights the way in which mythic ideological images of black womanhood are proliferated into existence. She draws on Michel Foucault's use of "fantasy" and "imagination" together with Antonio Gramsci's understanding of "hegemony" to form what she calls the "fantastic hegemonic imagination."[258] Townes' primary purpose for constructing this framework is to expose the overlooked underside of structural evil in ways that reveal it as a cultural production. Rather than focus on the "rational mechanisms that hold forms of oppression and misery in place," Townes' "fantastic hegemonic imagination" deals with the way "emotion, intuition, and yearning" are more deeply implicated in the constitution of reality.[259] Focusing particularly on the image of the Black Matriarch, Townes argues that images and stereotypes employ a "politicized sense of history to create and shape its worldview."[260] Such images are presented as historical, then proliferated in myriad ways, which eventually cements them in the public imagination as something that just is.

Townes' assessment is crucial because it alludes to the ways relational norms are shaped (subliminally) by fantastical images that proliferate without conscious awareness. She illustrates

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[258] Emilie Maureen Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 18ff.
[259]Townes, 18.
[260] Townes, 21.

this process of constructing the Black Matriarch as "real" by highlighting the packaging, marketing, selling, and consuming of this image via Aunt Jemima products.[261] The deeper significance of Townes' project is that she demonstrates how persons' attitudes, emotions, and even intuitions are constructed based on the productive function of mythic images. Couched in a celebration of Aunt Jemima is found a deeper racial logic that literally creates a reality where the mythic Black Matriarch actually exists. Despite being based in pure fantasy, the Black Matriarch becomes "real" through a cultural performance of her presumed reality. In other words, though persons may not consciously relate fantastical representations of black womanhood to black women, their relational patterns are still shaped according to the taken for granted "truths" embedded within these images.

Critical race theorist Alexander Weheliye's conception of race and racism reflects Townes' assessment of the blurred boundary between fantasy and reality but develops it further in terms of the role politics plays in writing race onto the body in ways that produce reality. In what he calls "racializing assemblages," Weheliye conceives of race as the cultural product of ongoing articulations and (political) assemblages that normalize mythic inscriptions as "real:"[262]

> With regard to the category of race, racializing assemblages ascribe "incorporeal transformations… to bodies," etching abstract forces of power onto human physiology and flesh in order to create the appearance of a naturally expressive relationship between phenotype and sociopolitical status: the hieroglyphics of the flesh (Plateaus, 98). Or, in Colin Dayan's words: "Slavery… rendered material the conceptual, giving a body to what had been abstraction… An idea of lineage thus evolved and turned the rule of descent into the transfer of pigmentation, which *fleshed out* in law the terms necessary to maintain the curse of color." As a result, the legal and extralegal fictions of skin color and other visual markers obscure, and therefore facilitate, the continued existence and intergenerational transmission of the hieroglyphics of the flesh.[263]

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[261] Townes, 37–55.
[262] Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 46ff.
[263] Weheliye, 50.

Weheliye's reference to the "hieroglyphics of the flesh" refers to my argument that "beast" is literally written onto the bodies of black men in legal and extralegal ways. His description of this political process fleshes out Townes' awareness of the productive ways in which "emotion, intuition, and yearning" can be culturally and politically produced. He writes, "Racializing assemblages articulate *relational intensities* between human physiology and flesh, producing racial categories, which are subsequently coded as natural substances…"[264] Hence, race is so thoroughly constructed (and normalized) as "real that relational patterns are shaped accordingly – even to the level of intuition, and emotion.[265]

Considering how a fiction such as race could shape persons so thoroughly – at levels of emotion, intuition, or desire – raises the issue of legibility (and scripts). "Legibility" denotes the level to which something is recognizable.[266] For instance, a person's handwriting is deemed legible if someone else can understand it. The very process of understanding, however, points to a linguistic agreement shared by both parties. Without this agreement, neither the writer nor the reader will know the rules of their exchange; the grounds on which they can communicate. Hence, legibility is never a neutral process. It imposes a norm that reinforces itself by requiring communicators to adhere to certain rules of interpretation. Legibility, then, should be understood as a political process by which one's sight is continually adjusted. This adjustment does not happen in a vacuum, however. Rather, it is always performed in relation to a norm that must be maintained. What is often overlooked, and what relational performance reveals, is how this

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[264] Weheliye, 50–51. My italics.

[265] I am thinking here about instances where a white woman clutches her purse when a group of black men walk by because of the (physiological) fear she feels in her body. This unconscious physiological response should be understood as a product of the way she (and society more broadly) has been socialized based on racial stereotypes, rather than (solely) an intentional performance meant to bring some relational truth to fruition. Despite her assumptive response, however, her actions are still productive in that they "play out" the racial reality she assumes is "real," thereby making it real.

[266] "Definition of LEGIBILITY," accessed May 2, 2018, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/legibility.

adjustment process happens as a result of the routine performance of roles in society, particularly as these performances "play out" predetermined scripts meant to set the terms for what will ultimately be recognizable.[267]

Race, then, is understood in this project as a "reality" that is predicated on a way of seeing based on the ongoing mutuality of a politicized myth and our performance of it. It is a fiction that exists materially because taken for granted assumptions of its "reality" get played out as "real." In other words, race is a matter of legibility. It highlights how society's way of seeing is continually adjusted to recognize its own presumed truths (read: scripts) about whatever (or whomever) is being gazed upon. Race is "real" because we continue to perform it in every aspect our existence. It is written into political systems, laws, and daily interactions; it is in the very air that we breathe. Race is a reality and racism is the wellspring of performances that continually bring it to fruition. Although it is a fantasy, race (and racism) is continuously brought to fruition (materially) by the ways society relates to black people (and others), racially. When considered in the light of my analysis of the way role-play performances produce selves (and societies), it becomes clear that race (and racism) are both ongoing productions that are held in place via the ways we perform in relation to each other. Hence, Race is itself a relational performance that is created and re-created in the same way that human selves more generally are formed.

Relational Performance in Full View

Relational performance comes into view when considering the foregoing analysis of performance as a complement to pastoral theology's critical attention to human relationality. This way of understanding the constitution of selves prioritizes performance as the mechanism

[267] I take this issue up in more depth in the next chapter

through which human beings are relationally formed. In a sense, relationality highlights what I understand the be the *nature* of human selves, but performance – namely ritualized (role-play) performances – discloses the way relational selves are *nurtured*. This framework brings the foregoing analysis of "play" and "ritual" (read: "work") together with an understanding of the political nature of roles in order to highlight the synergism between routine cultural performances and the realities – and selves – they create. We are always "playing a part," so to speak, even (and especially) when these parts have become so second nature that they are incorporated into/as the self with no recognition of their playful origin. Relational performance thus also challenges the historical (and political) separation of "work" and "play" in order to demonstrate how the process of becoming a self is largely an improvisation; a result of play itself. Such improvisational performances, however, are always grounded by the need to navigate political and cultural norms, namely for black subjects.

Relational performance thus articulates the ways the black body challenges the boundary between fantasy and reality in the production of race and racism in the U.S. Reading the black body *as performance* exposes the broader way in which separating "fantasy" from "reality" masks the mutuality of mythic discourses and material existence, respectively. It suggests that the "fantasy" of race and the "reality" it produces exist in a relational loop that continuously feeds back into itself synergistically. Hence, race is a production that is continually made "real" by the ritualized relational performances that presume its reality. Race represents a legibility that is produced, repeatedly, in America based on the way persons (and society) relate to black people in patterns. These patterns of relating are so commonplace and unconscious that we rarely recognize them as performances; much less productive ones.[268] Similar to the way human

[268] I provide a few specific examples of this in the next chapter when discussing the ways relational performance discloses scripts and legibility.

beings are formed via ritualized role-play performances, race is a way of seeing that is shaped by the performance of roles that are inscribed with racialized assumptions. In other words, society's inability to see young black men as anything other than "beast" is a product of (previously scripted) racialized assumptions *played out* in patterns.

"Beast" is a mythic image that has been written onto the bodies of young black men in ritualized ways; a (persistent) rite of passage for this country's becoming. This image has become so popularized that many young black men aspire to it as a means of success (and survival). What was once a derogatory slur meant to control black men based on presumptions of sub-humanity and hypersexualized violence has morphed into a celebrated image of success used to recruit young black men into forms of cultural participation that ultimately contribute to their own undoing. In the next chapter, I demonstrate the racial history of "beast" as linked with colonial imperialism's inscribing of inhumanity onto black bodies. In chapter five, I argue that contemporary neoliberalism recapitulates the politics of colonialism but does so in a way that masks its underlying racial logic. I use the culture of competitive sports to demonstrate how "beast," while presented as something to be celebrated, reproduces the inhuman inscriptions initiated during colonial imperialism. Ultimately, relational performance functions as a lens to help pastoral theologians see how neoliberalism recapitulates the underlying racial logic of colonialism, and how its participants are recruited into cultural performances that contribute to the ongoing construction of a reality built on the foreclosure of young black men's lives.

Chapter 4

Marking the "Beast": Coloniality and the Construction of Sub-humanity

Malik is real. Though he is fictionalized in John Singleton's film, *Higher Learning*, Malik represents many young black men and athletes just trying to "make it." I invited each of my co-researchers to reflect on this classic scene and to describe what "run nigga run" meant to them. Jimmy, a third-year player in the NFL, said this:

> The "run nigga run" part for me… You know I watched the clip a few times. I think it's just as simple as we're trapped in our own dream. For me, I don't even notice that I'm being controlled like a puppet, nor do I care, because this is something I want so bad. But at the same time, I'm helping somebody else out that's already well off in life. I'm helping their pockets more than I'm helping myself. And I say that because looking at the bigger picture, yea I "made it out" from what some folks like to think – some African Americans – but at the same time I really didn't because I was… I could tell you when my special teams meetings started back in college, but I could not tell you what my favorite class was in college. College academics was a blur. And it's sad to say that… I know I'm gonna have to go and pick up more books, I know I'm gonna have to do all these things later in life that I'm behind the eight ball on, but people – including myself – don't realize that through the whole four or five years that I was in college. So I think the "run nigga run" thing was, yea, basically myself trapped in my own dream and not even caring.[269]

Jimmy went on to talk about the allure of fame and wealth that comes as a promise for making it in sports for many young black men who do not have other options. He highlighted how he grew up watching other young black men be praised as athletes and enjoying the kind of lifestyle that he dreamed about. He spoke about the excitement he had about going to college, and potentially the pros, while also not realizing the reality that he was being used for someone else's benefit and would not have the opportunity to pursue his academic or (other) professional interests.[270]

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[269] Interview with "Jimmy," March 23, 2018.

[270] Jimmy noted having a love for animals and. When asked what he always wanted to be when he grew up, he talked about wanting to be a Veterinarian. That was, until he started playing football and quickly realized that sports would be his best option given his family's circumstances at that point in his life.

Jimmy's words highlight a significant theme that emerged across my interviews with these young men. He felt trapped; stuck between his desire to play the game he loves and the inevitability of having to deal with its political ramifications. And yet, he – like the majority of others in his position – agreed to play the game so as to secure life and livelihood for his family.

"Trapped in Our Own Dream…"

Not every young black man is an athlete. We are doctors, fathers, attorneys, social workers, the list goes on. One of the goals of this project is to challenge the overidentification of young black men with athletics. In doing so, I hope to make legible our humanities outside of sport. However, every young black man can identify with the association of young black men with the culture of sport. We grow up watching others who look like us reach pinnacles of success in the context of sport. We are lauded for our seemingly extraordinary athletic abilities and are held up in god-like ways because of it. Our bodies are plastered on cereal boxes, billboards, and on the news as the world celebrates our athletic prowess. Outside of a few significant exceptions, sport is the overwhelming reason for the normalcy of public images that routinely paint young black men in a (seemingly) positive light.[271]

On one hand, to be "trapped in our own dream" points to the persistence of athletics as a primary means of survival and success for young black men. It names the way in which black men are pigeonholed to sports, as well as the extent to which images of young black male athletes are used to recruit other "willing" participants into the world of sport. On the other hand, and more central to the work of this chapter, the fact that we are "trapped in our own dream" highlights the circumstances that give life to this reality: how many of us are in fact "trapped"

[271] These "positive" valuations, however, are more deeply rooted in the commodification of black male bodies. I will develop this more in the next chapter.

because of a lack of political and professional opportunities made available to young black men in a culture laden with threats of imprisonment and death. Each of the young men I spoke to referred to "making it out" in some way, citing prison or premature death as two potentialities from which they wanted to escape. Several of them also shared Jimmy's awareness of being used, even while trying to secure their piece of the "dream" while they had the chance. They shared awareness of their own commodification in sport and the broader political realities from which they are presently or preemptively trying to escape. Their responses highlight what I suggest is a three-pronged way in which young black men are targeted in the U.S.: containment, crucifixion, and commodification.[272]

Containment

The first prong of the American pitchfork that threatens young black men is what I call the *cycle of containment*. The cycle of containment refers most specifically to the routine ways in which imprisonment, and other forms of social control related to criminal justice, has become a primary means by which young black men are targeted in the United States. In a published report for *The Sentencing Project*, Ashley Nellis has shown that African Americans are incarcerated in state prisons more than five times the rate of whites. Beyond this national average, she also notes that there are states where the disparity is more than 10 to 1.[273] When considering African

[272] I use "three-pronged" intentionally for two reasons. First, by using "three-pronged" and "suffering" together, I am insinuating that there is always a subject involved in what too often gets understood as suffering in a vacuum; or by happenstance. Qualifying the suffering of young black men with "three-pronged" reminds the reader that such suffering is by design, has a subject, and uniquely targets young black men. It is an assault rather than a byproduct. Secondly, it refers to religious imagery that cast Satan as a devil who wields a three-pronged pitchfork. I use this intentionally to label the racism in the criminal justice system demonic. I use this language also to flip stereotypes about black men being "the Devil" on their head, and to instead put white supremacy in that position.

[273] Ashley Nellis, "The Color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic Disparity in State Prisons," The Sentencing Project, accessed May 2, 2018, https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/color-of-justice-racial-and-ethnic-disparity-in-state-prisons/.

American males more specifically, it has been estimated that 1 in 3 black men nationwide will spend some time in prison, while in some cities the rates exceed 75%.[274] Unfortunately, these numbers do not account for black men under the age of 18 who become involved with different aspects of the juvenile justice system prior to any formal involvement with the criminal justice system as adults.[275]

Scholars refer to what has been termed the "school to prison pipeline" to highlight links between criminal justice, juvenile justice, and public education. The "school to prison pipeline" refers to the systemic way in which youth of color are disproportionately suspended and expelled from school through "zero-tolerance" policies based on the criminalization of minor infractions of school rules. Rather than be handled within educational settings, disciplinary measures are treated as juvenile delinquency problems and result in police involvement, which eventuates in expulsions and arrests of students of color far exceeding the rate of white students.[276] These issues are compounded when considering the economic trajectories of prisons in comparison with educational funding. PBS reports that between 1987 and 2007 funding for incarceration experienced a 127% increase, spending almost 70$ billion per year.[277] During the same time period, higher education funding only increased 27%.[278] Statistics also show that while spending

[274] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 6–7.
[275] Minus, of course, the black youth who are tried and convicted as adults.
[276] "School-to-Prison Pipeline [Infographic]," American Civil Liberties Union, accessed July 6, 2018, https://www.aclu.org/issues/juvenile-justice/school-prison-pipeline/school-prison-pipeline-infographic.
[277] "New Report Slams 'Unprecedented' Growth in US Prisons," FRONTLINE, accessed June 4, 2020, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/new-report-slams-unprecedented-growth-in-us-prisons/.
[278] "State Higher Education Funding Cuts Have Pushed Costs to Students, Worsened Inequality," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, October 21, 2019, https://www.cbpp.org/research/state-budget-and-tax/state-higher-education-funding-cuts-have-pushed-costs-to-students.

on education declined as a result of the 2008 recession, funding for prisons continued to increase despite the economic crisis felt in virtually every other industry.[279]

The deeper racial logic of containment is best captured by legal and critical race scholar Michelle Alexander.[280] In *The New Jim Crow*, Alexander compares mass incarceration to Jim Crow and slavery, illustrating how the United States' criminal justice system functions to actively disenfranchise African Americans. What I find most helpful is her treatment of "mass incarceration" *as a concept* meant to transcend more narrow conceptions of criminal justice.[281] Certainly, criminal justice in America is fraught with biases that make its commitment to "justice" questionable. Alexander notes how conscious and unconscious biases shape public perception and how these perceptions undergird discriminatory practices in policing, prosecuting, and sentencing.[282]

This system of disenfranchisement uniquely targets young black men through racialized stereotypes that assume an inherent proclivity to criminal behavior. Alexander argues that the social construction of the "criminalblackman" – a term coined by legal scholar Katheryn Russell-Brown[283] – became a stereotypical trope that represented the public's conflation of blackness and crime.[284] The consequences of this conflation include a unique kind of social stigma that continues to follow young black men regardless of their involvement (or lack thereof) with the criminal justice system:

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[279] "A Punishing Decade for School Funding," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, November 27, 2017, cbpp, https://www.cbpp.org/research/state-budget-and-tax/a-punishing-decade-for-school-funding.
[280] By "racial logic" I mean that there is a systemic way in which the many parts of the criminal justice system all function based on deeply held racist assumptions. The performance of this system is predicated on the need to, in this case, contain black bodies as a new form of social control that became necessary due to changing laws and policies.
[281] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 12–13.
[282] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 104–8.
[283] Katheryn Russell-Brown, *The Color of Crime*, 2nd ed, Critical America (New York: New York University Press, 2009).
[284] Alexander, 107–8.

> One need not be formally convicted in a court of law to be subject to this shame and stigma. As long as you "look like" or "seem like" a criminal, you are treated with the same suspicion and contempt, not just by police, security guards, or hall monitors at your school, but also by the woman who crosses the street to avoid you and by the store employees who follow you through the aisles, eager to catch you in the act of being the "criminalblackman" – the archetypal figure who justifies the New Jim Crow.[285]

Alexander's attention to the racial underpinnings of mass incarceration are helpful in understanding how young black men have become the quintessential criminals who need to be contained in order to protect the American public. The assumptions that color this bias, however, are deeper; more fundamentally, and theologically, anthropological. Before expounding on these deeper assumptions, I will first highlight the second prong that threatens young black men.

Crucifixion

The *cycle of crucifixion* is the second prong of America's pitchfork that targets young black men. This prong points to the public spectacle that accompanies the untimely – and far too often, wrongful – deaths of young black men. It remains a fact that homicide continues to be the leading cause of death among black men ages 15-34.[286] While this statistic alone is troubling, what is even more disturbing is how public and routine these deaths are. It has become commonplace to see reports on the news about young black men being slain, whether by police officers, a citizen who "fears for their life," or by peers within his own community.[287] With the

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[285] Alexander, 162.
[286] CDC, "From the CDC-Leading Causes of Death by Age Group, Black Males-US 2014," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, June 27, 2017, https://www.cdc.gov/healthequity/lcod/men/2014/black/index.htm.
[287] Michael Eric Dyson, "Death in Black and White," *The New York Times*, July 7, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/10/opinion/sunday/what-white-america-fails-to-see.html. Dyson helpfully challenges the narrative of "black-on-black" crime in this opinion piece for the New York Times. Despite the popularity of referencing "black-on-black" crime as a real phenomenon, Dyson highlights the ways in which percentages of homicide across racial communities are virtually the same. Hence, he argues that "black-on-black" crime is nothing more than another racist narrative meant to further subjugate black people. He suggests that instead we should refer to "neighbor-to-neighbor" carnage because violent crimes are overwhelmingly committed persons in the same communities, regardless of race.

advent of social media, our collective awareness of these tragedies has increased, particularly when their ubiquity cannot always be captured by news outlets. Whether reported in the news or recorded on cell phones and broadcast, young black men are being crucified for all to see.

I have chosen to use "crucifixion" intentionally to recall the political, theological, and historical weight of this term. "Crucifixion" is used to highlight the public nature of black male death, as well as to remind readers that terror – striking fear in others – is a primary means of subjugation that accompanies our deaths. Explicitly relating crucifixion and lynching, James Cone describes crucifixion as a "a public spectacle accompanied by torture and shame—one of the most humiliating and painful deaths ever devised by human beings."[288] He notes how this form of execution was used by the Roman Empire to both punish rebels, and to squelch any possible insurrections that might arise. For Cone, the connection between crucifixion and lynching is found primarily in the terror they induce. However, Cone also makes this connection in hopes that linking slain black bodies with a crucified Christ can provide healing for black communities, while at the same time inviting white Americans to confront its brutal legacy of white supremacy.[289]

A feature of Cone's analysis that is particularly helpful for understanding the historical trajectory of "beast" is how he contextualizes the rationale for lynching. He argues that, because slavery had officially ended, whites needed a new pretense to dispense with black life. Hence, whites constructed a belief that black men had an insatiable lust for white women for which these women needed to be saved. Despite slavery being illegal, anti-miscegenation laws still shaped the norms of the day. Therefore, as Cone puts it, "Sexual intercourse between black men and

[288] James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2011), 1–2.
[289] Cone, xiii–xix.

white women was regarded the worst crime blacks could commit."[290] Kelly Brown Douglas analyzes the contemporary reproduction of Cone's articulation of this historical legacy. In *Stand Your Ground*, Douglas notes the ways black bodies are simultaneously constructed as inferior and inherently threatening:

> …black people are viewed as more than just inferior to white people. They are perceived as a threat. They are viewed as a chronic danger to cherished white property. That which makes the black body most dangerous is when it betrays *its created [or essential] nature.* Within the social-cultural context of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism, that nature has been established as chattel. Thus, a free black body and a dangerous black body are practically equivalent, according to the theoretical logic of America's Anglo-Saxonist exceptionalism.[291]

For Douglas, free black bodies are deemed inherently threatening for two reasons. First, by nature of their construction as chattel, to be free is to impinge on the space constructed as "cherished white property." In other words, free black bodies are thought to be naturally transgressive to the space reserved for whiteness. Secondly, free black bodies are dangerous because they disrupt the social order. In as much as the logic of white superiority relies on the subjugation of blackness, black bodies that are free subvert this relational norm, thereby revealing flaws in the narrative of white supremacy.[292]

This conception of the black body arose from a deeper ideological framework that prioritized whiteness as the "cherished property" of American (read: Anglo Saxon) "exceptionalism."[293] This narrative, Douglas notes, was further theologically rooted by a conflation of natural law theory, religio-scientific frameworks, and a Manifest Destiny war, where the protection of the white race was given divine sanctioning by those in positions of

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[290] Cone, 7.
[291] Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2015), 68. My italics.
[292] Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2015), 69.Douglas, 69.
[293] Douglas, 23ff.

power. Against this backdrop, then, crucifying young black men, both historically and in our contemporary world, is construed as an act of "standing one's ground" because it protects America's prized possession – a narrative of exceptional whiteness – from the "demonic" threat of blackness.

The undertones of salvation are telling. Both Cone and Douglas reveal how crucifying black bodies takes on a salvific quality for a larger purpose. In Cone's analysis, lynching was thought to *save* white women from the sexual threats of black men. Salvation in this sense is directly connected to preserving the presumed purity of white bloodlines by not allowing miscegenation; to, in effect, *save* the white race.[294] Douglas links the historical and contemporary murders of young black men to a broader goal of saving America from a perceived threat to its very (ideological) existence.[295] In both instances, the crucifixion of black men is simultaneously connected to a larger salvific goal, which is to eradicate us once we can no longer be used for (white) America's profit margins.[296]

Commodification

If containment and crucifixion are the cycles that are most blatantly and immediately death-dealing, *commodification* is the most insidious and difficult to recognize. In many respects, commodification functions as a primary means of survival for young black men whose social and political options are cut off. To survive is to submit to being used for the larger purposes of

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[294] Not only was all this rooted in the fantasy that black men were actually raping white women on some frequent basis, but it also completely ignored the regularities of rape visiting black women at the hands of white men. It also completely discounts the instances of consensual sexual relations that were taking place between white women and black men, because of a persistent need to protect the idea of white female purity.

[295] Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 120ff. Much of Douglas' analysis is meant to ground to ground the "stand your ground" law in terms of the way America constructed its own identity. What some might assume black men to be an actual threat to one's (physical and spiritual) existence, Douglas would argue that the only threat black men pose is to the ideological beliefs about itself America cast in which black men were meant to be chattel.

[296] More on the theme of commodification in the next chapter.

America's quest for supremacy in the global community, while trying to secure a piece of the American "Dream" along the way. It also means consenting to the way things are done and thereby participating in the re-creation of the status quo. While there is an extent to which all Americans are subject to commodification as part of a larger neoliberal project, young black men uniquely treated as commodities based on the ways our bodies have been *branded* for production and public consumption – not to mention the desire to own us. I develop this idea more fully in the next chapter when dealing specifically with the role of competitive athletics in young black men's lives. For now, however, I give some historical context that provides a background for the analysis to come later.

A key feature of Kelly Brown Douglas' analysis of the inherent threat of free black bodies is her reference to "chattel" as the presumed ontology of black men (and women). To be chattel is to be a commodity used by those with power to determine one's utility. It is to be property. Not human. However, in a strange way, black bodies are also *valued* based on their productive capabilities. Douglas notes the way in which younger black men and women were sold for top dollar at auctions because of their ability to produce; either through the labor of their bodies or bearing children (read: breeding).[297] It is noteworthy that enslaved persons in this context bought into the hope for a commodified existence. By nature of their virtually inescapable position as chattel, the most an enslaved person could hope for was to become the most prized commodity of the bunch.[298] Hence, to contribute to the larger system of slavery through relentless production simultaneously benefitted enslaved persons and bolstered the broader power arrangement. This power arrangement created a circumstance where buying into commodification became a means of literal survival for the enslaved.

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[297] Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 54.
[298] Douglas, 54.

Young black men continue to be uniquely commodified in our contemporary world. While athletes are the immediate focus of this project, the commodification of young black men is also apparent in other social spaces. As highlighted previously, prisons in the United States are overwhelmingly populated with young black men. Beyond the (essentially) free labor required of these men, the mere presence of their incarcerated bodies creates profit for stakeholders benefitting from the prison industrial complex.[299] Entertainment industries – particularly music – also contribute to the commodifying exploitation of young black men. Hip-Hop artists especially are recruited into creating music at the prospect of economic security, while the corporations that own rap labels can dictate their products and the percentage of money they see from producing.[300] Other examples could be given, but the point is that young black male survival, both literal and in terms of economic stability, is often contingent upon our willingness to yield agency to others who get to dictate the nature of our participation. For those young men that refuse to "play the game," the chances of their lives (and livelihoods) being discarded via containment or crucifixion increases immensely.

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[299] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 230–32. Alexander argues that criminal justice reform efforts have been futile because of the failure to address the interlocking ways it is beholden to our economic and political system. She notes the ways many unionized workers rely on prisons for their jobs, as well as how broader employment in relation to current functioning of the criminal justice system is dependent on the continuation of mass incarceration. She also discusses the amount of money invested into prison systems, which benefits involved corporations, and the explicit awareness of stakeholders that such investments would be adversely affected by reform efforts. It is well known that the overwhelming majority of persons who are incarcerated are young men of color. Hence, the very stability and thriving of a large segment of economic and political capital in this country is derived from the continued incarceration of young black male bodies.
Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 230–32.

[300] D Chuck et al., "Hip Hop: Beyond Beats & Rhymes," *Media Education Foundation Collection*, 2014. This documentary illustrates a kind of tragic existence for Hip-Hop artists who desire to speak critically about their lives in relation to a racist society. However, because these artists do not have the rights to their own work, many of them feel like they must "play the game" just to survive. Playing the game in this context means consenting to producing songs and albums that recreate racist and sexist stereotypes about black men, and overwhelmingly at the expense of black women. It was troubling to see how many of these artists were acutely aware of this, but because of their circumstances felt they had no other choice but to "do what they had to do."

In each of the above cycles there is an underlying thread of inhumanity at work. Whether assumed to be a "thug" (read: "nigger")[301] in need of containment, a (sexual) predator who is justifiably crucified, or merely a commodity used for production and hoarding wealth, black male humanity remains illegible to American society. I suggest that the normalcy of these cycles exist based on deeper anthropological assumptions held about the nature of black men; they demonstrate a persistent belief that we are not human. Though assumptive in most cases – especially in our "post-racial" contemporary context – the societal view of young black men as inhuman continues to shape relational norms in ways that contribute to the foreclosure of young black male lives.

(In)Script(ion)s of Inhumanity

A central claim in this project is that young black men are seen through *scripts* of inhumanity, as represented in the stereotypical image "beast." I focus on sub-humanity and super-humanity as twin caricatures of this trope to highlight the historical rendering and contemporary (commodified) celebration of black male bodies, respectively.[302] My attention to "scripts" is twofold. On one hand, the language of "scripts" points to the way "beast" – and race more broadly – is a social construction based on mythic inscriptions that become material reality. For something to be inscribed there must be external markings. It is written upon or engraved.[303] The marks do not represent an essence, but rather a label determined by the one who decides

[301] "Thug" is a coded way to say "nigger" in contemporary society, particularly when used by white men in positions of power.
[302] This way of organizing my argument should not suggest that the historical and contemporary aspects of "beast" are distinct. Much of the historical rendering of black men as "beast" relies on commodification, while contemporary society continues to treat young black men as sub-human. The two foci co-construct each other mutually. However, I separate these aspects this way to accentuate salient themes respective to colonialism (chapter four) and neoliberalism (chapter five), respectively.
[303] "Definition of INSCRIPTION," accessed May 2, 2018, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/inscription.

what is written. Often times this label is meant to signal ownership. In other instances, it is meant to determine how something will be categorized. In the case of blackness, historically, it was meant to do both. On the other hand, however, my attention to "scripts" also points to performance. Movies, television shows, and other forms of theater all rely on scripts that determine the roles to be played by the characters involved. These kinds of scripts have to do with writing as well but are more concerned with determining the behavior of a character rather than their essence. Held together, these two understandings of scripts point to the problem of "legibility" (as described in the previous chapter).

Critically analyzing the connections between scripts and legibility can help pastoral theologians better understand the interworking of society's inability to see the humanities of young black men. As previously noted, legibility refers to the political process by which patterns of recognition are continually adjusted in relation to norms meant to dictate what participants can recognize. Seen through the lens of relational performance, legibility discloses the way in which society's way of seeing is shaped by the performance of predetermined scripts that reinforce the norms embedded within. It is cyclical (read: synergistic). Scripts determine performances that bring to life their own norms and presumed truths. Legibility is born from this ongoing process. In other words, understanding the inherently political and synergistic nature of legibility reveals the extent to which society's inability to see the humanities of young black men is produced based on the continued performance of political scripts that render us inhuman. The lenses through which young black men are seen is continually adjusted to reflect norms, laws, and patterns of relating (read: scripts) that presume our inhumanity. Hence, "beast" continues to be the most legible interpretation of young black men in the U.S. because it reflects the racist scripts that society continues to play out publicly.

Other scholars have demonstrated similar concerns regarding legibility and black men in the U.S. In *Looking for Leroy*, cultural critic Mark Anthony Neal presents a character named Leroy, the protagonist in the 1980s film *Fame*, in order to disrupt the one-dimensional fiction of black men as hyper (hetero-) sexual predators given to criminality. The confluence of Leroy's suspected gayness and passion for dancing, coupled with his irreverence and erotic appeal to white women – not to mention Neal's own difficulty locating Leroy in terms of existing images – presented an alternative image of a black man that, for Neal, could provide a basis for a necessary "radical rescripting [sic] of the accepted performances of a heteronormative black masculinity."[304] Ultimately, Neal seeks to disrupt what he sees as the ways black men are both bound to, and bound by, a "legibility" based on existing stereotypes that reproduce historical constructions about black men and their bodies:

> In contrast to Leroy and other illegible black males, the "legible" black male body is continually recycled to serve the historical fictions of American culture (as the state rolls tenuously into a future of continued globalization, terrorism, and privatization). Here black male bodies continue to function as tried and tested props, whether justifying the lynching of black male bodies after emancipation or the maintenance of antimiscegenation laws and Black Codes (well into the twentieth century) to discourage race mixing and limit black mobility. In the contemporary moment we witness the prison industrial complex (where privatization looms large), which warehouses black (and brown) male bodies for nonviolent offenses as part of some preemptive attack on the presumed criminality of those bodies, while simultaneously exploiting the labor of those bodies for the profit of private prisons, a form of mass incarceration that the legal scholar Michelle Alexander has described as the "new Jim Crow."[305]

The consequences for legibility are clear. Failing to recognize black masculinity in its fullness and complexity contributes to historical fictions that justify societal mistreatment of black men. Neal is thus "looking for Leroy" in an attempt to "challenge prevailing logics about black male

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[304] Mark Anthony Neal, *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 4.
[305] Neal, 4.

bodies," while simultaneously "rendering so-called illegible black male bodies – those black male bodies we can't believe are real – legible."[306]

Pastoral theologian Greg Ellison also takes up this issue of legibility in the context of young black men specifically. He argues that young black men in America are regularly muted and rendered invisible to the point of being psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually snubbed altogether; "cut dead" by routine misrecognition based on racial stereotypes.[307] Ellison argues that this failure to recognize young black men engenders a social psychological rage that finds expression in one of two ways: 1) imploding as a self-destructive psychological retreat or 2) exploding (socially) as a demand for attention.[308] Ellison's pastoral theological attention to the way illegibility creates psychological, emotional, and spiritual suffering deepens Neal's attention to the sociopolitical consequences of such. Not only does failing to recognize black men's humanity result in cycles of imprisonment and death, it also contributes to a depth of suffering that can only be fully appreciated by also acknowledging the humanity of the sufferer.

Neal and Ellison both touch on important themes in my analysis of legibility. Ellison's connection of illegibility to psycho-emotional and spiritual trauma is useful for disrupting a view of young black men as inherently threatening. He (re)humanizes young black men by highlighting the pain that ensues as a result of society's failure to recognize us.[309] While Ellison's treatment of misrecognition is connected to America's apparent failure to see, my argument is rooted in assumptions of familiarity. It is not so much that young black men are unseen, but rather seen in ways that are presumably known all too well. We are seen, but only in

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[306] Neal, 8.
[307] Gregory C. Ellison, *Cut Dead but Still Alive: Caring for African American Young Men* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013), 1-11.
[308] Ellison, 14–19.
[309] Because an animal would not experience suffering as a result of this kind of (stereotypical) misrecognition.

terms of stereotypical images that undergird society's continued mistreatment of us. These images continue to dance around in the cultural imagination of a society that was born, and remains knee deep, in the sin of racism.

What Neal misses, I believe, are the deeper anthropological foundations on which these prevailing racial logics have been constructed. While he illustrates how attending to issues of legibility can reveal rigid cultural logics about the construction of black masculinity, he does not connect his analysis of legibility to cultural scripts. Consequently, the underlying (anthropological) assumptions within cultural scripts get divorced from the process of constructing legibility. Not only does this blind one from seeing the mythic political origins of "beast," but it more problematically blinds us all to the way its legibility relies on our collective performance of inhuman scripts written historically.

Scripting Sub-humanity: Ma(r)king the "Beast"

Societal assumptions of inhumanity have been inscribed onto the bodies of young black men in ways that continue to shape relational patterns today. I use the terms "sub-humanity" and "super-humanity" to illustrate the unique. On one hand, young black men are assumed to be the sub-human "beasts" that need to be contained (or crucified) due to what is thought to be the inherently threatening nature of our physicality and lust; dual attributes that are assumed to give way to both a proclivity, and uncanny ability, to engaged in criminal behavior. On the other hand, by nature of our presumed physical superiority, these "beasts" – if successfully controlled – can be exploited for production and free/cheap labor. Hence, young black men are "super-human" in that the utility of our bodies can be commodified in ways that serve the larger economic purposes of American imperialism and entertainment. This latter conception of "beast"

will be the focus on the next chapter. For now, I will analyze the historical, cultural, and theological origins of what I am arguing are the deeper anthropological assumptions that give life to the persistent practice of inscribing sub-humanity onto young black men.

Coloniality

The process of inscribing sub-humanity on the bodies of young black men is best understood against a historical and cultural backdrop of European imperialism. Analyzing the cultural anthropologist Walter Mignolo's concept of "coloniality" provides a helpful way to understand the interlocking forces that disclose the origin and maintenance of this inscription process. In *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, Mignolo challenges the assumption that modernity is a world of inevitable progress and enlightenment. He casts modernity as a socially constructed idea(l) that masks the deeper logic of coloniality undergirding the subjugation of people and communities globally. Coloniality, for Mignolo, refers to the complex ways in which European colonialism created a world in its own image, and consequently, how Eurocentrism persists in the twenty-first century.[310] It is important to distinguish *coloniality* from *colonialism*. To make this distinction, I analyze Mignolo's treatment of *decolonization* and *decoloniality* as two strategies for resistance implied by colonization and coloniality, respectively.[311]

*Decolonizatio*n points specifically to resistance strategies that entail expelling colonizers from geographic territories, allowing self-governance and political self-determination. The American and Haitian Revolutions and the Mexican and Argentine quests for independence

[310] Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, Latin America Otherwise: Languages, Empires, Nations (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 2–8.
[311] I found it more helpful to clarify the meaning of "coloniality" by examining its corresponding assumptions for resistance than to describe the term(s) itself.

serve as examples of decolonization efforts.[312] The ultimate goal is the removal of political rule and outside governance. *Decoloniality* differs from decolonization in that its primary terrain is not geographical space, but rather space(s) constructed epistemologically. Mignolo states, "Toward the end of the Cold War, decolonization mutated into decoloniality (without, of course, losing its historical meaning), to highlight "decolonization of knowledge" and to cast Eurocentrism as an epistemic rather than a geographical issue."[313] He argues that colonizing efforts evolved as cultures and societies developed, shifting the focus from the colonization of physical space to the colonization of knowledge (read: the mind). Hence, decoloniality also shifted the focus from trying to reclaim one's land to engaging in what Mignolo calls "epistemic disobedience."[314]

Beyond this epistemological distinction, decoloniality should be distinguished from decolonization because they have different points of reference. Decolonization's point of reference is an "indeterminate domain of 'reality.'"[315] In other words, assumes the idea that there exists a "reality" that is external to, and can be observed (and named) by, humanity. It never questions the idea that modernity itself is a unique product that reveals a deeper, more fundamentally oppressive and constitutive, logic. To the contrary, decoloniality's point of reference is the colonial matrix of power, whereby "reality" is continually constructed by "enunciating," or "constantly articulating" the sociopolitical norms that hold it in place.[316] Coloniality, in my view, refers to an *inscription* process that continues to write reality through the relational performance of a matrix of power originating with European imperialism.

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[312] Mignolo, 52–62.
[313] Mignolo, 53–54.
[314] Mignolo, 54.
[315] Mignolo, 51.
[316] Mignolo, 8ff.

While Mignolo does acknowledge several interrelated spheres through which the colonial matrix of power exerts control, his analysis of coloniality reveals a particular emphasis on economy and epistemology. These two spheres are held together by a "hidden dimension" of the rhetoric of modernity.[317] Examining this "hidden dimension" can uncover the unique ways in which sub-humanity has been written onto black male bodies, particularly when it is held in conversation with Willie Jennings' analysis of the theological origins of race. Before making this connection, however, I want to first say a bit more about how the interplay of epistemology and economy created a cultural backdrop for the writing of black sub-humanity.

Epistemology and Economy: A Tragic Intercourse

Epistemology (and economy): Constructing Eurocentrism

Epistemology is one of two central features of coloniality's construction of modernity. As mentioned briefly, coloniality discloses the extent to which Europe's primary terrain for domination was and continues to be epistemic. Coloniality casts the very idea of modernity, and the Western world more broadly, as a Eurocentric narrative that re-created the world in Europe's image. Rereading Carl Schmitt's historical conceptualization of Europe's imperial conquests from a decolonial perspective, Mignolo links the creation of this narrative to a series of political events beginning in the 15th century Treaty of Tordesillas. At this treaty, Pope Alexander VI began to divide global territories based on disputes between Spain and Portugal following the "discovery" of the "new world." This global demarcation of territorial space, according to

[317] Mignolo, 5-7, 8–10. Following Anibal Quijano's original formulation of the colonial matrix, Mignolo highlights four interrelated spheres through which control is exerted: 1. Knowledge & Subjectivity 2. Racism, Gender, & Sexuality 3. Economy 4. Authority. The four spheres are further upheld by two "legs," the "racial and patriarchal foundation of knowledge (the enunciation in which the world order is legitimized)." Also see: Quijano, Anival, and Immanuel Wallerstein. "Americanity as a Concept, for the Americas in the Modern World-System." International Sociological Association 1, no. 134 (1989): 549-556.

Mignolo, continued through the 16th century up until the beginning of the 20th. Whereas this Eurocentric remapping of the world was, on the surface, primarily about establishing Europe's political dominance through international law, Mignolo suggests that its more pervasive effect was to establish epistemological hegemony over the rest of the world.[318] Citing Colombian philosopher Santiago Castro-Gómez, Mignolo refers to "zero point" epistemology as the means by which Europe was able to cast its local knowledge universally:

> …zero point [sic] epistemology is the ultimate grounding of knowledge, which paradoxically is ungrounded, or grounded neither in geo-historical location nor in bio-graphical configurations of the bodies. The geopolitical and bio-graphic (e.g. body-politics, not bio-politics) of knowledge is hidden in the transparency and the universality of the zero point. It is grounding without grounding; it is in the mind and not in the brain and in the heart. Every way of knowing and sensing (feeling) that do not conform to the epistemology and aesthesis of the zero point are cast behind in time and/or in the order of myth, legend, folklore, local knowledge, and the like. Since the zero point is always in the present of time and the center of space, it hides its own local knowledge universally projected. Its imperiality consists precisely in hiding its locality, its geo-historical body location, and in assuming to be universal and thus managing the universality to which everyone has to submit.[319]

European customs, worldviews, theologies, and the like represent the "zero point." Europe's epistemic claims transcended even the world of epistemological reflection; it (presumably) just was. Throughout its sustained conquests of land, Europe was able to cast a cosmic vision of the world that erased the pluralistic nature of global knowledges that existed prior to colonial expansion. It literally erased the genius of culturally specific global histories and replaced them with its own (local) history presented as universal.

Language functioned in this process as a primary vehicle through which Europe was able to cast its own knowledge universally, while localizing, subjugating, and disavowing the epistemic insights of non-European languages. The phrase, "I am where I think" became the

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[318] Mignolo, 78ff.
[319] Mignolo, 80.

norm for non-European peoples, which signaled the ways all knowledge produced from their locale would be forever grounded by context. On the other hand, the Cartesian maxim "I think, therefore I am" became the norm for Europe, which linked the innate capacity for (European people to) reason to the foundations of all theological and scientific knowledge.[320] In other words, European thought and customs could be cast universally and considered normative, while all others were bracketed off as "contextual."

Economy (and epistemology): Constructing Capitalism

Europe's ability to subjugate cultural languages and worldviews around the world, while at the same time creating a "new" world where they cast linguistic and cosmological norms as universal, comes into full view when considering the ways economy interacted with epistemology. On one hand, economy – via the introduction of capitalism as a new priority that unified the colonial enterprise – provided a vehicle for Europe's epistemological dominance. The insights, languages, and cosmological norms that defined European imperialism could be exported around the globe as a commodity that helped recreate the world in Europe's image. On the other hand, epistemology provided the theological, and (eventually) scientific, rationale for transforming human lives into commodities. Hence, economy and epistemology exist(ed) in a mutually life-giving relationship, which discloses a unique feature of Mignolo's "hidden dimension:"

> There is, however, a hidden dimension of events that were taking place at the same time, both in the sphere of economy and in the sphere of knowledge: The dispensability (or expendability) of human life and of life in general from the Industrial Revolution into the twenty-first century. The Afro-Trinidadian politician, and intellectual Eric Williams succinctly described this situation by noting that "one of the most important consequences of the Glorious Revolution of 1688… was the impetus it gave to the principle of free trade…. Only in particular did the freedom accorded in the slave trade

[320] Mignolo, 80–81.

> differ from the freedom accorded in other trades—the commodity involved was man." Thus, hidden behind the rhetoric of modernity, economic practices dispensed with human lives, and knowledge justified racism and the inferiority of human lives that were naturally considered dispensable.[321]

Mignolo's description of the "hidden dimension" points to two specific developments that were taking place, both of which contributed to the eventual erasure of black humanity by recasting black bodies as chattel.

First, analyzing Europe's internal disputes in the 15th Century sheds light on Mignolo's analysis of the creation of capitalism. As mentioned previously, establishing political dominance via international law was a key feature of European disputes over the land "discovered" through explorations, even if the consequences ended up being more epistemological than political. The political elephant in the room throughout this period was the need to determine which territories would be given to what European countries. These land appropriations were largely based on the "capital" already accumulated in European banks, which allowed further "explorations" (read: invasions and expropriation of land and resources) for those European countries that were the wealthiest. Hence, not only did capital take on a central place in the colonial mind, the exploitation of land and labor became essential as a way to maximize production in the accumulation of such (capital).[322]

The second trajectory was more explicitly epistemological. Simultaneous to the internal conflicts, European theologians were increasingly conceptualizing "nature" in ways that followed the logic of Europe's epistemological hegemony. Central to the establishment of a Eurocentric worldview was the Jesuit Father José de Acosta's *Historia natural a moral de las Indias*, wherein "nature" was cast as a specific *thing* for humans to know. Nature, for Acosta,

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[321] Mignolo, 6.
[322] Mignolo, 183.

existed apart from human beings, and the knowledge of it was in many ways synonymous with understanding its creator, God.[323] The trajectory in Acosta's theology was more fully developed by Sir Francis Bacon, whose *Novum Organum* pushed nature's recent objectification to the next step: nature is not only to be understood, but ultimately dominated by humanity.

This construal of nature flew in the face of other existing cosmologies and contributed to the dawning of the capitalist economy that was taking over the world.[324] This problematic construal of nature was further objectified by the Industrial Revolution, which transformed "nature" into "natural resources" (i.e. charcoal, oil, gas). This transformation served the Western world's purposes of constructing a self-serving capitalist economy at the expense of the cosmos. Capitalism, then, grew out of the mutual interplay between the intra-European (political) economy of land appropriation (and exploitation) and the epistemological construal of "nature" as a thing to be exploited.

The picture becomes starker, however, when considering how both of these developments relied on the scripting and exploitation of black bodies. In many ways, the very creation of capitalism – and modernity itself – relied on Europe's association of black bodies with "nature," which further provided a foundation for the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Enslaving Africans served the resource extraction purposes of European colonial capitalism. Mignolo acknowledges how, during the disputes between Spain and other Western European countries, enslaving Africans was a practice that unified larger European initiatives. In other words, while European countries fought over what land would go to who, removing and enslaving Africans was a practice that was increasingly common among them all.[325]

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[323] Mignolo, 11.
[324] Mignolo, 11–12.
[325] Mignolo, 6–7.

This practice served every purpose necessary for European imperial conquests. On one hand, slaves were the very commodities equated with "nature" that could be exploited for economic purposes. They could be bought and sold just like the "natural resources" used to fuel the machines of modernity. On the other hand, the exploitation of free/cheap slave labor undergirded the "macroeconomy of plantation, harvest, and regeneration" that helped countries build capital without having to take out loans.[326] Hence, in as much as the whole of modernity and capitalism have relied on the dispensability of human lives, and "nature," black bodies have been the indispensable resource supporting the whole enterprise; valued not for their intrinsic worth, or even humanity, but for their exploitative and productive capabilities.

Script(ure)s: Canonizing Black Sub-humanity

One feature of coloniality that is central to understanding the extent of European imperialism's racializing effects is its theological nature. The entire colonial enterprise was grounded in theology. While Mignolo does acknowledge the role of secular philosophy and the sciences, particularly with regard to Europe's epistemological hegemony, he is also explicit that philosophy and the sciences were historically grounded by Christian theology.[327] Mignolo also acknowledges the role Christian theology played in constructing race specifically, noting the ways theology functioned as the "formal apparatus of enunciation" that began to establish the politics of racial hierarchies between white Europeans and non-white peoples globally.[328] Mignolo's acknowledgement of theology's central role in European imperialism is helpful, but

[326] Mignolo, 96, 183ff.
[327] Mignolo, 8–9, 199–200.
[328] Mignolo, 141ff.

understanding the extent to which theology was used to construct race is fully articulated by theologian Willie Jennings.

In *The Christian Imagination*, Jennings argues that contemporary Western Christianity reflects historical "patterns of colonialist dominance," which continue to shape Christian sensibilities, identities, and habits of mind."[329] These patterns – plus a broad inability and/or refusal to recognize them – belie what Jennings calls Western Christianity's "diseased social imagination."[330] Jennings' contribution to this project, more specifically, is an analysis of the construction of race that reveals how modern Christianity as a whole is implicated in racism. In other words, Jennings not only demonstrates the origins of marking black bodies as sub-human, he also exposes how such marks are indelibly theological. Three specific features of Jennings' larger argument help me illustrate this point.

Displacement

The first feature that must be acknowledged is Jennings' theological analysis of *displacement*. For Jennings, spatial displacement – the very stripping of people from their lands, culture, etc. – was the central theological operation responsible for the creation of race as something denoted by skin color. Before European imperialist conquests, Jennings argues, identities were connected to one's geographic locale. Africans were not thought of as "black," but were rather identified by their connection to geographic space, with the cultural customs and cosmologies that came with it. Jennings however, through a reading of chronicles describing Europe's early colonial practices, demonstrates the deeper consequences of "expansion:"

[329] Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 8.
[330] Jennings, 6–7.

> The often-used term European *expansion* fails to capture the spatial disruption taking place at this moment, a moment beautifully captured by Zurara. This Portuguese chronicler is watching and participating in the reconfiguration of space and bodies, land and identity. This is the newness presented in Zurara's simple observation. Again, land and body are connected at the intersection of European imagination and expansion, but what must be understood is the point of connection—the Portuguese and the Spanish, that is, the European. He is the point of connection. He stands now between bodies and land, and he adjudicates, identifies, determines. The position of agent is equal in importance to the actions. Zurara is capturing the twin operations of discovery and consumption. With those twin operations, four things are happening at the same time: first, people are being seized (stolen); second, land is being seized (stolen); third, people are being stripped from their space, their place; and fourth, Europeans are describing themselves and these Africans at the same time. There is a density of effects at work here far beyond a notion of expansion.[331]

What Jennings describes is how Europe used a variety of political means to render its own aesthetic judgments of non-European people as theological truth around which the "new" world could be built. Stripped of their land, displacement left persons open to the aesthetic judgments of European colonizers; their identities were divorced from geography and written on via skin color. Such judgments followed the same logic of Mignolo's "zero point," a scale where whiteness became the organizing principle around which people globally were organized. Hence, while whiteness enjoyed the invisibility of functioning as the organizing conceptual frame, blackness was simultaneously constructed as its ever-visible counterweight to be used in Europe's reconfiguration of the world.

More problematic was the content of such aesthetic judgments. Jennings notes how a comparative racial scale was used by colonizers to report back to authorities about the people they were encountering. However, since whiteness was the zero point, colonizers measured beauty and characteristics in terms of their closeness with presumed European qualities. Hence, blackness was not only construed as ugly, but also increasingly associated with savagery, debasement, and the like; in essence, the opposite of the qualities Europe casted of itself.

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[331] Jennings, 24. My italics.

Coupled with the next two trajectories, these mythic representations became the common-sense norms in European minds, and eventually, the world.

Ecclesial Authority

The theological significance of this process becomes increasingly clear when considering a second critical feature: *ecclesial authority*. If the original construction of blackness relied solely on Europe's aesthetic judgments in relation to itself as the invisible norm, then it was the added layer of ecclesial authority that allowed such aesthetic judgments to be grounded in (colonialist Christian) theological terms. Jennings and Mignolo alike note the significance here. Expounding on the previously mentioned papal authority to demarcate land between European countries, Mignolo states explicitly, "The authority of the pope to divide the planet and to offer it to Spanish and Portuguese monarchs was indeed an act of sovereign authority, not only political but epistemic. For the act of tracing a line dividing the Atlantic means that there is an epistemic sovereign: God has the knowledge backing up the legality of the decision, and He is also in control of the rules and acts of knowing."[332] Jennings goes further, however. While also acknowledging the obvious audacity of both papal and monarchical authority to reconfigure the world in the name of God, Jennings discloses the more insidious ways in which ecclesial and political leadership adapted theological content to narrate their own imperialist activity:

> In his *Chronicle of the Capture of Ceuta* Zurara masterfully ascribes to the prince the trappings of anointed sonship. His mother, Queen Philippa, is described in *theotokos*-like ways. Her deathbed imperial oration to her sons, especially to Henry, prophesies and commands him to lead the elite of the nation to the glory that is their due. This holy beginning of his reign is further established by the appearance of the Virgin Mary next to Philippa as she lay dying. On her deathbed Philippa contemplates the divine, transfigured in the Holy Virgin's presence. The religious reality of Prince Henry approximates that of

[332] Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 79.

> the chronicle. A very pious and theologically astute man, he was known to quote Scripture to strengthen his arguments and had even considered taking religious vows.[333]

In highlighting this portion of Zurara's chronicle, Jennings illustrates the entanglement of ecclesial authority with a deeper understanding of God's providence. This heinous association allowed Europeans to mask the brutality of their conquests, presenting them instead as acts of God saving the world through Christian missions. These presumptions of divine sanctioning were connected to the aesthetic judgments previously highlighted, casting the construction of blackness – and its presumed sub-humanity – as a "natural" (read: ordained) reality to be discovered; a mere fact of life.

Script(uraliz)ing Sub-humanity

Casting blackness as the qualitative antithesis to whiteness, and eventually the face of evil, became cemented in the colonial consciousness via one final historical feature I highlight: *theological discourse*. It was ultimately the content of theological reflection – as it was *colored* by aesthetic judgments and justified by ecclesial claims of divine authority – that rendered the presumed sub-humanity of blackness scriptural. Jennings notes how doctrines of *Election* and *Salvation* were interpreted through Europe's racial scale, which resulted in a transference of Jewish election to Europeans while the presumed reprobate nature of Africans presumably left them incapable of achieving salvation on their own. Hence, it was up to European missionary efforts (via colonization) to bring salvation to Africans. Europeans believed that Africans were "brute beasts" without a culture. Therefore, European missionaries bore the (political)

[333] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 25.

responsibility of saving Africans, which also meant taming and "civilizing" them for a life of servitude (unto God).[334]

Jennings also highlights the more formal theological ways in which the world was reshaped in black and white. Highlighting the writings of José de Acosta, Jennings demonstrates how Acosta's doctrine of *Creation* successfully narrated the New World scripturally on the aesthetic and political foundations of European epistemology. In essence, Acosta made theological sense of native people around the world by supplanting their local knowledge about themselves with his own creationist interpretation of how they fit into the larger scheme of Europe's perceived Election.[335] Acosta built on Europe's assumption of divine sanctioning to begin the discursive process of speaking for non-European peoples. He named land, animals, plants, but also included native people around the world in the list of "objects" he sought to understand (on Europe's behalf).[336]

Acosta's theologizing reflects what I highlighted previously about the imposition of Western epistemology. When considering the theological content that he produced, coupled with his political and theological prominence in the Jesuit order, one realizes how deeply formative his work was for the colonial enterprise. Acosta's theology provided a foundation on which theologians and philosophers alike would increasingly construct blackness in opposition to whiteness. However, because of the extent to which European aesthetic judgments and ecclesial authority were already in place, assumptions of blackness as a sub-human essence was an assumed norm that shaped European thought prior to any formal theologizing. Hence, black

[334] Jennings, 34.
[335] Jennings, 84–91.
[336] Jennings, 91.

bodies were marked from the beginning, and were subsequently read back into the scriptures throughout Europe's (re)construction of the "Western" world.

Together, these three trajectories disclose the triune ways European imperialists used theology – via its political role and discursive power – to reconfigure a world wherein black bodies were justifiably marked as uniquely sub-human based on their being cast as "natural resources" along with other recently exploited aspects of nature. The success of these theo-political advances was further grounded by race – understood by skin color – in the way that black bodies were cast as the antithesis of whiteness. Such a construction of blackness provided the epistemological, economic, and ultimately theological foundation on which coloniality constructed the "modern" world. Black bodies were marked, presumably by God, and could provide the modern machine the tools, fuel, and justification it needed to remake the world in its own image.

Marked: "Beasts"

With a deeper foundation of inhumanity established, black men were marked as the "beasts" from which society would perpetually need to be saved. This totalizing image was constructed through a confluence of theologically rooted racial, gender, and sexual stereotypes. Assaults on black sexuality specifically have been a primary means of oppression employed by white culture.[337] More specifically, complementary stereotypes inscribed onto black women and men were used to justify enslaving, raping, and ultimately killing black people. The prevailing image written onto black men was that of the oversexualized "buck," or "beast." This image was constructed based on assumptions that black men and women were sexually out of control,

[337] Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1999).

coupled with the white male's infatuation with the physicality of black men; namely the size of the penis. Womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas notes, "Black male sexual prowess has become almost legend in the stereotypic logic of White culture. The idea that Black men possess an unusually large penis has only reinforced notions of their sexual aggressiveness and mastery."[338]

Theologian Dwight Hopkins illustrates the theo-biblical origins and evolution of this sexualized trope. His analysis also reflects Jennings' deeper awareness of the colonial legacy of these cultural and theological attacks, but does so with the specificity of black men and the role of sexuality in mind:

> The religious concept of sexualized Black beast body (cemented in a theology of antagonistic dualism and a theology of prudishism) did not fall from the sky. A historical legacy has birthed it with white, European Christianity as a prime architect. "The church officially reinforced this entanglement of aesthetics, carnality, and negativity of Blackness at the fifth-century Council of Toledo." White religious men decided that Satan was a monster with a huge penis. Three centuries later, one finds a naked black Devil painted in Europe.[339]

Subsequent historical developments contributed to the growing association of black men with a unique kind of carnality – via presumptions of our sexual character and abilities – that required the control of white Christianity. Ultimately, Hopkins' assessment reveals the extent to which black men were rendered synonymously with Satan; how the "mark of the beast" was situated at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in black men. This discloses what I see as the canonization of black sub-humanity.

Whereas Hopkins discloses the theological and religious rendering of "beast," this image is also situated culturally and historically. "Beast" is a stereotype (based in fantasy) that was used

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[338] Douglas, 45.
[339] Dwight N. Hopkins, *Black Theology—Essays on Gender Perspectives* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2017), 48.

to simultaneously control black bodies and maintain white supremacy amidst significant cultural shifts in America. More specifically, this image provided a narrative that justified white culture's continued dominance during the segregation era when extralegal methods of enslavement became necessary.[340] The narrative of "beast" played on/out white fears and was predicated on attempts at covering up the atrocities of slavery, particularly those enacted on black women's bodies.[341] In a sense, black women's bodies functioned as the material terrain on which Northern abolitionists and Southern slave apologists fought.

Northern abolitionists used black women's experiences of rape to challenge the atrocities of slavery. These debates were occasioned by the very real abuses black women were experiencing at the hands of white "masters" who could rape them without consequence. However, when these practices were exposed, Southern apologists shifted their attention to black men. In doing so, they also managed to change public perception in ways that centralized the black "beast" as a threat to American ideals vis-à-vis the presumed purity of white women:

> This extraordinary turn of public perception with regard to interracial sex occurred in the decades after emancipation, and the change would have far-reaching, enduring, and devastating consequences for race relations in the United States. The focus shifted gradually at first and then with increasing speed as Reconstruction failed and the South moved into an era of vicious segregation. The transition in perspective on interracial sexual dynamics was, in fact, a shift in white minds, for African Americans did not forget the sexual abuse etched in the memories of individual victims and in the complexions of the mixed-race population. Nonetheless, the concerted and consistent efforts of postbellum southern whites to define white women as the victims of black empowerment succeeded in reversing white America's perception of rape in the South and centralizing that new perception for its political gain. In essence, an aggressive northern-initiated attack drawn from the brutal realities of slavery shifted to an aggressive southern-initiated defense drawn from the fantastical fears of the Reconstruction era.[342]

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[340] Andrew B. Leiter, *In the Shadow of the Black Beast: African American Masculinity in the Harlem and Southern Renaissances*, Southern Literary Studies (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 3–16.
[341] Leiter, 17ff.
[342] Leiter, 18–19.

Whereas black women were objectified as the terrain on which debates about interracial sex during slavery were fought, black men became the terrain on which these fights took place during segregation. The atrocities enacted by white men were replaced by the potential victimhood of white women.[343] In other words, "beast" was a constructed narrative used to shift attention from the atrocities of slavery – as understood through the prism of black women's bodies – to the mythic presentation of black men as the ultimate threat to America after emancipation.[344]

Though "beast" as a formalized representation of black masculinity took center stage during segregation, the tendency to associate human beings with animals for the sake of justifying their mistreatment goes back much further. This point may seem redundant. To be certain, the crux of this chapter is anthropological. I have tried to demonstrate, quite explicitly, how the matrix of mistreatment visiting young black men is grounded by a pervasive anthropological failure; that society has failed to recognize the humanities of young black men. However, there is an important difference between noting assumptions of sub-humanity and exposing tendencies to render one an animal. Simply stating what one is not usually eventuates in apathy, or invisibility altogether. On the other hand, is-ness implies presence, and acknowledging presence invites attention; in this case, an often death-dealing kind of attention. To highlight the ways in which society simply fails to see the humanities of young black men is not enough. Rather, exposing the ways this failure includes an intentional envisioning of young black men as animals paints a fuller picture.

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[343] This point is crucial in understanding the intensity with which the "beast" narrative was received and reproduced culturally. In many respects, protecting the idea of white women as pure… Hence, to pose a threat to white women was to also threaten white cultural identity, particularly as the foundation of American relied on the presume supremacy of whiteness…

[344] Recall my analysis of "crucifixion."

In *The Mark of the Beast*, philosopher Mark Roberts traces developments of human-animal distinctions throughout early philosophy, science, and contemporary practices. He begins his analysis with Aristotle to demonstrate how one early conception of animals was that they were seen as "failed humans" in that they did not possess the capacity for moral reflection, which presumably implied the lack of ability for intentional action. The assumption was that animals and children were similar, except animals did not have the capacity to develop in the way children did.[345] This more benign view of the distinction became more malignant in the world of Rene Descartes. Descartes' perspective was shaped by a view of animals as purely mechanical, lacking a rational soul, and thereby "dumb" "beasts." However, Descartes also assumed that animals were physically superior by nature of their closeness with materiality and the environment, coupled with their presumed lack of rationality.[346] Hence, his conclusion was that human beings were of a higher, more positive, nature than animals and should therefore "master" them (read: use them for human purposes).[347]

These philosophical conclusions eventually made their way into the sciences. What is most notable here is that these conceptions coalesced with political developments that created oppression for Jews, women, and Africans based on mythic associations with animals. More specific to this project, however, animalizing Africans was one of colonialism's central tactics for justifying the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. After highlighting the ways Africans were packed like cargo on ships for economic efficiency, Roberts goes on to describe how associating blacks with animals was also *played out* (read: performed) on plantations in the form of slave markets, separating families, breeding, and forcing enslaved persons to work (and die) in the harshest

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[345] Mark S. Roberts, *The Mark of the Beast: Animality and Human Oppression* (West Lafayette, Ind: Purdue University Press, 2008), 3–7.
[346] His logic assumed a fundamentally inverse relationship between rationality and physicality.
[347] Roberts, *The Mark of the Beast*, 7–12.

inhuman conditions.[348] With regard to black men specifically, Robert's analysis highlights the ways "beast" brought assumptions of inhumanity and physical superiority together to create the perfect storm that continues to play out in the cycles of containment, crucifixion, and commodification previously highlighted.

Relational Performance: An Interpretive Interlude

Returning to relational performance can help interpret the foregoing analysis in a way that also provides a bridge to the next chapter. In this chapter, I have argued that society employs a three-pronged pitchfork of suffering that targets young black men in America, and that this complex dehumanization exists because of a deeper anthropological failure at work. This society has collectively failed to recognize young black male humanities, despite lip service given to post-raciality and equal opportunity. I have argued that colonial imperialism discloses a theo-political onslaught that created power dynamics that continue to exert control. I have also demonstrated how the image of "beast" was constructed historically, and the ways it took hold during slavery and was concretized during segregation. What I have not done, until now, is speak explicitly about how relational performance deepens our understanding of how "beast" continues to construct reality in insidious ways.

Relational performance, specifically in my analysis of role playing, suggests that "beast" is a cultural performance that has the power to construct and re-construct reality. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, performing a role constitutes both human selves and society, relationally. Let us consider the performance of "beast" in particular. On one hand, performing this "role" constitutes the self of the actor. Even if the person "playing this part" is

[348] Roberts, 61–72.

consciously aware of their own disavowal of the role, their continued performance of it has a constitutive (and reinforcing) effect on both their self and the contexts in which they perform. Furthermore, when considering the relational contingency of roles, performing "beast" in this way also reproduces the interpersonal politics and power dynamics embedded within the relational milieu. Societally, such performances reproduce the sociopolitical and ideological scripts that fund(ed) the very creation of "beast" in the first place.

Legibility and scripts come full circle. Legibility functions on the surface as merely the regulation of relating, but more insidiously as a way to maintain a social norm by requiring performances that then reinforce the presumed legitimacy of the norm/law embedded in the political process. In other words, prevailing standards for legibility normalize themselves by requiring participants to perform the norms embedded within them.[349] It is important to acknowledge that this view of legibility is prior to, and completely separate from, the variety of value judgments that may arise. Many will vehemently disagree with any explicit racist statements that say black men are (seen as) "beasts" in the United States. The assumption of such, however, still shapes relational performances in ways that reveal just how legible black male inhumanity is (i.e. racial bias when policing, clutching one's purse when walking past a group of young black men, etc.). These often-unwitting cultural performances reproduce the taken for granted assumptions embedded in the reality they construct, which contributes to a continued failure to recognize the humanities of young black men. Hence, "beast" is inscribed

[349] I use this term in the Foucauldian sense, where he argues the fundamental productivity of laws and lawmaking. Foucault suggests that laws supposedly function to regulate political life according to the social needs of protection, prohibition and the like. In this way, laws become taken for granted realities in relation to which people can *choose* to live. In more subtle ways, however, laws have the effect of "subjecting" persons to the norms embedded within, which ultimately constitutes them accordingly. In other words, laws – both written and unwritten – possess a productive power that often goes unquestioned because its function is couched in the mere regulation of social and political life. Taken from: Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 136. Also see: Michel Foucault, "Right of Death and Power over Life," in *The History of Sexuality, volume 1, An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980).

over and over again because it is what is already most legible in a country whose DNA is marked by the colonial reconfiguration of the world in black and white. Legibility, as mentioned previously, relates closely to scripts.

Scripts define what performances are recognizable; what is legible. They do this in two ways. First, they describe what is presumably the nature of things; both the way things are and the way things should be. Similar to a play or film, the writing of scripts creates the content of the production (i.e. the character traits of the villain, the plot, resolution, etc.). A script tells the overall narrative of the production. It imagines a reality that later relies on the performances involved to bring it to life. This way of understanding scripts points back to the colonial process of inscribing blackness – with attending assumptions of inhumanity (read: "beast") – onto African bodies. Norms, laws, and taken for granted realities that reflect these racist assumptions arise from the (in)script(ion)s that have been written. The "rules" of society take their cue from what is assumed to be "reality," which itself reflects only what has been naturalized. The problem, as is seen in the above analysis, is that "reality" is continually constructed based on the relational performances of all who participate. Hence, norms, laws, and rules are also products of social constructions that arise from the writing of scripts. This points to the second function of scripts; dictating performance.

The purpose of scripts is not just to describe the content of reality, it is also to dictate the performances that construct it. Actors in a play are given scripts so they know what role they are to play. They are told what to say, when to say it, how to say it, and the like. They are given detailed instructions for their respective parts in the overall production in which they are participating, and each part functions *synergistically* to bring the imagined narrative to life. Each actor's participation, however, is contingent on their ability and willingness to *play the part* in

such a way that makes real the role as has been written by the writer. If they choose not to play the role according to the way the script has been written, their participation is terminated and someone else is chosen to play the part.

Historically, black men were forced to play a role that assumed their inhumanity; that of the "beast." However, the consequences for not playing this role were far worse than simply terminating one's participation in a play, or movie. It was death. Performing "beast" became a literal survival mechanism during slavery. Then, in a strange twist during the segregation era, "beast" became something to be avoided at all cost. This was due to concocted myths about black men being sexual predators in pursuit of white women, and subsequent threats of lynching. In the next chapter, I will argue that "beast" continues to function strangely as something that black men must simultaneously perform and disavow as means of survival. My immediate focus is on "beast" in a more "positive" sense, as situated in the context of sport in a broader neoliberal context. Ultimately, relational performance functions as an interpretive lens that demonstrates how the ideological and political norms of our racist colonial history are recapitulated in contemporary neoliberalism's continued assault on black bodies in general, and young black men in particular. Using this lens, I demonstrate specifically how the image of "beast" continues to be reproduced through cultural performances in the contemporary United States. It connects the foregoing analysis of coloniality's construction of sub-humanity to contemporary neoliberalism's commercialization of (commodified) super-humanity in relation to young black men.

Chapter 5

Mark(et)ing the "Beast": Neoliberalism and the Commercialization of Super-humanity

Many today would say Malik is a "beast." The freshmen track star who possesses exceptional talent, can sprint faster than anyone else on the team with seeming ease. Watching him tear up the track, passing up opposing runners, it is not a stretch to imagine hearing someone in the stands saying, "Man, Malik is a beast!" This phrase, "he's a beast," has become commonplace in the world of sport. NFL Network has a whole segment devoted to highlighting exceptional performances called, "He's a BEAST!" Commentators, players, and fans alike regularly refer to Lebron James, and others, as "beasts" when watching them throw down gravity-defying dunks or dominating a game single-handedly. Even the most popular workout playlist on the music streaming platform Spotify is entitled, "Beast Mode." The image of "beast" is common parlance in virtually every aspect of the athletic world.

This notion of "beast," however, has become so commonplace that it has bled over into industries outside of sport to signify a similar kind of professional dominance. In a recent BBC interview about his film *Black KKKlansman*, famed director Spike Lee is asked about the film's cast members. After describing the talent of John David Washington – Denzel Washington's son – Spike Lee begins to talk with movie critic Ali Plumb about Washington's co-star, Adam Driver:

Lee: And then let's talk about Adam Driver.

Plumb: He is, I mean astonishing. He's got so much work to do.[350]

[350] While many in the United States understand this phrase to suggest the need for improvement, Plumb's use of it is meant to signify exceptional acting talent. By suggesting, "he's got so much work to do," he is essentially saying that, because Driver is so talented, he should be in many more films – and that he presumably will.

Lee: He… He's a beast.[351]

After the interviewer laughs at the statement, Lee clarifies his comments by stating explicitly that his reference to "beast" means "good."[352] He then proceeds to talk about Driver's exceptional talent and unusually broad range as an actor as the rationale for his referring to him as a "beast."

My attention to the image of "beast" as a celebration of exceptional talent and dominance is informed by my own experience as a collegiate athlete, and the experiences of the young men who participated in this study. Drawing on our conversations more directly in this chapter, I critically analyze the seeming celebration of "beast" with respect to young black men and their supposedly unique physical capabilities. I situate my analysis of "beast" in the context of neoliberalism to illustrate how what seem to be contemporary celebrations of super-human talent are actually insidious recapitulations of sub-human inscriptions endemic to colonial imperialism; in other words, a persistent performance of other-than-humanness, but now shrouded in commodifying praise. After exposing this persistent thread of inhumanity, I use relational performance to demonstrate the links between the image of "beast" and society's ritualized mistreatment of young black men.

Reflections on "Beast" from Young Black Athletes

I invited my co-researchers to offer their thoughts on the image of "beast" both as something celebrated and potentially problematic.[353] Two significant themes arose from their

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[351] Spike Lee, "Movies that Made Me," interview by Ali Plumb, Movies with Ali Plumb, BBC Radio, August 24, 2018, audio/video, 7:12, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xkeNEZ-G-Rw

[352] Lee's clarification is grounded in his awareness that he is interviewing with the BBC in Europe, where presumably his reference to "beast" needed clarification due to different cultural and linguistic norms.

[353] I did not frame "beast" as problematic in such a way that shaped their responses, however. Rather, we problematized the image through our conversations, which allowed us to think critically together about all angles of the image.

responses. First, each of the men I interviewed reflected a sense of feeling complimented when referred to as a "beast" in the context of their sport. Even while our discussions hinged on critical engagement with the many issues embedded in this image, there was a common awareness of just how seductive its positive use can be. When asked how it would make him feel if coaches, teammates, or fans referred to him as a "beast" when describing him as a football player, Jimmy said, "I'd, you know, I'd feel good. Obviously as a male, that helps. I think you can't help but to smile either on the outside or inside. Um, I don't think that makes me pump my chest, but I think when they refer to me as a 'beast' that means they have somewhat of a following of me."[354] Greg, a third-year player who is currently pursuing film school, responded to the same question by speaking to the regularity of "beast" in his upbringing, and the way it motivates, "Just on the face, I'd be like, 'Shit, I'm doing my thing. I'm "beasting." I'm cold.' Because when we were younger we used to say 'beast' all the time. So I think, on face, I would just take it as, 'Oh shit, I know I'm a beast. I'm in this hoe eating.' "[355]

"Beast" is common parlance in basketball as well. In a recent podcast episode of *Jalen & Jacoby*, Jalen Rose, former NBA star, responded to his cohost David Jacoby about an elite performance NBA star Giannis Antetokounmpo had against another team. When describing what he liked most about Antetokounmpo's performance, Rose stated:

> Now when he dunks, he does it angrily. It's one thing to get the bucket, because you're the biggest, tallest dude out there. It's another thing to do with ferocity. And that's what I saw from him, a "beast" out there! He's taking it personal on every possession. That's what I appreciate.[356]

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[354] Interview with Jimmy, March 23, 2018.
[355] Phrases such as "I'm doing my thing," "I'm cold," and Greg's reference to "eating" are all colloquial references to dominating performances in his respective sport. He is describing the way in which his being referred to as a "beast" would signify his exceptional performance and achievement. Interview with Greg, February 7, 2018.
[356] "Giannis Gets Freaky, Warriors New Reality, NFL Week Preview and More!!! From Jalen & Jacoby," accessed January 16, 2020, https://www.stitcher.com/s?eid=64850700.

While Rose made his final comments, Jacoby cosigned his statements with interjections of "yep, yep" and "I like it." He then responded to Rose's "beast" comment by saying, "He's snarling, snarling, lifting up the knees while he hangs on the rim. I like it a lot, what I saw from the Greek Freak."[357] If this language is not obvious enough to illustrate both the regularity and weight of this term in basketball, the fact that Antetokounmpo has been given the nickname "The Greek Freak," which suggests that he is a "freak of nature," further demonstrates how "beast" is used as a strange celebration of black male athleticism.[358]

Bilal, a fifth year NFL player who has been vocal about racial politics in sport and has tackled such issues as the Flint Water Crisis, offered probably the most critical perspective on "beast" when responding to the same question:

> I never really liked the term "beast." I never really liked it personally just because I think it kind of discredits a little bit of… well, it doesn't thoroughly explain the process of a lot of the hard work it takes to be successful. Just calling somebody a "beast" sometimes just says, like, "aw man, he's just different… he's just different." And of course, everyone's different. Some people have the ability to do other things that some people don't, that makes someone more athletically inclined, but it's a lot of hard work to becoming a "beast." If you want to be a "beast" you've got to be strong. That means he works his ass off in that weight room; he's conditioning like crazy. You know, I think "devoted" is a better term. "That's a devoted individual," you know, a person that puts his mind to something and was like, "nah, I'm not gonna stop until this has been achieved." And I think that's a much more elegant way to explain an individual, especially when it comes to athletics because we so often put athletes in this *animalistic* type of realm of life; that calling them a "beast" is only prolonging that to me.[359]

Even while Bilal is critiquing the shortsightedness of calling someone a "beast," he too recognizes that its use is meant to give praise to persons for their exceptional abilities.

Despite the common sentiment that "beast" was something to be aspired to in sport, there arose a second theme that disclosed the more problematic nature of this image. While I did have

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[357] "Giannis Gets Freaky, Warriors New Reality, NFL Week Preview and More!!! From Jalen & Jacoby."
[358] The phrase "freak of nature" is sometimes used in a way similar to "beast," and was more prevalent before Marshawn Lynch's persona as "Beast Mode" bolstered the use of "beast" in common parlance.
[359] Interview with Bilal, March 23, 2018. My italics.

a hunch that the sociopolitical consequences for "beast" were uniquely negative for young black men, I did not foresee the extent to which even using this phrase to ascribe praise was also unique to black athletes.[360] When asked about specific players being "beasts," my co-researchers most readily gave examples of the most (physically) dominant black players. This wasn't necessarily surprising, given the predominance of black players in The NFL and the NBA. However, a telling tension showed up when I invited us to ponder together "beast" in relation to white players. There was an overall reluctance to ascribe this image to even the most dominant white players, regardless of their style of play. Bilal's perspective, again, was illustrative, "And it's funny too though, because they only describe black athletes as 'beasts' too. I just noticed that. I'm thinking about that. I'm like… they don't ever call Tom Brady a 'beast.' They just call him the GOAT."[361]

Interestingly, when I asked my other interviewees whether Tom Brady could be a "beast," each of them wanted to make an allowance it, but seemingly struggled to do so. DeShawn said that he *could* consider Tom Brady a "beast," but that it would be "a different style." He went on, "When people think of "beast" they think of someone who is "savage." You can be a "beast" in different aspects; being smart, a true team player. He's mastered the game."[362] When asked the same question, Greg responded:

> Um, he would, *but in a different context*… He would be a "beast" because I guess… I guess you don't hear it as much though, but I think he would be a "beast" in the way he, kind of, I guess he can turn up in the fourth quarter and stuff like that, and kind of just his résumé. Like if you look down at Tom Brady's career stats, you'd be like, "Dang, he was a "beast" when he played."

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[360] To be sure, white players are still called "beasts" at times, particularly those players who play positions that rely on physical dominance more than that of a quarterback (i.e. linebackers, etc.). However, such ascriptions are more intentionally given in these circumstances, whereas "beast" functions as a kind of default category for dominant black players.

[361] GOAT is an acronym for Greatest Of All Time.

[362] Interview with Deshawn, February 6, 2018. My italics.

Seeking clarification, I asked, "But you mentioned you don't hear it as much?"

> Yea, no… Yea, you don't necessarily hear somebody say, "Tom Brady was a 'beast,' " you'll hear them say, "Man he was cold," or like, you know, "he was the GOAT," or something like that. I don't think "beast" in that context fits him.[363]

Collectively, my co-researchers suggested that Tom Brady *could* be a "beast," but not in the same sense as Marshawn Lynch, or other dominant black players named.[364] In order to ascribe this image to Brady, they had to somehow recast its parameters in a way that moved beyond the typical connotations. Hence, these interviews extended my thinking by revealing how, even while "beast" has become a commonplace way of acknowledging greatness in sport for all players, it remains an image unconsciously reserved for black athletes.

Considered critically, my co-researchers' comments point to the way in which Tom Brady – and other white players – can transcend "beast," while the best black players cannot. Brady can be called the "GOAT," with his greatness construed as a kind of intellectual superiority; traits traditionally associated with humanity.[365] "Beast" when referring to black players, however, assumes a kind of physical dominance or brute force that signifies age-old tropes of "savagery." There is no need for critical intelligence, and therefore one does not need to be human to succeed. Rather, it behooves black players to embody a kind of animalistic approach because it remains the most legible performance toward the ends of black athletic success.[366] Unfortunately, this image of "beast" follows black players off the field and into

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[363] Interview with Greg, February 7, 2018.

[364] This distinction could be due also to different positions, and different styles of play. "Beast" is typically associated with physical force, aggression, and other characteristics that point to overt dominance. Therefore, a broader study of this question would need to ask if white players that play positions that rely on overt dominance could be "beasts" similarly to their black counterparts. I suspect that there is still a degree of separation, but it would make for a more thorough treatment of this question, nonetheless.

[365] GOAT is a widely used acronym in sport that refers to someone considered to be the Greatest Of All Time.

[366] This is point is further illustrated by the simultaneous evolution, and persistence of certain positions being reserved for black players. What are known as the "skilled" positions in football are overwhelmingly played by black players. These include running backs, wide receivers, defensive backs

locker rooms, press conferences, and ultimately their daily lives. They cannot escape it, regardless of their many other endeavors that speak more to their humanity than some presumed other-than-human existence.

A Case in Point: Marshawn Lynch

Marshawn Lynch is the quintessential "beast" when it comes to competitive sport. Nicknamed "Beast Mode," Lynch epitomizes the dominating, seemingly super-human talent that is often associated with this ascription of greatness. Off the field, he represents the kind of success every young black athlete hopes to attain. He owns a store front in Oakland that features his own clothing line named after "Beast Mode," teaches financial literacy classes to kids and young adults in the inner city, and has been featured on numerous television shows built around his unique personality.[367] Most recently, Lynch has started buying properties in his hometown to combat the displacement of members of his community due to gentrification. "Beast Mode" has become a household name, and Lynch's place in the public mind has become an inspiration for other young black men aspiring to similar kinds of success, both "on" and "off" the field.[368]

Unfortunately, there are also many for whom Lynch's association with "beast" signifies the kind of "savagery" that reeks of colonial inscriptions of sub-humanity. He wears his hair in locs,[369] is physically strapping with tattoos, and not afraid to assert his voice even when it means

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[367] Note how his character portrayals are most often "himself." See: "Marshawn Lynch," IMDb, accessed June 5, 2020, http://www.imdb.com/name/nm2834234/.

[368] The notion of "on" and "off" the field helps describe how "beast" functions in one way while playing a sport, but how it functions differently outside the context of sport. However, this distinction also uniquely describes how young black men get read in ways that are most legible – as "beasts" – regardless of where they are, or how they are performing. In other words, it gets at the way "beast" implicates all young black men whether they play sports or not. More on this later in this section.

[369] Some call this hairstyle "dreadlocks." I resist this terminology because it reflects a history where this particular style of hair was seen – at least by some – as "dreadful." Even in contemporary circumstances, locs are associated with "thuggery" and such, which reflects this historical way in which even black men's (and women's) hairstyles were read in light of "beast."

disrupting the natural flow of things. In this sense, Lynch is similar to athletes such as Lebron James, Colin Kaepernick, and countless others who give voice to racial inequality, abuses of power, and an overall failure to recognize the humanity of black men (who are also athletes). Lynch provides the best example for my analysis of "beast" because of the way the aforementioned trajectories converge on him. He has become the face of this phrase both as he epitomizes athletic dominance and the way he exposes society's tendency to refer back to its own assumptions of black male inhumanity when black men do not comply. Analyzing Lynch also provides a bridge into broader considerations of the way neoliberalism uses "beast" to create, maintain, and reproduce the very circumstances from which young black men are trying to escape.

"Run Through a Motherfucker's Face…": Necessary Grit, Misunderstood Essence

In what has become an iconic 60 Minutes Sports interview with John Wertheim, Lynch opens their dialogue by providing a literal and figurative picture of his approach to life and sports. Upon being asked what he learned from his uncle Lorenzo, who also played in the NFL, Lynch said this:

> We went to his house one time, and uh… And he told me something like this… He say, "It's 4th and 1, the running back is coming through the hole. I'm going to kiss that motherfucker in the mouth." That's what he told me, "Smell his breath." And this was a young age too. I think that's when it just clicked in my mind that if you just run through somebody's face a lot of people ain't gonna be able to take that, over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over… (pauses) and over and over and over and over again. They just not gon' want that.[370]

[370] "Run through a Motherfucker Face - YouTube," accessed March 10, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8Rh6KuuH6w.

Wertheim asks, “Do you think there is a deeper metaphor there? To which Lynch bluntly replies, “Run through a motherfucker’s face, then you don’t have to worry about ‘em no more.”

With this now iconic response, Lynch captured the kind of cultural grit necessary for many young black men to survive their sociopolitical conditions. Lynch grew up in Oakland, California, where he says he was regularly exposed to violence, drug paraphernalia, and an overall lack of resources. His gritty approach was appropriate, then, because it helped him deal with these difficulties without succumbing to them. Beyond Lynch’s own circumstances, however, his statement also created a language that describes “Beast Mode” in ways that translate well into the world of sport. In a pragmatic sense, he authorizes an approach to life and work that proves advantageous for many young black men trying to survive. To “run through a motherfucker’s face,” repeatedly, speaks to one method of resisting the onslaught of sociopolitical abuses that target young black men.

More problematically, however, is the way society misreads Lynch’s grit for bad character. During the height of his career, Lynch began a media protest where he refused to participate in interviews because of the way reporters routinely created negative stories about players, in addition to the ways they oversimplified his success.[371] Lynch was explicit about his distrust for the media, and the fact that they only wanted to talk to him when he was putting up big numbers; they were nowhere to be found whenever he went home to Oakland.[372] Lynch’s decision to refuse interviews went against the NFL’s league policy, however. Consequently, he

[371] When Bilal made the point about his hard work in his disavowal of “beast” as a potential complement, he also referenced Lynch’s training regimen to illustrate his own dedication and commitment. In doing so, Bilal cited his first-hand knowledge of how hard Marshawn Lynch trained every off-season because they worked with the same trainer.

[372] To “put up big numbers” refers to elite performances that are measured by great statistics, respective to one’s sport and position. For instance, when Kobe Bryant scored 81 points in one of his NBA games one might say, “Wow, he put up big numbers!” In Lynch’s case, this phrase refers more specifically to games when he had multiple touchdowns and/or a lot of rushing yards.

was fined tens of thousands of dollars each time he did not comply. Persistent to resist, he figured out a creative way to protest while still abiding by league policy: he would show up for the interviews and answer questions with the now famous line, "I'm just here so I won't get fined." Lynch was able to successfully and creatively protest without financial penalty simply by being present (but essentially silent) for the allotted time mandated for player interviews.[373]

Despite his seeming victory with his media protest, Lynch still became the target of character assaults. He was referred to as a "thug" and a "bad sport" by news outlets on several occasions. The assaults got worse a few years ago when he joined Colin Kaepernick in his protest of the National Anthem.[374] From the time he returned from retirement in 2017, Lynch never stood for the National Anthem in a show of solidarity with what Kaepernick was trying to accomplish related to police brutality. However, during an NFL game that was hosted in Mexico City Lynch made an explicit statement against Donald Trump and his immigration policies toward Mexico: he stood for the Mexican national anthem and sat for the Star-Spangled Banner. Not only did this draw more negative attention from some news outlets and reporters, but the president himself essentially called Marshawn Lynch "unpatriotic" for his political statement.[375]

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[373] While the League dictates that players must talk to the media for a certain amount of time, it doesn't dictate what should be the content of these conversations. Lynch's method was brilliant in that he fulfilled his requirement while staying true to his values and rationale for not talking to the media.

[374] Colin Kaepernick's protest initially began when Kaepernick stayed seated on the bench when the rest of his teammates stood for the National Anthem prior to the start of a game. Kaepernick eventually moved his method of protesting to kneeling during the National Anthem, and many other players followed. For Kaepernick, Lynch, and others this protest was about raising public consciousness to the persistence of blacks being killed by police officers, while the officers themselves were not held accountable – in many cases, these officers were given paid leave and then able to return to work after the media firestorms around particular cases died down. These protests reveal the depth and breadth of humanitarian concerns so many black athletes carry with them. However, because they are often cast as "dumb jocks" or "just athletes" who should "shut up and dribble," their displays of humanity are not recognized as such. Instead, as I argue is the case with Lynch, they are read in terms of negative tropes that presume underlying criminality that more fundamentally references society's assumptions of black inhumanity (i.e. "Beast.).

[375] *Marshawn Lynch | Real Time with Bill Maher (HBO)*, accessed March 10, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=skJ_-iVl3ow.

If this was only about Marshawn Lynch, it would not be as problematic. The reality is, however, that Lynch serves as one example of a systemic tendency to only appreciate young black men when we comply with the status quo. When black men choose to resist and assert our agency and voices, even for worthy causes, society pulls the *trump* card of young black male thuggery.[376] This tendency not only shades the contributions black athletes make, but it completely ignores the (love for) humanity embedded in our rationales for resistance. I have already mentioned Lynch's commitment to economic literacy in his community, and his many other contributions, but recognizing the deeper commitments that fund his resistance is equally as important. Only a human being who cares about other human beings – and who exhibits a critical racial consciousness – would commit his time and resources to fending off gentrification and displacement of the most vulnerable in Oakland.[377]

In response to Trump's assault, Lynch asserted, "You call me unpatriotic, but I mean, you know, you come to my neighborhood, where I'm from, and you'll see me take the shirt off my back and give it to someone in less need. I mean, what would you call that?"[378] In an unexpected departure from his usual, "I'm just here so I won't get fined" during Super Bowl XLIX media day, Lynch laid into reporters, explaining to them what matters to him most:

> Hey look, I mean, all week I done told y'all w'sup. And for some reason y'all continue to come back and do the same thing that y'all did… I don't know what story y'all trying to get out of me; I don't know what image y'all trying to portray of me; but it don't matter what y'all think… what y'all say about me… because when I go home at night, the same people that I look in the face, my family… That's all that really matters to me. Y'all can go and make up whatever y'all wanna make up, because I don't say enough for y'all to go and put anything out on me. But I'll come to y'all's event and y'all shove cameras and

[376] The notion of black male "thuggery" more fundamentally registers in the public mind (of white society) as a need to control a population that is presumably out of order. Hence, containing and/or crucifying black men is seen as necessary because of deeper assumptions that we are criminals threatening the well-being of society.
[377] This is not something a "thug" or a "beast" would do.
[378] *Marshawn Lynch | Real Time with Bill Maher (HBO)*.

> microphones down my throat, but when I'm at home in my environment, I don't see y'all.[379]

For Lynch, family and his community are what matters most, especially since there are concerted attempts at removing residents behind some pornographic fetishization of "the hood" that makes wealthy white people want to go in and "flip" the very houses that (usually poor) people have created a lifetime of memories in. He has dedicated himself to helping young people of color in Oakland, fighting against gentrification in his community, and playing the game he loves. Lynch refuses to take part in what he feels is an overly negative and superficial aspect of professional sports: media coverage and the stories they tell about athletes; namely, black athletes. Like Lynch, other young black athletes are also deeply concerned with issues affecting black communities, and many of them have dedicated their time and resources to addressing issues affecting other young black men specifically. These efforts not only tell a different story than what we typically hear about black athletes, but they also reveal the deeper humanitarian concerns these young men have. Hence, part of my task is to continue the stories they are telling about themselves, which will hopefully make legible their humanities to a society hell-bent on seeing us as animals.

Neoliberalism: Epistemology and Economy, revisited

Marshawn Lynch also provides a bridge into my analysis of the deeper cultural that the image of "beast" is doing to young black men. I contend that the contemporary celebration of "beast" functions as a recapitulation of "beast" construed colonially. The celebration of "beast" today is based on a strange kind of super-human ascription that mirrors the sub-human

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[379] *Marshawn Lynch Lectures The Media*, accessed March 10, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lAe-caMBjDg.

inscriptions that marked black men during colonialism, developed during slavery, and culminated with Jim Crow. Calling a black man a "beast," historically, signified inhuman assumptions (via sub-humanity) that gave way to literal chains and lynchings. Calling Lynch a "beast" today still signifies inhumanity, but does so in a way that more acutely appreciates the commodifying potential (read: super-humanity) of Lynch's black athletic body. Yet his humanity remains illegible, as is evidenced by the ease with which appeals to his presumed essence as a "thug" go viral when he refuses to comply.[380]

Recall the analysis of the deeper assumptions in black criminality (chapter four). One can see how character assaults such as "thug" are more deeply grounded in assumptions of young black male inhumanity. "Beast," then, becomes a signifier of a particular status that black men have in society. We are celebrated when we can produce and are compliant, but we are discarded when we resist. Moreover, a "beast" – even when used in a celebratory sense – remains inhuman. The best a "beast" can hope for is an appreciation that never leaves the realm of commodification. It is what critics David J. Leonard and C. Richard King call "new racism," described by "the way in which blackness is commodified even as it is pathologized and criminalized within public discourse."[381]

Leonard and King's "new racism" speaks to contemporary circumstances where buying into commodification becomes a best-case scenario for young black men trying to escape the

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[380] "Going viral" is a popular social media reference for when something quickly gains popularity to the point of finding its way on virtually every social media user's platform. In other words, "going viral" is another way of noting the rapid movement of news, images, or other happenings due to sharing and resharing among social media users. Troubling as it is, something typically only goes viral when it is widely recognized as, in some way, "true." Hence, the recognizability of appeals to Lynch being a "thug" bespeaks broader assumptions that this sentiment is, at least in part, an accurate depiction of him; or at least one that is common enough for it to "ring true" when seen.
[381] David J. Leonard and C. Richard King, eds., *Commodified and Criminalized: New Racism and African Americans in Contemporary Sports*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 8. David J. Leonard and C. Richard King, eds., *Commodified and Criminalized: New Racism and African Americans in Contemporary Sports* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 8.

potential consequences of criminalization. The worst-case scenario remains literal chains (containment) and lynching (crucifixion) but is now veiled by the possibility of "success" associated with black athletic achievement. Herein lies a contemporary dilemma facing young black men (and athletes). Either play the game, knowing (to various degrees) that you are being used for a larger economic purpose, or resist, and run the risk of being criminalized and discarded accordingly. This dilemma can be more deeply understood with an analysis of neoliberalism, particularly as I understand it to be a recapitulation of the tragic colonial interplay of economy and epistemology.

Epistemology (and economy): A Colonial Groundwork

Analyzing neoliberalism can help to make sense of how a cultural "celebration" could create death-dealing circumstances for young black men, while simultaneously bolstering a narrative that suggests young black men are killing ourselves. Neoliberalism, in my analysis, is understood as a cultural performance that employs *epistemology* and *economy* in a mutual exchange meant to maintain extreme wealth for some at the expense of others.[382] I imagine neoliberalism to be a recapitulation of colonial imperialism; colonialism 2.0, as it were. It similarly employs an interplay of epistemology and economy in a way that constructs a reality based on mythic images and policies that assume their own truth, while normalizing them through ritualized performances. Specific to this project, "beast" functions as one commercialized image neoliberalism uses to recruit young black men into our own undoing.

[382] Bruce Rogers-Vaughn, *Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age*, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 43ff, 54–61. Rogers-Vaughn demonstrates how inequality functions as a foundational reality in a neoliberal society. He brings together theory and statistics to illustrate trends of inequality, showing specifically how deregulation and exportation – two tenets of neoliberalism – result in increased wealth stratification. Bruce Rogers-Vaughn, *Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 43ff, 54–61.

I have already demonstrated in chapter four how "beast" is grounded in black inhumanity, and how it became a central image on which whiteness was constructed in relation to black men specifically. "Beast" was able to be imposed due to the blatant politics of slavery and state-sanctioned racism (Jim Crow, etc.). Today, racism takes on a more insidious nature. Its existence is pervasive and yet often missed due to the fact that it is covered with a cloak of "post-raciality."[383] In fact, the myth that we live in a post-racial society gives "beast" strength because it strips it of its connection to colonial inscriptions of inhumanity. Rather, "beast" is cast as a superlative that is presumed to be completely devoid of racial undertones.

It is important to note here that I do not understand neoliberalism to be a static thing. Rather, it is a cultural process that is constantly being reproduced and rearticulated (read: performed) through our embodiments, cultural participation, and socio-economic policies. Pastoral theologian Bruce Rogers-Vaughn prefers the term "neoliberalization" because it more fully captures the way in which society is able to continuously adapt itself to the concerns of free market capitalism despite cultural and legislative changes.[384] In this sense, neoliberalism functions as a kind of *relational performance* that centers free market capitalism as its guiding ethic in the production of reality. And as much as neoliberalization hinges on its prioritizing the free market (economy), its dominance – like colonial imperialism – is largely epistemological.

On one hand, the neoliberalization of society *employs* myths that disclose its epistemological reach. "Beast," in service to post-raciality, is more deeply grounded by

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[383] "Post-raciality" refers to the contemporary narrative that society is post-racial, and refers to those who appeal to "not seeing color" when discussing race and racism in the U.S.

[384] Rogers-Vaughn, 36. My treatment of neoliberalism reflects Rogers-Vaughn's use of "neoliberalization." Roger-Vaughn underscores the "cultural process" of neoliberalization in addition to neoliberalism as a political and economic structure in order to highlight its malleable and adaptive characters. I will use both terms interchangeably throughout this chapter. By linking neoliberalism with relational performance specifically, it will become obvious that I intend for it also to be understood as a cultural process rather than only a created structure.

individualism, meritocracy, and the overarching "America Dream."[385] Together these myths create a world where we are taught to assume that any person, no matter where they are from or what they have been through, can make it; "make it," of course, meaning to achieve the level of extreme wealth enjoyed by the top 1% of U.S. society.[386] The reality is, however, income and wealth inequalities are central aspects of neoliberal society that are held in place by the belief that "if I just work hard enough, I can be just as rich as them."

On the other hand, neoliberalism does not just function *on* an epistemological plane, it *is* itself an epistemology that exerts dominance by its ability to reshape human existence accordingly. Highlighting the hegemonic means of neoliberalism, Rogers-Vaughn suggests, "Neoliberalism is *both* a form of hegemonic control that serves the interests of financial elites *and a form of governance that adapts to local circumstances and shapes individual subjects and their personal relationships*."[387] He also speaks to the way in which neoliberalism more broadly functions as a "global *rationality* that organizes all of life…"[388] What Rogers-Vaughn highlights, though not using the same language, is the fact that epistemology is both the *nature* and *means* of neoliberalism. It employs certain myths meant to orient the public to particular ways of being, then requires such ways of being for survival.

Similar to colonialism's construction of whiteness, epistemology is neoliberalism's primary vehicle for constructing the world around capitalist ideals. Such ideals, however, are

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[385] Stephen J. McNamee and Robert K. Miller, *The Meritocracy Myth*, 2nd ed (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 1–11. McNamee and Miller demonstrate how these myths interact to create a system of belief that holds capitalist ideals in place. In this sense, they speak to epistemological argument I am making, even while not using the language as such.

[386] Rogers-Vaughn, *Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age*, 56. Of the statistics Rogers-Vaughn draws on to demonstrate the centrality of inequality in a neoliberal society, he reveals that the top 1% own 85.1 of household income growth. He also reports that the same 1% also own 40% of the total wealth for the country, with the majority of recent growth being consolidated in the hands of the top .01%. Also see: bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 70-79.

[387] Rogers-Vaughn, 54–55. My italics.

[388] Rogers-Vaughn, 44.

built on a foundation of white supremacy. Pastoral theologian Cedric Johnson argues that to sufficiently understand neoliberalism one must also recognize its fundamentally racialized character:

> …the neoliberal system that emerged in the United States is deeply racialized. White supremacist ideals did not end with the emergence of the neoliberal age. An alliance of political and ideological forces coalesced to form a hegemony characterized by both "racially driven neoliberalism" and "neoliberally fueled racism." Racist discourses and practices have been redeployed as a component of this new socioeconomic configuration. In the neoliberal age, however, racist discourses are but one of several strategies utilized to secure the containment, cooperation, and contributions of black Americans.[389]

Johnson's awareness of neoliberal hegemony as an all-encompassing system of domination reflects Rogers-Vaughn's concerns, but ultimately grounds the whole enterprise racially. In other words, Johnson argues that much of neoliberalism's ability to continue to exert control is found in its white supremacist underpinnings. Racial constructions such as "beast" are the redeployed stuff of the new socioeconomic configuration Johnson speaks of. Eurocentric constructions of whiteness continue to form the more foundational aspects of a neoliberal society, particularly as it continues to recreate the exportation (and prioritization) of whiteness globally. In this sense, neoliberalism is a continuation of the colonial project begun centuries prior, but with a new system of governance made necessary by changing cultural realities.

Economy (and epistemology): Guided Aspirations

Grounding the neoliberal project racially, as Johnson does, is especially helpful for understanding how its economic thrust uniquely targets young black men. For Johnson, neoliberalism can only be understood as a fundamentally racialized movement because much of

[389] Cedric C. Johnson, *Race, Religion, and Resilience in the Neoliberal Age* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 3–4.

its construction continues to take place on the backs of African Americans.[390] He conceives of neoliberalism as a socioeconomic system of dominance that is largely a response to cultural and historical developments (i.e. Civil Rights) that revealed threats to whiteness as the organizing center of society; the "zero point," as illustrated in chapter four.[391] Hence, much of the economic functioning Johnson discloses also signifies the epistemic white supremacy on which colonialism was similarly grounded. What emerges is a picture of economic norms specifically meant to create new forms of racialized oppression in a society that prides itself on being post-racial. Building on Johnson's analysis of the "neoliberal matrix," I want to highlight three aspects of neoliberalism's insidious economic logic that creates unique forms of suffering for young black men.[392] Before noting these factors, however, more should be said about the broader thrust of Johnson's "matrix."

For Johnson, the neoliberal age is primarily a hegemonic configuration that proceeds from a confluence of "core ideas including individual liberty, free markets, competition, consumerism, deregulation, low taxes, and limited government."[393] Johnson argues that the interworking of these ideals forms a broader racialized system of dominance that hinges on its ability to achieve four functions: (1) *maintain* the full reign of the "free" market, (2) *contain* left behind sectors of the population whose presence discloses the systems' inequities, (3) *control*

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[390] And people of color more broadly.
[391] Johnson, *Race, Religion, and Resilience in the Neoliberal Age*, 30–36.
[392] I have chosen to highlight black athletes specifically because of the way in which "beast" from both sub- and super-human standpoints converges on them uniquely. In this sense, the "success" many black athletes experience demonstrates how neoliberalism's colonial domination is able to function as a "hidden dimension" of contemporary society.
[393] Johnson, *Race, Religion, and Resilience in the Neoliberal Age*, 48. Johnson also identifies four broader thrusts that characterize the neoliberal age: "(1) The subordination of democratic political power to unaccountable economic power in order to facilitate that movement; (2) *Westoxification* – the strategic marketing of Western culture and consumer-oriented ways of life around the world; (3) commodification of life forms and cultural practices, and (4) advances in communication and information technologies capable of facilitating massive shifts in capital, instantly, by investors unaccountable for social and environmental impacts." See: Johnson, 24.

those populations who pose a threat to the systems' stability, and (4) secure the continued *contributions* of those who are indeed indispensable to the system's operations."[394]

The seemingly contradictory goals of these functions are precisely what gives the system its strength. On one hand, the system is built on inequality and its ability to keep disenfranchised populations on the underside of the "free" market. On the other hand, however, the contributions of these very populations are central to neoliberalism's ability to continue its dominance. Thus, the neoliberal matrix thrives from its ability to recruit disenfranchised populations to participate in their own undoing by strengthening the market responsible for disenfranchising them in the first place. For Johnson, "hegemony" provides the answer to how this is able to be accomplished so effectively:

> In the United States, the neoliberal age signifies a historic transition from a system of racial domination to a racialized capitalistic hegemony. Hegemony, however, is never about pure victory or absolute domination. It is always about tendencies in the balance of power in a society. Hegemony operates at multiple levels in a society, exerting authority in the cultural, political, economic, intellectual, and material domains of life. Authority is not attained or sustained merely through the forcible imposition of power. Hegemony is attained and sustained by "coercion" and by securing a substantial degree of "popular consent." Neoliberal hegemony subtly and effectively encourages people to identify themselves with the habits, sensibilities, and world views supportive of the status quo and the class interests that dominate it. It is successful in persuading people to "consent" to their oppression and exploitation.[395]

Whereas oppression and exploitation were exerted more unilaterally during colonial imperialism, neoliberalism achieves such dominance via recruitment and cultural participation; in essence, getting people to say "yes" to their own domination. It is important to note, however, that this kind of "consent" is based on the promise that one's cultural participation will result in their own portion of the wealth that is idealized in neoliberal society. This is precisely where the triune factors of neoliberalism's economic logic show up.

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[394] Johnson, 48.
[395] Johnson, 48–49.

Privatization/Deregulation

The first aspect of neoliberalism's economic logic worth noting is *privatization/deregulation*. I highlight privatization and deregulation together because they function as two sides of the same coin, both of which work together to consolidate power in the hands of upper-class whites (usually males) in service to the status quo.[396] Privatization and deregulation refer to the ways in which economic (and epistemological) power is situated in private markets and stripped from governmental oversight, respectively. These twin features mutually enhance each other by pitting the ideals of capitalism against the welfare state and governmental programs meant to care for those in poverty.

On one hand, deregulation aims to liberate the market to operate globally in unrestricted ways. This goal is predicated on the notion that governmental regulation inhibits economic growth and trade. By removing governmental oversight, corporations are granted the freedom to not only export goods and services (and ideas), but they can also exploit labor globally in a way that contributes to the highest profit margin.[397] Without governmental oversight, these practices are subject to the ethical deliberation of corporate executives and shareholders. On the other hand, privatization presumes that markets can reasonably and more efficiently provide necessary services to persons and communities that need them. It builds on its own notion that governments slow the processes it deems necessary for economic growth, then responds to this dilemma by

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[396] Rogers-Vaughn, *Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age*, chapter 5. Beyond the way in which I have already noted neoliberalism's explicitly racist existence, it is also undeniably sexist. Its racism and sexism, however, function in ways meant to be disguised by rhetorical appeals to equal opportunity. Hence, Bruce Rogers-Vaughn refers to "gender-blind patriarchy" and "antiracist white supremacy" as helpful ways of understanding the oppressive logic herein.

[397] Consider the ways corporations in the U.S. target countries that do not have protections for their labor force. These companies can find the cheapest labor that puts them in the best position to make astronomical percentages of profit because they were able to exploit poor persons and communities globally due to the desperation of their circumstances. Deregulation allows this to go unchecked.

arguing that private companies – and the Market in general – can more effectively provide resources and care for those who need it.[398]The problem with this, however, is that deciding who is worthy of said goods and services is also left up to markets. Hence, when serving particular communities does not positively affect the bottom line there is no externally enforced requirement to do so.

Considered together, deregulation and privatization have the effect of increasing wealth stratification in extreme ways because they are both justified by deeper assumptions of individualism and meritocracy, in service to the narrative of equal opportunity. They have no awareness of humanity's relational existence built within, and therefore no obligation to care for the left behind sectors Johnson speaks of. If each of us exists as individuals who only have to work hard to achieve the kind of wealth the top 1% enjoy, then failure is read as the fault of the persons and communities that are suffering. Furthermore, if markets are able to hold this kind of responsibility over public life then the door is left wide open for the second aspect of neoliberalism's economic logic uniquely targeting young black men: discrimination.

Discrimination

Discrimination is a central tenet embedded within the economic logic of neoliberalism. In a neoliberal society, it has always been the presumption (and acceptance) that some will win and some will lose. Such beliefs are bolstered by narratives of competition, individual(ism) responsibility, and equal opportunity, which devolve in the conviction that those who suffer only do so by their own fault. Discrimination in relation to young black men, however, is a whole 'nother "beast." Johnson's analysis is again helpful here. He situates the maturation of

[398] Johnson, *Race, Religion, and Resilience in the Neoliberal Age*, 23–24.

neoliberalism in the context of Ronald Reagan's response to the economic turmoil wrought by black cultural movements against racism. Civil Rights marches, sit-ins, and eventually riots resulted in the need to rebuild in urban centers such as New York, Detroit, etc. Rather than continuing to invest in these cities, however, Reagan and his administration proposed a new economic strategy that entailed increased investments in wealthy corporations, while cutting funding that benefitted those who lived and worked in the urban core.[399]

Reagan's theory of "trickle-down economics" was further materialized by specific practices that facilitated wealth redistribution in suburban spaces while abandoning those concentrated in cities. Such practices were strategic and explicit; and wholly racist. A confluence of discriminatory housing policies meant to segregate, denial of loans, and other wealth-denying practices were used to keep Black Americans siloed (and poor) in dilapidated urban centers. At the same time, the government approved a variety of stimulus efforts meant to save whites from the urban core. A variety of mortgage aid programs, lending, tax breaks, and new construction in suburban areas created a way for whites to escape the conditions that blacks were relegated to.[400] Beyond the obvious way in which these salvific efforts were extended to white populations while Blacks were strategically denied the same opportunities, there were also economically motivated efforts to criminalize those left in urban centers.

One specific method of discrimination that relates more specifically to young black men is the proliferation of for-profit prisons, coupled with the "War on Drugs." While I have already mentioned the problem of "containment" in chapter four, I want to now emphasize the extent to which incarcerating young black men has also functioned as an economic issue that further demonstrates the fundamental racism of neoliberalism. We must not forget that at the same time

[399] Johnson, 36ff.
[400] Johnson, 40.

Ronald Reagan was steering economic attention away from urban centers, and subsequently contributing to increasing rates of black unemployment, he and Nancy Reagan were also using the "War on Drugs" to refocus negative attention on poor black communities.

Crack-cocaine entered black communities during the mid-80s and had a devastating impact that uniquely affected black men. Because the service-oriented jobs that existed amid the new economic struggles were overwhelmingly occupied by women, black men had more difficulty finding work. At the same time, the highly addictive "crack" entered black neighborhoods as a more affordable version of cocaine that could be easily sold. Left with virtually no other options for employment due to "white flight" and governmental neglect, black men became uniquely susceptible to trying to make ends meet through the drug trade. The most heinous aspect of this, however, was with the interlocking way in which black men were singled out as America's biggest criminal threat.[401]

In a 1986 presidential address, Ronald and Nancy Reagan launched a new public campaign to combat what they presented as a new crack epidemic responsible for killing millions of Americans, namely children.[402] Many will remember "Just say no," which was a specific advertising campaign that itself was a part of America's "War on Drugs." Alongside this sensationalized campaign, spending for local and federal law enforcement in urban centers increased drastically. Legislation converged as well. Congress swiftly passed new mandatory minimum sentencing laws that penalized crack offenses 100 times that of powder cocaine. Simultaneously, new for-profit prisons were being built in the suburbs, contributing to a prison

[401] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*.
[402] Much of the way they narrated this epidemic was to pit drug users and criminals against (white) American children. Their intention was to paint the worst possible picture of those associated with drug abuse, and playing up the effects the crack epidemic had on infant mortality, younger children, and even teenagers was a key way to accomplish this task.

industrial complex that persists today. There were of course other practices that could be noted here, but my point is that all this was in service to a concerted economic agenda that was predicated on consolidating wealth for white elites while systematically disenfranchising black Americans.

Fundamental to this barrage of economic forces, particularly where it relates to black men specifically, is the deeper assumption that black men are "beasts." The coded racism in Ronald Reagan's presidential address about the war of drugs, his economic policies, and even a private phone call that was recently leaked between he and Richard Nixon reveal both his, his administration's, and much of the wider public's views that the drug abusers threatening American children were in fact black men. Hence, cutting off viable escapes from urban ghettos, disproportionately policing black neighborhoods, piling black male bodies into prisons at rates far exceeding their white counterparts, and the myriad of other practices that extended from neoliberal economic policies were all justified due to the presumed animalistic nature of black men. This kind of negative economic targeting, then, discloses how thoroughly caught many young black men are – particularly those who grow up in urban centers that are increasingly neglected economically.

Brandization

The final aspect of neoliberalism's economic logic that discloses the unique social position of young black men is what I call *brandization*. Brandization refers to the insidious process by which young black men are "branded" as athletes, whereby a confluence of factors coalesce to "recruit" our participation in sport. Merriam-Webster defines "branding" as "the

promoting of a product or service by identifying it with a particular brand."[403] In this sense, young black men are both the products (providing entertainment or a service) and the brand itself. Black athletic bodies are routinely marketed and shown on media platforms, valorized for their athletic achievements and super-human-like form. Along with these fetishizing cultural performances, other brands such as Nike, Adidas, etc. use these young men's bodies to promote their products to mass audiences. All this takes place in the context of sports. And let me be clear, this kind of normalized professional valorization of young black men in the U.S. ***only*** takes place in sport.[404] The only other image we routinely see of young black men in our society is criminal.[405] And strangely, "beast," even when used in the most positive sense for young black men, still carries this criminal-like appeal that functions as a signal that says, "Beware: at their best they can produce and make this industry lots of money, but they're still essentially animals given to criminality." This rings true in Marshawn Lynch's case, where as soon as he resisted, the impulse was to appeal to "beast" as more fundamentally a "thug," rather than "beast" as an exceptional (human) athlete.

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[403] "Definition of BRANDING," accessed August 12, 2019, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/branding.
[404] Black men are also problematically valorized in the broader context of physicality, which also shows up in the porn industry or other industries predicated on commodifying black (athletic) bodies. However, one could see porn and sports in the same vein, in that black male bodies are put on center stage, while the fullness of black male humanities does not exist. In a real sense, porn itself could be read as "sport," particularly as the sexualization of black male bodies (read: penises) are objectified (for sport) in the porn industry. Therefore, my broader point remains that sport continues to be a unique space where black men can expect to be "successful."
[405] One could reasonably argue that rappers are another image that is routinely promoted in our society, and I would agree. However, I would include in that argument that rappers are also fundamentally understood as "thugs." Rappers are never promoted for positive changes they intend to make. In fact, when there are rappers who explicitly use their platform to create positive change in the world, they rarely get major records deals, play on the radio, or features/awards at the Grammys. Worse, according to an interview conducted by Byron Hurt in the documentary entitled, "Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes," record executive in charge of signing artists only sign those artists who (agree to) rap about things that denigrate the Black community (i.e. drugs, hoes, violence, etc.). Artists who challenge white supremacy, and the very privilege of the majority of record executives, are forced to form independent labels and end up having a much more difficult time gaining the kind of mainstream appeal they would have if they had agreed to actively reproduce stereotypes about black men and women.

When I read Merriam-Webster's definition of "branding" a series of photographic works come to mind. Conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas is known for artistic works that are dedicated to illustrating the problematic relationship between young black men and sports in the U.S., namely football and basketball. In one of his exhibits, he features black athletic bodies with Nike checks branded on them. In another, he shows black athletes playing their respective sports, but he includes troubling props (nooses, plantation attire, cotton, etc.) in the images that are meant to suggest a kind of slave relationship to sports (and advertising).[406] Hank Willis Thomas' art captures what I am trying to demonstrate with my attention to brandization. Brandization demonstrates neoliberalism's role in creating, sustaining, and ultimately reproducing the circumstances that give rise to the problematic relationship between black men and sport. This happens in two directions.

On one hand, neoliberalism creates circumstances *from* which young black men must escape. As mentioned in the previous two sections, privatization/deregulation and discrimination come together to create oppressive circumstances in which many inner-city young black men are raised. Such circumstances are represented by the intersecting chokehold society has on young black men, as evidenced by the cultural and political pitchfork I named in the previous chapter. The cycles of containment, crucifixion, and commodification are all undergirded by neoliberalism's insidious economic logic, all of which create circumstances that literally breed desperate attempts at escape. On the other hand, however, neoliberalism also creates forces that move in the direction of aspiration. Rather than exclusively creating circumstances from which young black would escape, neoliberalism also creates a world we are invited to aspire *to*.

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[406] "Hank Willis Thomas | WORKS | 0," Hank Willis Thomas, accessed June 5, 2020, https://www.hankwillisthomas.com/WORKS/Photographic/thumbs.

There is creative way in which mass media broadly, and advertising campaigns specifically, are responsible for much of the public mindset toward wealth and consuming. As cultural critic bell hooks notes:

> Largely through marketing and advertising, television promoted the myth of the classless society, offering on one hand images of an American dream fulfilled wherein any and everyone can become rich and on the other suggesting that the lived experiences of this lack of class hierarchy was expressed by our equal right to purchase anything we could afford. The rich came to be represented as heroic. By championing hedonistic consumerism and encouraging individuals of all classes to believe that ownership of a particular object mediated the realities of class, mass media created a new image of the rich.[407]

hooks' description of the role advertising and mass media plays in shaping public consciousness toward the presumed availability of riches is apt for understanding the allure of sport in the lives of young black men. Sport not only offers many young men the promise of escaping current circumstances, but also the possibility of contributing to forms of social change most readily made possible by being rich. Recall Marshawn Lynch's many social contributions. He is explicitly conscious of the difference he can make simply because he has fame and wealth. This awareness is also common among the young men I interviewed. Even among those who noted the allure of fame and riches as primary motivations, there was always a deeper hope to use one's platform to contribute to change for other young black men in similar circumstances.[408]

hooks' analysis of the persuasiveness of advertising should not be overlooked, particularly when analyzing oppressed communities. In juxtaposing poor people's circumstances with their desires to be rich due to mass media, she suggests, "Drug trafficking is the only

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[407] bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 71.

[408] In my interview with Greg, for example, he spoke about how his primary motivation for trying to make it to the NFL was to make money. He expressed wanting to live the "flashy lifestyle" early on, but also revealed how this desire was born from how much he and his mother struggled financially. He wanted to make sure they would not struggle forever. Therefore, he decided to pursue a career in the NFL because he was good at football and knew he could make enough money to alleviate the economic difficulties he experienced in much of his childhood.

economic enterprise that enables a poor person to acquire the means to drive the same cars and wear the same clothes as the rich."[409] While her claim *may* be a bit overstated, her overall point is helpful. The drug trade can be incredibly alluring for young black men who are trying to survive amid dire circumstances. Devoid of options, one will do whatever needs to be done to survive; or, according to hooks, to *consume* just like the rich. In a deeper sense, considering the confluence of factors that make the drug trade both alluring (potential riches, financial security) and risky (imprisonment and/or death), it makes sense why sport would rise as the most viable possibility for young black men who are lacking other options. If the only "positive" and successful portrayal of young black men they see is that of an athlete, then of course they will gravitate toward this profession. This is even the case for young black men who aren't from "the hood."

To this point in my analysis it might seem that I have only focused on young black men who are poor and without options. To be sure, there is no singular young black male experience. And while the logic of neoliberalism *is* designed to keep us all contained in a ghettoized existence, our stories are varied and multidimensional. That said, the expectation of athletic achievement is a luring force that can be found in virtually every young black man's consciousness. Regardless of upbringing, young black men from all walks of life can identify with sports. There is, to some extent, some awareness of athletic expectation, and to often even greater extents, a hope to participate. Brandization, then, also points to the ubiquity of black male athletic expectation, and the extent to which hooks' analysis shapes even those young black men who are seemingly set up for success outside of sport – because regardless of upbringing, young

[409] hooks, *Where We Stand*, 67.

black men in the U.S. will all be inundated with images of themselves either as criminals or athletes.

Summary

Neoliberalism is a hegemonic force that is literally reproducing the kinds of dehumanization that colonial imperialism began. Young black men are a uniquely targeted group on whose backs much of the economic stability of this country continues to be built. The confluence of privatization/deregulation, discrimination, and brandization creates the perfect storm for athletic participation to become a primary vehicle through which young black men aspire to survive and hopefully take part in the perception of an American Dream. This trinity of economic exploitation coalesces with America's pitchfork, resulting in (small) windows of opportunity that only exist if one consents to commodification. The next section speaks more explicitly about how commodification, as briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, becomes a literal means of survival for young black men in the U.S.[410]

Playing the Game: Commodification as a Vehicle… to Life?

Scholars have acknowledged the commodifying normalcy of neoliberalism broadly, but there is a specific way in which black athletic bodies are commodified and commercialized as "super-human" in contemporary society.[411] It is important to remember, though, that such "super-humanity" is always couched in an (imposed) animalistic extraordinaire that reeks of

[410] It is unfortunate that one cannot expect to live his life with dignity, and a humanity recognized by everyone. Rather, one grows up with the awareness that to survive will likely mean one has to set aside hopes for dignity and humanization until something broader in our society changes.

[411] Johnson (Race, Religion, and Resilience…) and Rogers Vaughn (Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age) both acknowledge this in their texts. Johnson highlights commodification in relation to black communities specifically, while Rogers Vaughn notes it more broadly across races.

commodification. In other words, rather than presented as "gods" or "GOATs" in sport, black male athletes are more readily identified as "beasts;" animals with extraordinary physical gifts that can be objectified and exploited for their own profit, yes, but more importantly for the disproportionate wealth accumulation of their "owners."[412] In a sense, black athletes continue to be used as the "chattel" that largely reflects the methods of production and exploitation central to Slavery.

Perhaps nothing illustrates the commodification of young black athletes more than the NFL and NBA combines. Each year, both leagues invite the top athletes from colleges around the country to participate in what is called "The Combine." At the Combine, NFL and NBA draft hopefuls are literally poked and prodded to measure their heights, weights, and the composition of their bodies. They are then put through a series of physical and mental tests. They are assessed for how fast they can run, how high they can jump, how quickly they can change directions, shoot, throw, the list goes on. NFL and NBA coaches stand around with their clip boards and watch these tests, while "experts" analyze all of it. In one troubling clip that went viral on social media for its seeming absurdity, Mike Mayock – then sports analyst, now general manager for the Oakland Raiders – while agreeing that a particular player at the draft was "checking all the boxes," was recorded saying, "Yea. He really is. Look at that big bubble butt. That's a power generator, those thighs, quads, and the bubble butt. Offensive lineman love that."

[412] In my interview with Bilal, he informed me that all stadium upgrades, and other improvements to the League's infrastructure comes out of the players' half of the Collective Bargaining Agreement. This was part of our broader conversation that the "owners" of NFL teams own 51% share of the League. The players, 49%. And yet, there is one team "owner," while there are at least 70 players who must be paid on a given NFL team (53 active roster). One of two may have the multimillion-dollar contracts, but the majority of them are not making the kind of money players like Aaron Donald, Antonio Brown, or others are making. Further, each team has a "salary cap," which refers to the allotted money a team can pay all of its players. My point is, the economics even in professional sports are drastically in favor of team "owners" and not the players. Yet, the players are who do all the labor and risk life-changing or -ending injuries (such as paralysis or CTE from repeated concussions) are used as the figureheads to attract the fans in order to maintain the league's $16 billion (per year) revenue.

Mayock, here, was describing his assessment of a young man who was in effect "auditioning" for the rest of his life. He was going through drills and trying to impress coaches so that he would get drafted and make far more money than any other professional opportunity (outside the drug trade) would promise at his age. In as much as this young man was glad to be there, seizing his opportunity, he was also subjecting himself to having his (athletic) worth evaluated by primarily white men who have the power to decide – between this young man and thousands of others – whether or not his dreams would come true.[413] This kind of subjection is not only dehumanizing, it is also eerily reminiscent of the slave auctions used to assess the exploitative and commodifying value of enslaved black men not all that long ago.

Virtually every young black man is at least minimally aware of the problematic nature of having to give "consent" to this kind of commodification. It is a negotiation we all make out of pragmatic necessity. Young black men know we must "play" along with the bullshit if we want to survive and have a shot – so as not to get shot – at a "normal" life. So, we say "yes," even though we realize to varying degrees what is taking place. This is called "playing the game." Many might have the urge to ask, "why?" Why, if you know you are being exploited, do you continue to play the game? Why would anyone say 'yes' to this?" I asked Osiris this very question, albeit in the specific context of professional sports. His response was both resonant for me, and troubling:

> Well honestly man, shit, well here in America, I feel like money is sadly tied to survival. And uh, you know the more money that you have, the better chance you have at surviving out here. There is more opportunity for you to do things, and just better opportunity to take care of yourself and anyone else around you. So pretty much what I'm saying is just, you know, *the money is too good*. You know, it's just like, I feel like a lot of times everything has its price on it. So, you know that a lot of things aren't going, like, properly. You know it's kind of ran like a slave auction. You know, everything man, but

[413] And even if he does make it, he might feel as "trapped" in this dream as Jimmy and many others feel.

> at the end of the day we have to make money to survive. And we just happen to be talented at a certain sport. And it's just like, you know, why not do it while we can?[414]

"The money is too good" succinctly captures what every young black athlete knows, both literally and figuratively. On one level, young black athletes know that "making it" to "The League" means you will be able to make the kind of money that most only dream of. The broader excitement, however, is deeper than just getting rich. These young men know that this kind of "payment" signifies a deeper sense of "making it," where one's confidence that many of the potentially derailing things they have had to deal with throughout their lives might just come to an end. It is a deeper sense of security that one can rest in, knowing that survival is no longer in question – one hopes. I identify with Osiris' statements. I also aspired to this. My father played in the NFL, as did several cousins, and friends. Sports have been a central part of my family's life and is the reason several of my cousins, siblings, and myself were able to afford college.[415] Just like Osiris, I also recognized the great opportunity I would be presented with if I made it to The League – both for the accoutrements of being rich, but more importantly the power and resources to create change in relation to the circumstances of young black men – and black people – more broadly.

On a deeper level, however, every young black man also knows what it means to "play the game" in life. To "play the game," in this sense, is similar to saying "go along to get along," albeit with much greater stakes. Far more crucial than merely advancing in one's job or some other form of social mobility that requires the patience and maneuvering of "going along," to "play the game" is a more specific reference to the uniqueness of being black in America. It

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[414] Interview with Osiris, April 29, 2019. My italics.

[415] My three first cousins and I all received full athletic scholarships to play football in college, which also meant having our school paid for as long as we continued to agree to participate in the full requirements of our respective teams each year.

speaks to the need to make negotiations oriented toward survival, literal and figurative. Young black men live with a ubiquitous awareness that one must be willing to make dehumanizing sacrifices because deep down we know these decisions are pragmatic negotiations for life and livelihood. Many of our fathers and mothers told us when we were young, "son, just play the game," because they knew that if we did not, our lives could end prematurely just like too many others. Sadly, even many of us who do "play the game" still end up profiled, incarcerated, or dead.[416] And as troubling as these negotiations seem on the surface, the depth of harm becomes uniquely visible when seen through the lenses of relational performance. Before making this connection, however, a key distinction is in order.

Shifting Methods: From Force to Finesse

The need to "play the game" is occasioned by a cultural shift wherein the mistreatment of persons based on race has had to become more strategic. From colonialism through Jim Crow, white society enjoyed the legality of black inhumanity. As mentioned in chapter four, slaveholders were free to *force* enslaved persons to perform inhuman scripts; performances that functioned as a means of survival for the enslaved. Failure to do so would result in forms of punishment, abuse, or even death; treatment that mirrored the inhumane treatment of animals and other "resources" deemed "natural" (read: not human).[417] As I demonstrated in chapter three, such performances reproduce the legibility of scripts, rendering them "real" and recognizable in normalized ways. The performances of enslaved men during this era, then, were compromised. They had no choice.

[416] There are countless young black men who have been imprisoned after being wrongfully accused for various crimes, not to mention those of us who have been killed for suspicion of criminality when we were complying fully with the laws and expectations society has set.
[417] Unfortunately, in many cases some animals were treated better than enslaved persons.

Choice is similarly compromised in our contemporary political economy, albeit in more complex ways. Physically forcing black men to perform scripts of "beast" based on legalized inhumanity is no longer an option. However, there are other forms of coercion that can function in ways that make it more difficult to recognize them as such. What we are currently witnessing, then, is a more insidious strategy for pigeonholing young black men into opportunities that ultimately bolster America's grand narrative of black inhumanity. Young black men are recruited (read: coerced) into performances that contribute to the reproduction of "beast", while these performances are couched in celebratory praise and super-human fetishization. Such "recruitment" is effective because the confluence of factors named previously literally chokes out the variety of potential options available to young black men in this society.[418] Concerted efforts to strip resources from urban centers, increases in policing, proliferating for-profit prisons, and the like are juxtaposed with the dangling carrots of wealth, fame, and opportunity.

Together, these threats and promises point to the ways this political economy has shifted from force to *finesse* in its intention to target young black men. For instance, when something is law it is able to be enforced. When it is not, however, it must be reinforced; finessed, in a sense. Strangely, both have close relation with "force," but they relate to it differently. Enforcement is based on the presumption of authority. Government-sanctioned persons can legally enforce certain practices based on laws. Legislation dictates what can be enforced or not. Reinforcement, however, does not presume authority. The need to reinforce presumes freedom to choose. Therefore, it must convince. It does so by not only threatening punitive consequences, but also

[418] My decision to use the language of "chokes out" is intentional. Beyond the way this phrase discloses the social and political means used to target young black men, it also refers specifically to the routine way in which black men have been killed in this manner. Hence, my language here is meant to confront readers with the reality of "I can't breathe" as a reminder of the urgency with which police (and a myriad of other) reforms much happen to preserve and protect the lives of black men and women in the United States.

by promising positive ones. In this case it is the kind of valorization of a particular lifestyle that seemingly offers riches, a platform, and opportunities of "making it" (out) in a society hell bent on killing us. The allure is quite obvious.

Young black men are promised the American Dream, almost exclusively via sport, which presumably comes with the kind of security and hope that convinces us to "consent" to commodification now for the hope of freedom later. It's an invitation to subject ourselves to what we know is wrong for the sake of "living to fight another day."[419] Herein lies the deeper problem. This kind of negotiation gives way to the status quo, allowing the portrayal of black men as "beasts" to go unchecked; even celebrated. While many young black men read this as a necessary evil to positioning themselves for future possibilities, this kind of "consent" also agrees to much more. By saying "yes" to this kind of commodification, young black men become active participants in cultural performances built on assumptions of their own inhumanity. Coupled with the ways society more broadly performs our presumed inhumanity, synergistic patterns of relating continue to be recreated in interactions that further normalize the assumption that black men are "beasts."

Returning to Relational Performance: Disrupting our Cultural Equilibrium

Returning to relational performance demonstrates how the consequences for "playing the game" go much deeper than merely allowing the status quo to go unchecked. Let me be clear, however, that an analysis of the status quo remains in order, particularly as it relates to the idea of "equilibrium." As mentioned, deeper assumptions of (young) black male inhumanity are built

[419] This is common colloquialism used to encourage young black men to use wisdom and humility to not respond in the immediacy of particular circumstances in ways that might result in their deaths. Rather, one is encouraged to essentially "let it slide" so as to have more opportunities to right the wrongs later in life.

within the status quo of our society. The idea that young black men are violent animals is more than abstract, however. It is a central part of our equilibrium in the U.S., which shapes how persons and society perform in relation to (young) black men. Equilibrium is scary because it is produced by routine performances while masking itself as something that just *is*. We do not often question equilibrium because it gives off the sense that it is static, neutral, and apolitical; it renders the thing in question unquestionable, presenting itself as an inevitable balance to all of life.

Equilibrium is thus another way of naming the broader process of relational performance. It refers to the way in which coordinated cultural performances become so normalized that they appear as "reality" without conscious awareness that "reality" is itself a constant (re)creation based on ritualized role-play performances that are themselves based on political scripts. Further, equilibrium also highlights the way in which legibility – the constructed standard for what is recognizable – functions at an assumptive level; how society *cannot* recognize the humanities of young black men because it does not show itself humanizing images of young black men. Hence, when referring to the way a neoliberal society recruits young black men into performances of "beast," even when such performances are celebrated in an athletic context, I am more deeply referencing the way cultural hegemony strongarms young black men into prioritizing the assurance of survival right now over the possibility (read: hope) of survival long-term. Neoliberalism gives life to a confluence of circumstances that blinds society to the ways young black men are coerced into performing our own undoing, while at the same time requiring such performances for us to survive. It is (at least) a *double* bind. We must do what is necessary in the right-now of our circumstances to survive, even if that means "playing a game" that reproduces

an image that follows us off the field and into the grave; and potentially sends me there prematurely.

By nature of the status quo referring more deeply to our racialized cultural equilibrium, not challenging it allows it to continue to shape relational patterns on macro, meso, and micro levels of society. Because relational performance reveals the level to which "reality" is a constant production, the seeming fixity of the status quo is more accurately understood as consistent patterned behavior. In other words, even the balance presumed in equilibrium is an ongoing coordinated effort. It is not balanced because all things are set in their rightful place. Rather, its balance comes from consistent movement that keeps things in the place they are currently in, via ritualized performance. This simultaneously reflects and invigorates relational patterns among those in society that relate to young black men (police officers, potential employers, peers, etc.). In this sense, then, society continually creates, and is created by, norms of relating to young black men that presume our inhumanity. Society is literally shaped by ritualized cultural performances of mistreating us in a historical trajectory that belies this country's DNA.

Personal and Communal Consequences: "Beast" at the Intersections of Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality

"Beast" is destroying the lives of young black men in ways that are not easily recognizable. As noted, neoliberalism thrives on its ability to render any form of suffering the fault of those who suffer, whether individuals or whole communities (of color). Young black men are not exempt. Each of the dehumanizing cycles I named in chapter four are upheld by a political economy that convinces its participants that persons exist individually and are solely

responsible for what happens in their lives. Therefore, when a young black man is profiled, imprisoned, or killed the default is that it must have been his fault. Additionally, young black men are often blamed for much of the suffering that takes place in society more broadly due to the ways we are cast as the quintessential "super predators" that presumably threaten white America's fragile (ideological) existence.

Young black men do play a part in this, though not in the ways typically represented. We are the star characters in this problematic production, but we are not the writers, producers, or directors; nor are we its primary spectators. Young black men are put on display to act out a script that simultaneously arises from, and reinforces, white society's racist pornographic imagination. We are recruited into opportunities for our survival, given scripts we must adhere to, then put under the spotlight for all to see. As a result, American society continues to construct its identity in opposition to its own presentation of "beast" as illustrative to the "nature" of black men; and they are using this image to justify killing us. Yet, we remain agential. Young black men *can* (technically) choose not to play this game, though not without consequences. Yet, even when we do perform in ways that tell stories of our full humanity – which are more than regular occurrences – the picture gets painted differently. In a complicated way, then, young black men are simultaneously caught and accountable; not responsible, but still participants.

Examining "beast" through an intersectional lens can help pastoral theologians (and society) understand the complexity of young black male agency as it relates to the cultural consequences of this trope. "Beast" is not just a racist rendering of black men. Though race is central, "beast" also includes norms related to class, gender, and sexuality that shape how this image is performed and interpreted publicly. An intersectional analysis helps shift the focus of attention from particular performances to the broader cultural and political arrangements that

occasion them. In other words, learning to see the ways "beast" is constructed based on the complexities of race, class, gender, and sexuality can illustrate how society scapegoats young black men in the suffering it produces.

"Beast" "On" *and* "Off" the Field: Intercultural Harm

"Beast" is an image that exists uniquely at the intersections of race and class. It refers to a persistent racialized history that continues to be inscribed onto the bodies of black men but has been reshaped according to the demands of neoliberalism. Rather than forcing black men to play their part, society now finesses us into dehumanization using a mix of class warfare and the allure of economic security (via sport). Neoliberalism's method of enslaving black men blinds society to the underlying politics by appealing to the "success" some young black athletes have been able to achieve. In other words, the complexities of race and class within "beast" play into the narrative society uses to convince itself that Americans live in a post-racial world where anyone can "make it."[420]

These complexities also blind us to "beast's" cultural consequences. As I described in chapter four, young black men's lives and livelihoods are routinely threatened by a cultural onslaught based on the assumption that we are animals (by nature). This onslaught, however, refers most directly to the way "beast" references a historical sub-humanity that is still used to criminalize young black men. However, there is a way in which even "positive" representations of "beast" in sport contribute to our undoing; how the super-human fetishizing of black athletes is equally destructive.

[420] Rogers-Vaughn, *Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age*, 131ff.

Recall the way Marshawn Lynch's media protest was met with claims about him being a "thug." And yet, as a football player who embodies "Beast Mode" and attracts millions of viewers on Sundays, he is beloved by many.[421] Lynch's dilemma reveals the way neoliberalism masks racialized class warfare by using exceptions to socially constructed rules to reinforce the presumed reality of those rules. His life is the perfect poster for advertising to other young black men that "playing the game" is worth it. Lynch's story plays into America's narrative that anyone – even young black men from the hood – can become rich and famous. Until he speaks. When Lynch transgressed the boundaries of his public image – an image that he disavowed publicly, repeatedly, and from the beginning of his career – white society immediately recast the previously beloved "Beast Mode" in explicitly racist (read: sub-human) terms.

Lynch went from being a god to a thug simply because he disrupted the narrative society wanted to tell itself about him and other black men. And Lynch is well aware of this tendency, which is precisely why he decided to protest the media. Recall his critique from Super Bowl XLIX when he departed from his usual answer to reporters' questions. Rather than, I'm just here so I won't get fined," Lynch reminded them that he is fully aware of the ways they say things about him that are inaccurate as a means of portraying him as a problem, despite the fact that he remains silent as a strategy to render the repertoire from which they typically talk about him bankrupt. In other words, as Lynch criticizes, "Y'all can go and make up whatever y'all wanna make up, because I don't say enough for y'all to go and put anything out on me."[422]

Critically analyzing Lynch's situation – and the countless others like it – sheds light on the extent to which the "success" granted to young black men in sport contributes to the dehumanization of young black men in general. On one hand, the class benefits of "beast"

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[421] Typically, NFL games are played on Sundays.
[422] *Marshawn Lynch Lectures The Media*.

participate in narratives of black exceptionalism, which itself is an underhanded way of "allowing" a minority of blacks to achieve success while using these successes to reinforce a presumed rule society refers to in order to keep the majority oppressed. Lynch's success is used (via advertising campaigns and the like) to keep other young black men participating based on the hope that they can achieve something similar. However, this only makes it easier for society to deny its role in the racist realities of containment, crucifixion, and commodification that continue to deal death to young black men in the U.S. In other words, new possibilities for class mobility – however narrowly construed – make it easier to enact racist policies and practices without the appearance of racism. Hence, Lynch is recapitulated publicly as proof that anyone can make it, while scores of young black men are locked up and killed by state-sanctioned officials.

On the other hand, however, the fetishization of black athletic bodies also contributes to the dehumanization of young black men outside of sport. As my co-researchers highlighted, "beast" assumes certain levels of aggressiveness, physical dominance, and "savagery."[423] When one thinks of "beast" the image of a muscularly chiseled black athletic body, standing shirtless, and screaming like that of an animal comes to mind; even if not consciously.[424] It conveys an image of a violent black man who, if not controlled, poses a threat to society's existence. Unfortunately, this kind of performance is what is often most successful in the context of sport.

[423] Deshawn, Greg, and Bilal all used this term to refer to characteristics typically associated with "beast." I reference this portion of my interview conversations in the next section when dealing specifically with the gender norms built within "beast."

[424] A recent issue of Vogue magazine featured Lebron James in this very position, joined by supermodel Gisele Bündchen. James is pictured dribbling a basketball in one hand while groping Gisele with the other, all the while his mouth is wide open as if he is an animal yelling. Though James was not shirtless, this depiction was still very controversial because of its similarities to previous depictions of black men as King Kong with white women as Jane; depictions that more historically signify Jim Crow stories of black men raping white women.

Athletes can be "beasts" "on" the field and are rewarded for such. However, as my co-researchers illustrate, young black athletes resist this contextual performance "off" the field.[425]

Regardless of the ways athletes in general may be able to put on and take off "beast" as is necessary, Lynch's situation illustrates how black athletes do not have the luxury of such separation; at least, not in terms of how we are seen publicly. Young black men are read "off" the field in terms of how we are required to perform "on" the field. Worse, these performances are held up as examples that, while celebrated (in commodifying ways), more fundamentally reproduce racist narratives about the nature of black men. In other words, society recreates its own way of seeing young black men by requiring us to perform "beast" when it is socially acceptable (i.e. in sport), then reads such performances as proof of historical myths, and eventually plays out the presumed truth of these myths when relating to black men publicly. Hence, young black men are not only threatened by "beast" understood in overtly negative ways. Even "positive" representations of black athletes as "beasts" contribute to our undoing.

"Beast" in the Black Community: Intracultural Harm

"Beast" does not only exist at the intersection of race and class. There are also explicit gender and sexuality norms within it that contribute to intra-cultural suffering within black communities. Considering "beast" more critically in terms of gender (and sexuality) reveals its hegemonic appeal for young black men. Perhaps the most unifying theme in my interviews was both the assumptive, and explicitly articulated gender norms within "beast." I asked each of my

[425] They not only displayed a collective awareness of the context-specific requirement of "beast," they also recognized its inability to fully represent their wishes and capabilities outside of sport. While they related to the term as something "positive" in the context of sport, they also spoke about other embodiments and ways of relating in social and professional spaces more broadly. None of them saw themselves as the "beasts" society assumes them to be, even while they were aware of how inescapable this image is for them in public.

co-researchers a series of pointed questions meant to help me better understand the connection between "beast" and masculinity, particularly in the context of their sport. These questions arose out of my own familiarity with the way in which a particular kind of "man" was most successful in the sports I played growing up.

Beyond the links between "beast" and blackness, this trope is virtually synonymous with performances of masculinity that my co-researchers described as, "tough," "macho," "super aggressive," and "savage." Perhaps even more telling are the descriptors they used when I asked them what the worst critiques and/or insults they have heard used for subpar performances in their sport. Their answers were always explicitly gendered with specific references to traditional assumptions of femininity. Coaches used phrases like "you're soft" and "don't be a pussy" to describe what they felt were less than ideal athletic performances. I can remember specific references to "the little sisters of the poor" as a way to level the ultimate critique on performances that did not live up to my college coach's (gendered) expectations.

It is not just gender, though. Sexuality factors explicitly as well. In my conversation with Osiris, we began talking about the gender assumptions within "beast," and how only a specific type of "man" – or at least, masculine performance – would "make it" in the League. Osiris then brought up Michael Sam, the first openly gay football player to be drafted into the NFL. Interestingly, Sam's on the field performances checked all the assumptive boxes of "beast" in terms of gender performance. He was physically dominant, aggressive, relentless, athletically gifted, and black. But he was gay, and he was "out."[426] It is widely agreed that Michael Sam's openness about his sexuality, which culminated with a public embrace and kiss of his then

[426] This refers to the way Michael Sam was not closeted as a gay black man. Rather, he had already "come out" and revealed his sexual orientation to the public.

boyfriend upon hearing his name called on draft day, are ultimately the factors that prevented him from having the kind of NFL career his talent warranted.

"Beast" should then also be understood as a socially constructed image that not only undergirds racist assumptions about young black men, but one that also participates in the ongoing construction of heteronormative gender performances that eventuate in mistreatment of women and gay men. In another study examining connections between sport and gender, sociologist Michael Messner found explicit links between hypermasculine gender norms and success in sport:

> Homophobia and misogyny were the key bonding agents among male athletes, serving to construct a masculine personality that disparaged anything considered "feminine" in women, in other men, or in oneself. The fact that winning was premised on physical power, strength, discipline, and willingness to take, ignore, or deaden pain inclined men to experience their own bodies as machines, as instruments of power and domination—and to see other people's bodies as objects of their power and domination.[427]

Messner's attention to the ways homophobia and misogyny serve "to construct" attitudes in men that disregard other people's bodies, and one's own, is critical. When read in light of relational performance, this idea more deeply suggests that there can be uniquely personal consequences for performing "beast," particularly for young black men. In cases where athletes must embody these hypermasculine norms over long periods of time, one can literally produce violent personalities in themselves. Their thought processes, emotions, and norms for interpersonal engagement can all be shaped according to the way "beast" has proven successful for them in sport.[428]

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[427] Michael A. Messner, *Power at Play: Sports and the Problem of Masculinity*, Men and Masculinity (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

[428] Barbara J. McClure, "The Social Construction of Emotions: A New Direction in the Pastoral Work of Healing," *Pastoral Psychology* 59, no. 6 (December 1, 2010): 799–812.

This becomes even more clear when considering the ages at which many young black men begin socializing in the context of sport. On average, my interviewees were ten years old when they began participating in the sports they eventually played professionally.[429] As early as this seems, there are young black men who begin competitive athletics as early as seven or eight years old – with the seriousness of competing with others for the attention of Division-1 scouts.[430] Barring messages related to hypermasculinity they were (likely) already receiving from the media, participating in sports that are governed by physical dominance, aggressiveness, and disregard for other bodies – particularly as these are cast as "manly" traits – socializes young athletes into ways of being that can be destructive. This is compounded when considering how black youth realize early on that sports may be their best shot at making it out of their circumstances. Hence, their participation in these socializing spaces takes on more seriousness because they know their options are far more limited than their white counterparts.

One can imagine, then, how the culturally induced necessity of routinely performing "beast" can shape the subjectivities of young black men in potentially destructive ways. And similar to what I previously noted about how society's way of seeing is a product of the images it represents, then relates to, forcing young black men into destructive embodiments that deny their humanities can also shape the ways they perceive themselves; and one another. In other words, this ongoing cultural performance not only constructs a societal reality that acts back on young

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[429] For most of them, they actually began playing much earlier. However, we only decided to only focus on when they started playing "tackle" football, which refers to when they began wearing pads, helmets, and uniforms meant to protect them from the violence inherent in the game. In comparison to my interviewees, however, I began playing tackle football in fourth grade; at nine years old. This is not uncommon, especially among young black men.

[430] *8 Year-Old Football PRODIGY | Jaylen Huff Highlights*, accessed April 30, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5ZrdUFl0Pc&list=PL9TCweIMrgOckF23JR66PQEWDHq4nw10p&index=11&t=0s. I first learned about Jaylen Huff from a video I stumbled across on Instagram. I was scrolling my timeline and came across a video of this eight-year-old young man who had apparently gone viral for being his phenomenal abilities to play football. Several of the videos I saw that feature Jaylen focused on how his father trained him as if he were already an adult (meal-prepping, waking up at 5am to train, etc.). However, what I found most troubling was the way the language of "beast" was already being used to highlight this young man's talent.

black men, but it is also creates a reality within our selves that increasingly reflects the deeper inhuman assumptions on which "beast" is constructed.[431]

"Neighbor to Neighbor Carnage": Devaluing our Selves

One specific category of consequences undergirded by the intersectionality of "beast" relates to what some call "black on black" violence. On the surface it is a fact that homicide is the leading cause of death for young black men ages 15-34. This is the only group at the cross-section of ages, races, genders, etc. for whom murder is the leading cause of death. It is also "true" that the majority of young black men whose lives are taken by murder happen at the hands of other young black men. Many have used these statistics to concoct a narrative meant to further normalize what "beast" ultimately claims: that young black men are inherently inhuman, and thereby criminals. "Black on Black" violence has perhaps been the most effective narrative for victim-blaming and allowing white society to ignore its role in the mortalities of young black men.

The deeper truth, however, is that the percentages of intra-racial violence among black men are virtually the same as other racial groups. Michael Eric Dyson argues that such violence should be more accurately represented as "neighbor-to-neighbor carnage."[432] He rightly argues that violent crimes are overwhelmingly perpetrated within racial groups, and at similar rates. Hence, the percentages of young black men killing young black men are virtually the same as what could also be called "white on white violence." Though they do not have to reckon with the racial complexities and consequences of "beast," white men are not immune to its gendered

[431] My analysis should not blind readers to the fact that black men are also susceptible to believing these lies. After all, we are only human.
[432] Michael Eric Dyson, "Death in Black and White," *The New York Times*, July 7, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/10/opinion/sunday/what-white-america-fails-to-see.html.

appeal. Particularly in poor white communities, where economic and political options may be limited, white men often embody the aggressive, violent, disregard for others' bodies in their pursuits for life and livelihood. However, society reads white male performances of "beast" against a backdrop of humanity, which allows their actions – however destructive they may be – to be personalized and not applied to all white men.

Aside from the obvious need to challenge these racial double standards, and the ways assumptions of black male inhumanity uphold them, there is also the need to address the ways young black men also learn to devalue our own blackness. The reality of young black men killing each other not only reflects broader connections between violence and masculinity in the U.S., it also highlights the extent to which desperate economic conditions can shape the way young black men relate to each other.

Black men often find themselves in circumstances where survival is at stake, or situations where one's "manhood" is in question. Too often in these scenarios we fail to care for one another, but instead dispense with each other's lives; a "choice" that is marred by broader socioeconomic circumstances meant to disenfranchise young black men. Understanding this complexity is vital for disrupting the ways society links violence among young black men to assumptions of a deeper inhuman nature. Young black men find themselves caught by interlocking systems of injustice meant to drive them to their wits end in a broader context where competition and inequality define neoliberal existence. It is no wonder, then, why some resort to violence as a means of survival. However true this may be, learning to recognize (and love) our own humanities – even in the midst of this cultural onslaught – can prevent us from taking the option where we kill each other. We can find another way together.

All about the Booty: Devaluing (Black) Women

"Beast" also does harm to women; namely, black women. This image has built within it a misogynistic view of, and an objectifying desire for, women. "Beast" is rooted in an expression of hyper-heterosexuality that claims social status through sexual conquests. Patricia Hill Collins rightly names this as the pursuit of "booty." She highlights the way in which "booty" has come to represent the objectification of black women by black men (and society as a whole), and how societal stereotypes of "uncivilized sexuality" continue to be inscribed onto black sexuality more broadly.[433] Her most critical insight, however, is how sex and violence at the expense of black women connect with Black masculinity:

> In the context of the new racism in which miseducation and unemployment have marginalized and impoverished increasing numbers of young Black men, aggression and claiming the prizes of urban warfare gain in importance. Being tough and having street smarts is an important component of Black masculinity. When joined to understandings of booty as sexuality, especially raw, uncivilized sexuality, women's sexuality becomes the actual spoils of war. In this context, sexual prowess grows in importance as a marker of Black masculinity. For far too many Black men, all that seems to be left to them is access to the booty, and they can become depressed or dangerous if that access is denied. In this scenario, Black women become reduced to sexual spoils of war, with Black men defining masculinity in terms of their prowess in conquering the booty.[434]

Collins is right to name the centrality of "booty" for *some* expressions of black masculinity. This kind of objectifying desire can be heard in locker rooms around the country. What Collins fails to highlight, however, is the way in which this form of "locker room talk" reflects dominant cultural (read: white) norms of masculinity into which young black men are recruited to perform.

Recall Donald Trump's misogynistic comments from the Access Hollywood audio that released in 2016. The tape records Trump describing how easily he can "get" women due to his wealth and fame. He tells Billy Bush, in what has since been defended as harmless "locker room

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[433] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 151.
[434] Collins, *Black Sexual Politics, 151.*

talk," that he could simply, "Grab 'em by the pussy." Unfortunately, there is an extent to which black masculinity often reflects an objectifying gaze toward women in general, and black women especially. However, this dehumanization of women is a product of the construction of masculinity more broadly in the United States, and around the globe. This does not excuse young black men's participation in the failure to recognize (black) women's humanities.[435] We remain accountable. However, it is important to note how "beast," understood in terms of gender norms specifically, is a microcosm of a larger problem this society must deal with.[436]

Summary

"Beast" is an age-old myth that society continues to use to write inhumanity onto the bodies of young black men. Though the methods have changed, the message has not. During Slavery and Jim Crow, black men were essentially forced to play the role of "beast." Such performances reproduced a cultural "reality" where black men were believed to be inhuman; sub-human in an animalistic sense. Now, we are finessed into it. Death-dealing circumstances, cultural messaging, narrow (athletic) opportunities, and the like create the perfect storm wherein many young black men not only aspire to, but ultimately thrive in, roles that require us to play the "beast." And just like the days when these performances were forcible, they continue to construct cultural realities that shape personal, communal, and societal patterns of relating in ways that are literally killing us and our communities.

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[435] I want to maintain a separation between black women and women in other racial groups because of the ways in which their blackness renders their experiences of sexism far worse. The intersecting realities of what black women must endure are heinous. Unfortunately, I do not have room in this project to do justice to this topic. I felt it necessary, however, to name it and keep it on the table as something that still requires our attention.

[436] Hypermasculinity generates a unique social (and economic) capital in homo-social spaces where young black men are prevalent. In both "positive" social spaces (such as sport) and more negative spaces (like prisons), young black men are held to – by dominant cultural norms and peer policing – ideals for masculinity that are harmful to self and others. Yet, black men are uniquely criminalized for embodying such ideals because of the ways in which they register in terms of racial stereotypes.

No longer forcible, the role of "beast" is now highly *reinforceable.* Neoliberalism has transformed our world into a marketplace where products and people alike can be packaged, marketed, sold, and consumed. "Beast" reveals the extent to which young black men are the commodified products and the performers that make consuming this image appealing to so many. We are coerced into this coordinated cultural effort towards our own demise, and neoliberalism is the recapitulated "hidden dimension" used to tell the half-truth (read: three fifths) that we too can achieve a "Dream" that was never meant for us.

Chapter 6

"Playing" the Game: Curating Realities that Care

In the previous two chapters, I demonstrated how thoroughly caught young black men in the U.S. continue to be. They are targeted by a confluence of factors that result in alarming patterns of containment and crucifixion, while commodification has become virtually the only way out; an inevitable consequence for pursuing life and livelihood for far too many black men, particularly athletes. Considering these consequences through the lens of relational performance reveals the constitutive depths of this caughtness. Young black men are often required to perform their own perceived inhumanities just to achieve a semblance of the American Dream, while succeeding in such performances reproduces the very inhuman assumptions used to justify their mistreatment. Young black men are caught in a vicious game of life or death, where even "life" is fraught with dehumanizing costs. This chapter is about care; how "care" should be defined with respect to the particular suffering young black men experience; what should be our primary focus of care; what image of care most effectively informs the variety of interventions that will prove effective? Before addressing these questions, however, one question lingers: what happens to one's soul when we "play the game?"

"Beast": Binding Self and Soul

One aspect of the foregoing analysis I have not addressed until now is the theological depth of suffering wrought by "beast." Seen through the lens of relational performance, "beast" has shown itself to be destructive to young black men in a variety of ways. I have demonstrated how "beast" funds relational patterns that result in threats to life and livelihood. From the variety of ways society performs this image, to its requirement of young black men's participation in

such performances, "beast" functions as a totalizing stereotype that reaches beyond any particular disavowal of it to produce death-dealing circumstances. Even for the most socially conscious black men who resist, one must still navigate a terrain where the consequences of "beast" are occasioned by the mere presence (read: performance) of black male bodies in public space. Whether profiled because of wearing a hoodie in the rain,[437] arrested for trying to get into one's own home,[438] or responding to an intruder in a panic while watching TV on one's own couch,[439] "beast" continues to produce suffering… regardless.[440]

There is, however, a unique theological depth to the suffering produced by "beast." This image not only does harm to young black men materially, but it also reaches the "immaterial."[441] "Beast" does harm to the soul. By nature of its connection to the sociopolitical abuse of young black men, and the way in which it funds the construction of selves and society (read: "reality") via relational performance, "beast" reaches beyond (the body) to that part of our selves that remains mysterious. There are religious traditions for whom the soul is assumed to be in some way protected from political life. My own Black Baptist heritage would testify to this point: the belief that the soul, in its connection with the divine, is so transcendent that what happens to the body is of little consequence to its eternal existence. This disembodied sentiment not only misses

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[437] Trayvon Martin.
[438] Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
[439] Botham Jean.
[440] In another project I will explore in more depth the particular effects that "beast" has on the emotional and bodily (on a cellular level) lives of young black men. Specifically, I will spend time making more connections between the gendered norms built within "beast" and the way men are taught to become emotionally bankrupt while trying to achieve dominant cultural ideals for masculinity. Beyond these emotional implications, I also want to further explore the neurophysiological consequences of "beast." There are undeniable connections between "beast" and the destruction of bodies, but neuroplasticity – particularly as understood in conversation with relational performance – could offer new ways of understanding how one could literally be made a "beast" by performing such.
[441] I qualify this term because its immateriality is primarily symbolic. As will become clear in this chapter, I conceive of the soul as fundamentally wrapped up with the embodied self. However, there is – to use M. Shawn Copeland's depiction – a "more" to the soul that transcends embodiment (M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 2010.). Hence, to suggest the soul is "immaterial" is only to refer to the "more," but should not downplay the soul's participation in sociopolitical life via embodiment.

the seriousness of racialized oppression, but it also fails to appreciate the inherent political consciousness of the soul.

Soul: The Struggle to be Free

I understand the soul to be that mysterious part of our selves that exists prior to personality. It is the apriori aspect of human existence that extends from our connection with the Creator – regardless of religion, culture, or creed. The soul is that creative energy in/with us that is fundamentally (read: relationally) tied to other energies and extends from the Source of all (creative) energy. Despite its mysteriousness, however, the soul is not separated from political life. The body is not the vessel of the soul, protecting it from the dangers of human existence. Rather, as M. Shawn Copeland suggests, there is a "more" to us that is mediated by our bodies.[442] For Copeland, the "more" of every human person testifies to what I understand to be the mysteriousness of the soul. Central to her understanding of this "more" is the idea that the soul is never disembodied. Rather, the body – in all its cultural and political formation – is fundamentally tied to the soul. Or, as Copeland puts it, the soul and body, "are not two realities of which we are composed, [but] the originary totality that we are."[443]

In addition to view of embodiment, Copeland understands the soul to exist as "essential freedom."[444] She conceives of the soul as the "incarnate spirit" that "refuses to be bound" due to its connection with the Divine and its rootedness in essential goodness, yet is constantly engaged in a "struggle to exercise freedom in history and society."[445] It is important to note that

[442] M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, Innovations (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 7.
[443] Copeland, 8.
[444] Copeland, 8.
[445] Copeland, 46, 8.

Copeland's articulation of "struggle" is not abstract. Rather, she names explicitly the way in which the soul's "struggle" can be seen in specific forms of material suffering, namely that of black women. Using cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas' concept of "social bodies," Copeland demonstrates how discourse negatively affects (read: determines) material realities for marginalized communities:

> So the social body's assignment of meaning and significance to race and/or gender, sex and/or sexuality of physical bodies influences, perhaps even determines, the trajectories of concrete human lives. Thus a social body determined by the arbitrary privileged position and, therefore, power of one group may enact subtle and grotesque brutality upon different "others."[446]

Copeland is not only naming the connection between "social bodies" and materiality here. Rather, when considering her connection of embodiment and the soul, she also demonstrates how the soul's "struggle" is directly connected with social discourse. This is significant because it suggests that discourse can do damage to the soul even if it does not show up materially.

Theologian Wendy Farley similarly argues for the freedom of the soul. She depicts the soul as a burning desire; a light in every human being that longs for freedom due to its connection with the Divine. Like Copeland, she too conceives of the soul's freedom existing in juxtaposition with struggle wrought by sociopolitical realities. For Farley, however, the soul possesses an inherent political consciousness that has built within it an intuitive awareness of injustice. She writes:

> Suffering seems to us intolerable in part because it comes to us as a betrayal. Against all the evidence of our senses, our history, and our knowledge of the natural world, we experience suffering as something foreign; it seems to us *unfair*. As Simone Weil says, when afflictive suffering penetrates to the heart of even the hardest or most cynical of persons, something cries out in them, "Why am I being hurt?" This indomitable sense of injustice is a barely visible trace of a beauty in us that testifies against any and all

[446] Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 8. For a description of Douglas' concept of "social bodies" see: Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1996).

> justifications of suffering. The implacable voice in us that cries out so piteously and foolishly, Why am I being hurt?" arises from the image of God in us.[447]

In this sense, Farley echoes much of what Copeland argues about the connection of embodied life, political struggle, and the soul. Where she goes further, however, is in her articulation of the difference between "suffering" and "radical suffering."[448] Though Farley would acknowledge that suffering in and of itself affects the soul, "radical suffering" for her is the most destructive:

> Radical suffering assaults and degrades that about a person which makes her or him most human. This assault reduces the capacity of the sufferer to exercise freedom, to feel affection, to hope, to love God. Radical suffering pinches the spirit of the sufferer, numbing it and diminishing its range. The distinctiveness of radical suffering does not lie in its intensity or its injustice but in its power over the sufferer.[449]

Radical suffering goes against the essence of one's soul. It not only *chokes out* one's fundamental pursuit for freedom, but it also numbs the inherent political consciousness that grows from one's connection to the Divine. Radical suffering, Farley further argues, is fundamentally dehumanizing and contextual. It is differentiated from forms of suffering in relation to which one can find strength or resilience. It also moves beyond forms of suffering from which someone might gain some new understanding. There is no redemption to radical suffering.[450] Rather, to suffer radically is to lose hope; to despair; to lose even the awareness that one is suffering.

Farley and Copeland's analyses provide theological depth for my understanding of the consequences of "beast." Recognizing the "totality that we are" highlights the vulnerability of the soul in relation to the unique suffering young black men experience. Patterns such as

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[447] Wendy Farley, *The Wounding and Healing of Desire: Weaving Heaven and Earth*, 1st ed (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 20.
[448] Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy*, 1st ed (Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 53ff.
[449] Farley, 53–54.
[450] Farley, 55ff.

containment, crucifixion, and commodification take on increased seriousness because we realize that routine dehumanization has effects beyond the obvious. This connection pushes us further, however, when considering Farley's differentiation of suffering and radical suffering. Because the suffering wrought by "beast" hinges on dehumanization, particularly in the way assumptions of inhumanity are directly linked with patterns such as containment, crucifixion, and commodification, it is not a stretch to suggest – at the least – that many young black men are suffering radically. Whether it is a loss of hope tied to being imprisoned for life for petty drug offenses, or a more explicit resignation to continue "playing the game" because of no other options, the souls of young black men are routinely threatened.

The particularity of radical suffering, however, makes it difficult to apply to young black men broadly. We have demonstrated persistent and creative resilience in the face of the worst kinds of suffering, as did our ancestors for generations before us. Hence, one's response to these forms of suffering – or simply the threat of suffering – largely determines the extent to which one suffers. Still, Farley's description of radical suffering fits much of the suffering young black men experience: there is no point to it. It is not meant to teach any life lessons, or to develop strength. Rather, the abuse of young black men is meant to dehumanize; to deface.

Whether radical or not, however, all suffering that arises from the inhuman assumptions of "beast" do harm to the soul. In this sense, Copeland and Farley help reveal what I suggest is the more *direct* suffering of the soul wrought by sociopolitical oppression. What I do not find in their analyses, and what relational performance teaches, is that there is a "hidden dimension" to the soul's suffering that must also be taken seriously. In addition to the direct assault on soul that can be linked to oppression, there is a more *indirect* way in which the soul can be rendered powerless.

Numbing the Soul: The Effects of Ritualized Performance

To highlight the ways oppression directly assaults the soul is only half of the story. Relational performance discloses the other half of the story, which is the indirect way in which the soul can be disempowered by ritualized cultural performances assumed to be benign in nature. In chapter three, I demonstrated how the construction of reality hinges on relationally linked performances of selves in/and society. Central to this process are routine cultural performances that recruit participation in "roles" meant to maintain the status quo; how we *play out* America's (racist) cultural equilibrium. "Beast," as I have argued, functions as one totalizing role young black men are finessed (read: coerced) into. It is a central myth (and means) used to fuel the cycle of (mis)treating young black men according to the concocted assumptions of inhumanity built within. Beyond our particular relation to this role – whether we aspire to it or disavow it – society continues to perform it culturally in ways that re-create its "reality." Hence, regardless of our performances, the existence of "beast" continues to create and recreate a racialized cultural equilibrium that funds the mistreatment of young black men. But what of the soul?

If the soul is essentially free, then the binding tendency of "playing the game" goes directly against its nature. A defining characteristic of the soul's freedom is its fundamentally creative nature. Inasmuch as our souls exist in connection with the Creator, and the extent to which its connection with embodied life is governed by an impulse to actualize freedom politically, I suggest that the soul be understood as the *crux of creativity*. It is the creative center of human existence from which political action is born. The soul is impinged upon by what happens to the self, *but it can also be enlivened in ways that incite disruptive performances*. The

soul's participation in political existence is precisely why "playing" this particular game does damage to the soul's creativity, even in cases where one is not suffering directly.

On one level, routine performances of roles that assume young black men are "beasts" go against the fullness of what it means to be human. This point may seem obvious, but it gets at the indirectness of the soul's suffering. One may not be suffering directly, but one's soul can be virtually deadened when forced to participate in the routine re-creation of our racialized cultural equilibrium. The "freedom" (read: disruptiveness) of the soul is numbed to the point of apathy and is further lulled to sleep when routine is grounded in lack of awareness. The essence of the soul, then, is essentially stripped away due to the delayed pain of indirect suffering; suffering that does not hurt me now, one might say, but does contribute to the creation of circumstances that will eventually kill us all.

This process, on a broader level, is not specific to young black men. Rather, the very (f)act of *routine* in human performance has a numbing effect on the soul in general. The strength of the status quo is found in its ability, on one level, to recruit the majority's participation in its maintenance. More deeply, however, the status quo's power is more fully realized by reflecting on the ways specific forms of cultural participation are rendered second nature. In other words, selves in/and society can become so ritualized in performances of dehumanization that one can lose conscious awareness of the broader harm such performances (re)produce. This suggests that persons in society more generally contribute to the undoing of young black men, and others, simply by participating in the continuous creation of the status quo. Beyond the specific victimization of young black men, then, our souls are collectively threatened by *ritualized participation* in the construction of realities that dehumanize, even if indirectly. Human beings are all recruited into coordinated efforts to construct reality, and the mindlessness of this process

numbs us (collectively) to the harm we do to each other. Hence, relational performance reveals the level to which care for the selves and souls of young black men is fundamentally tied to care of the soul(s) of America(ns).

A Sinful "Reality"

Teasing apart moral responsibility in this complex picture can be difficult. I can imagine persons wondering, "So, what am I actually accountable for if we're all caught up in this mess together?" Investigating Farley's analysis further helps me address this question, particularly when I reflect on it through the lens of relational performance. Farley understands sin to be fundamentally connected to radical suffering by nature of the ways they both participate in the erosion of the soul. For Farley, this is evil: "…that the spark of life and dignity can be snuffed out in them [human beings] before they die."[451] Understanding specifically how Farley defines sin can be seen in the way she distinguishes the respective relationships that sin and radical suffering have with evil. Farley suggests that sin represents a "corruption of the human spirit by indifference to or desire for evil."[452] In other words, sin participates in evil wittingly or unwittingly, contributing to radical suffering in the world. Radical suffering relates to evil differently. It is produced by it. Radical suffering refers to those who are victimized in an evil world, while sin refers to what Farley understands to be the "willful repudiation" that allows such evil to run amuck.[453]

It is important to underscore that Farley puts both "indifference to" and "desire for" (evil) in the same category of "willful repudiation." She is clear that one can sin whether they intend

[451] One is reminded, here, of Greg Ellison's understanding of "cut dead" as a kind of social and spiritual death that negatively affects the souls of young black men. Clarification added. Farley, 41.
[452] Farley, 42.
[453] Farley, 44.

the harm they create or merely neglect to do something about it. This is made possible by what Farley sees as an interplay between four dimensions of sin: (1) Deception, (2) Callousness, (3) Bondage, and (4) Guilt.[454]In lieu of spending time developing each of these dimensions, I want to instead describe their complexity and how they function together to recruit human participation – especially unwitting participation – in evil. Seen together, Farley's presentation of deception, callousness, bondage, and guilt essentially highlight the ways routine performances of hegemonic lies (deception) produce an incapacity to recognize the lies as such, which tempts persons to believe that the dehumanizing fallout of such lies are "someone else's fault" (callousness). These factors become more complex when one recognizes the extent to which the choices human beings make exist in a broader relational web wherein realities (of radical suffering) are created and maintained through political structures meant to hold current configurations of power (and oppression) in place (bondage). In other words, we are bound together in a sinful world where the sinful reality of racism is all around us. And yet, we still have a choice to make (guilt).

These insights connect to and add depth to my analysis of the soul's oppression, particularly the "indirect" ways in which persons erode their own souls by blindly participating in the dehumanization of others. Seen through the lens of relational performance, one realizes how slippery of a slope sin can be if persons are not *actively* pursuing humanizing ends. Relational performance holds that persons' souls can be effectively lulled to sleep by simply conceding to routine (cultural) performances. This point implicates the space that status quo presumably occupies. Many people in the U.S. assume they can merely "stay in their own lane" in life and not cause any harm. They believe that there exists a liminal space between actively

[454] Farley, 44ff.

doing wrong and actively resisting wrong, where they can rest comfortably in "just the way things are" based on a deeper assumption that "things are" outside of anything they have done. This is particularly true for white people who are preoccupied with not being categorized as "racist" while they are equally as committed to doing nothing to acknowledge or resist the reality of racism. Recalling the way relational performance's recasts "reality" as something that is always in motion, one realizes that even the status quo is moving in a particular direction in relation to current realities (and the possibility of new ones).

Status quo is resistant to change, yet it is always in motion. It is itself an equilibrium designed to support what is; even if what is, is evil. Status quo has no moral sensibility built within it. It can be moved in whatever direction is dictated, but very quickly becomes a rhythm that feels second nature. This effortlessness is tempting for those whose collective performances actually dictate status quo's movement, in that it presents the façade of stability. It makes sense, then, why a phrase like "going with the flow" registers in our minds as something easy or comfortable. The problem is, "going with the flow" in the United States means willfully accepting the sinful reality of racism as a ritualized way of being in relation to black people. Recall my analysis of race in chapter three. If race is a "reality" that is continually produced by the collective movement (via ritualized performances) of its participants into its own presumptive reality, then simply succumbing to its current direction is willfully sinful.

What emerges, then, is way of recasting sin – namely the sin of racism – based on its movement. This way of understanding sin dispenses with the assumption of liminality that is built within phrases like "minding my own business." It renders status quo an accomplice to whatever direction reality is moving, implicating everyone based on the nature of their participation in such. In this sense, Farley's claim that sin refers to willfulness, both direct and

indirect, is particularly helpful. There is no possibility that any human being can choose not to participate in *either* reproducing the sin (read: evil) of racism *or* moving in the opposite direction toward producing new realities where the Divine spark embedded in the souls of black folk are never in question. Understanding sin in this way can help persons make sense of what is actually at stake when they say they want to live in a world where race and racism no longer exist. It helps them realize that they must decide, constantly. And relational performance reminds them that they will know they are on the right track when their own souls come alive due to the Divine spark in them that says "yes" in those moments when they learn to recognize the humanity in others and choose to pursue reality as such.

Enlivening the Soul: Reclaiming Play as Possibility

Play provides a way forward. This point may seem counterintuitive, particularly where playing the game epitomizes the insidious nature of "beast" and its consequences. By recruiting (read: coercing) young black men – and society more broadly – into playing out the supposed, and thereby constructed, "reality" of "beast," we continue to make this image "real" without conscious awareness of doing so. In other words, in routinely playing by the rules of this neoliberal game, we are actually not "playing" at all.[455] Rather, our cultural performances of "beast" have become so ritualized in a culture driven by the endless "work" of competitive production and consumption, that we have forgotten the role of play in the first place. We are

[455] This "play" on words is intentional. I am holding together the multiple senses of the word "play" as a way to illustrate how caught up we often are in political "games." We can never assume no participation. By nature of being alive in this constructed world, we are always already participants, whether we like it or not. At the same time, I am demonstrating how – even in the midst of our participation – we can maintain a critical distance from these "games" as a way to challenge their rules. More on this in a later section.

caught in second nature performances of an image that began in "fantasy" and culminates in the very "real" destruction of human lives, particularly young black men.

Over the last few chapters I have tried to paint a picture that illustrates how thoroughly caught young black men are in this society. This picture, however, also reveals the level to which we are all caught up in this tragic production; how we all have our part to "play." Realizing the full weight of this insight relies primarily on understanding the way American culture fetishizes "work," which seduces (if not forces) us into forgetting the playful (read: fantastical) origins of "reality." Recall my explanation of play in chapter three. As noted, Victor Turner challenges the separation of work and play by linking the overemphasis on "work" with the moral ideals of the Protestant Ethic, and more specifically with Western industrialization. Owing this understanding of *when* work and play became separated in the Western world, one can see *how* this separation has run amuck in contemporary configurations of culture, both in the U.S. and abroad (largely due to the U.S.). Neoliberalism has become a primary means through which we to export American ideals and practices across the globe, and consequently has produced an overemphasis of "work" in the world more broadly. As a result, we fail to remember the role fantasy plays in imagining realities that we aspire to (even if problematically and unjustly), perform (routinely), and consequently end up with.

One should not forget that "beast," the idea of race more broadly, and the plethora of tropes inscribed onto people's bodies are myths. Such myths do not come to us from some ultimate reality that exists prior to, or outside of this world. They become "reality" because we perform them into it. Said another way, "beast" originated as a form of imaginative "play" that was politicized in a way that continues to be used to literally control the bodies and subjectivities of black men. The same could be said about images like Mammy, Welfare Queen, Illegal Alien,

the list (unfortunately) goes on. Mammy and Welfare Queen are also age-old images that continue to morph into new stereotypes used to oppress Black women, where Illegal Alien is used to marginalize our migrating Latinx brothers and sisters.[456] Like "beast," these images do not reflect anything other than the way imagination funds images persons (and societies) perform into "reality," then refer to said "reality" as a way to proof-text forms of control and mistreatment of human beings.

Play: A Precursor to Care

I suggest that reclaiming "play" is one fundamental way to unravel the threads of suffering that have become second nature in this country. There is an element of this project that has emphasized nuances of language meant to challenge boundaries of meaning. For instance, I have played with the language of scripts in its connection to the process of inscribing (i.e. "(in)script(ion)s" in chapter four). I have also tried to demonstrate the closeness between how young black men have been "marked" and "mark(et)ed" in chapters four and five, respectively. Even the title of this project, *"Playing" the Game*, is crafted with a double entendre in a way that hints at one of my central goals: to demonstrate how possibilities for transformation lie just beneath the surface of what is already considered to be "real."

My use of play is no different. Yet, to this point, I have emphasized it in only one direction; one that demonstrates how young black men – and society more broadly – get caught up in playing by dehumanizing rules that reproduce their presumed truth of the game itself. However, play can (and should) also be understood in a more revolutionary sense. Human

[456] Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*. Kelly Brown Douglas contextualizes the images of "Mammy" and "Welfare" queen in helpful ways. She demonstrates how these images arose as sexualized myths meant to control the enslaved bodies of black men and women and further analyzes how they have morphed into contemporary versions that undergird new forms of control.

beings, to varying degrees, are aware of the difference between playing and being played.[457] On one hand, persons routinely participate in cultures, systems, and "reality" in ways that belie trust in that which they are participating in. In this sense, persons *play (along)* without challenging the premises – or (constructed) rules – of said cultures, systems, and "reality." They are "bought in," in a sense. On the other hand, however, persons also regularly *play* in ways that resist unwitting participation. This refers to what we might call "wit," which points to the *witting* ways one might challenge the rules of a game even while "participating" in it.

This way of understanding play moves in the opposite direction related to the normalization of "beast" as a totalizing image written onto black men. Just as "beast" began as a form of imaginative play, it can be *played* in ways that destabilize its (taken for granted) reality, which participates in the process of (re)humanizing young black men. In other words, playing a dehumanizing game in the unwitting sense of playing along, or "doing what I have to do," is not the only option for those who participate in the re-creation of this presumed reality. One can also "play" the game in a way that highlights the absurdity of its rules, thereby exposing its "realness" as merely a product of collective consent to continue unwitting participation.[458] Play reveals the subtle revolutionary moments in every interaction. If attended to with the intent of transformation, play presents opportunities for creative forms of care that can disrupt current realities of dehumanization.

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[457] Hamman, *Growing Down*, 142ff. Hamman provides examples of the small nuances that separate the different ways play can be used. Referencing interactions such as flirtation, seduction, etc., Hamman also illustrates the regularity of these (playful) interactions as something all participate in, with some sense of awareness. He does not articulate this way of defining play in the "revolutionary" sense that I use it here, but he does speak to the essentially disruptive nature of play on pp. 131-132. Hence, one can presume Hamman would make a similar argument at this juncture if his goal was the same as mine.

[458] More on this below.

Act 1: Play is Essentially Disruptive

There are at least three specific functions worth noting about the ways play opens up the possibilities for care. First, play is essentially disruptive. Play exists as a kind of balancing phenomenon to ritual, or what is more routinely understood as "work:" the mundane everydayness of life that we rarely question. Despite being constructed as opposites, ritual and play are actually twins that exist simultaneously. This is where Turner's critique of their cultural and historical separation is helpful. Human existence happens in the mutuality of play and ritual. Relational performance reveals how human selves and society are products of this mutuality. This framework can also help persons recognize how the ritualized patterns of relating that they settle into define what is considered to be "real." Despite the consistency of those aspects of human lives that have become second nature, however, one must not forget that play is always present.

Human beings play all day, even when we do not recognize our own playfulness as such. Consider those moments when we are at work, or in the middle of a "serious" conversation, or even engaged in a religious ritual… the little nudges siblings give to each other during prayer, the wink or joke in the midst of a tense conversation, or office pranks during the workday. These are all forms of play that "disrupt" the routine flow of "work" because they depart from the routine that defines it as such.[459] Now imagine colonizers engaging people who are minimally (i.e. color) different from them, embarking on a "new" land, and seeking to justify the reinstitution of their routines across the globe; dictating culture in ways that force and/or finesse

[459] Hamman, *Growing Down*, 131–32. While Hamman does acknowledge that "play is often transgressive and pushes against boundaries," I cast it as essentially disruptive in its very existence. While it can be employed in a disruptive sense, such use is not inevitable. However, play as a phenomenon exists as something wholly unruly, particularly because the institution of rules refers to a process of adhering to something in routine. Hence, play's existence is largely out of bounds to what has been normalized as "work," "routine," or "serious."

others to have to adjust to their norms (read: "code switch") in order to survive. In this scenario, "beast" began as a playful myth that gained traction and eventually became theologically grounded law, both written and unwritten. It functioned as a new ideological norm that could justify the imposition of a way of life foreign to new soil. And as tragic as this example is in juxtaposition with those named previously, all of them demonstrate how play functions as a disruption to what *is* – because, again, our perception of what "is" is only a real-time hindsight reflection of an intention to continue patterns that have been: "reality," as we know it.

Play, understood by its fundamentally disruptive nature, opens the possibility for new performances. The disruption of routine creates a pause in existing patterns. In this pause, those involved in the rhythm of the routine are invited into a moment of deliberation. In many cases, because there is no perception that there is something "wrong," all actors will resume their participation in the pattern. Yet, even when they intend to resume in the same way they did previously, something has now changed. Even if simply because of the difference of time, the seeming insignificance of a phrase (i.e. a seemingly "harmless" racist comment), or the fact that those involved must now exercise a level of intention in their continuation, the pattern can never be truly the same.

Imagine this scenario: We are watching a football game and a running back rips off a 75-yard touchdown run after breaking four tackles.[460] One spectator says, "Man, he's a beast!" Another responds, tongue in cheek, "Actually, he's a human being with great talent who has honed his craft through dedicated hard work and consistency (wink). But I agree, it was a great run." The spectator who mindlessly called the player a "beast" now must consider his word choice. He might resume the language of "beast" next time he witnesses a similar performance of

[460] "Breaking tackles" refers to one's ability to shake loose from a defender after contact has already been made, especially when such contact seems to have stopped the runner.

athletic extraordinaire. His decision to resume, however, is forever rendered just that; a (conscious) decision. Obviously, there is much variation in this example, as well as levels to which decisions to resume patterns are considered. However, this is exactly my point. This way of seeing the disruptiveness of play not only reveals how open to disruption (read: fickle) our patterns of relating are, but it also helps us see the endless possibilities of "play" in the midst of our ritualized constructions of reality.

Act 2: Exposing the Fantasy in/of "Reality"

This brings me to the second point I want to make about play: how it exposes *the fantasy in/of "reality*." If play and ritual exist in a mutual tension, we should recognize "fantasy" and "reality" in a similar way. Fantasy signifies the way we play in our minds. To fantasize is an act of play, and therefore a disruption to what is widely considered to be "real." Reality, on the other hand, hinges on ritual. The realities we live with are ongoing products of ritualized performances that continually bring them to life. Patterns of relating (via performance) recreate the very norms assumed in the scripts that seek to dictate how persons perform in relation to each other and societal systems. The ritualized nature of this coordinated effort is what creates the certainty in us that presumptuously says, "This is real." Fantasy, then, should be understood as a kind of disruptive (read: playful) reminder that our (unquestioning commitment to) "reality" is a product of what has become second nature to us.

Fantasy's connection with play also participates in its disruptiveness; it functions in the "pause" that play occasions. In highlighting the way play invites participants into a moment of deliberation, fantasy represents the world of possibilities from which new performances are drawn. In the moment that one decides to perform differently in the pause of disruption, fantasy

takes center stage. Understanding this point is critical. Fantasy coexists with reality in the same way that play and ritual are connected. To reclaim (the disruptiveness of) play also means reclaiming fantasy as our creatively constructive inspiration. It means that we are, in essence, taking back our imaginations in a neoliberal world that seeks to recruit us all into a zombie-like commitment to the status quo. But fantasy does more. Inasmuch as it arises from play to offer possibilities that are "outside of this world" (read: "reality"), fantasy also points out the absurd in the very idea, and the routine performance, of reality. Stand-up comedy is a helpful example.

In a stand-up comedy bit – which is itself set aside in a context of play – comedians take reality and turn it on its head. The best comedians are able to give social critiques, offer a moment of relief from stressful realities, and get us to laugh at some of our deepest insecurities. Why is this? The answer is "absurdity." Because the whole performance takes place in a context of "just kidding," comedians can suspend reality long enough to bring light to the absurdities in it; not to mention the absurdity *of* it. That is precisely why we laugh. While describing the way absurdity functions in stand-up comedy, humor researcher John Morreall argues that absurdity in jokes is defined by the way it breaks the "standard mental patterns and normal expectations" of a "thing or event."[461] Morreall suggests that this particular type of humor is based on "the discrepancy between abstract ideas and real things."[462] He notes how the set-up of a joke builds a particular kind of expectation in the listener, which is based on norms and patterned ways of being. In other words, persons have an expectation of the joke's conclusion that is based on previous routines of thought and making sense of the world. However, the punchline violates that expectation, making the whole scenario "absurd." The conclusion does not match the beginning,

[461] John Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016), 15.
[462] Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor," 20.

so we laugh. In the (disruptive) moment when the punchline is given, we are able to see the silliness of what we take so seriously. We are confronted with the fantastical nature of it all.

Jokes that highlight absurdity are effective because they lay bare for us the way we have bought into something that is only "real" because we do it, repeatedly, and without question. This is precisely what makes it absurd: the commitment to something that is created (as "real) simply because persons do it in routines, coupled with an underling belief in the routine and an unquestioning commitment to continue doing it. Some of the funniest jokes I have heard are only funny because I can identify with them in some way. Something about the joke is "true," even when I might vehemently hate the reality it exposes.[463] In fact, the potential disavowal of an offensive joke could be seen as revealing one's own recognition of it as a "reality" that should not be (joked about). Hence, what comes off as "making light" of something "off-limits" should be more critically understood as the comedian's commitment to pointing out absurdity, despite one's emotional investment in whatever "reality" was being joked about. Morreall highlights this critical audaciousness as a comedian's gift of being able (and willing) to think outside of typical patterns so that they can name the many absurdities in life, despite the emotional equilibrium society uses to dictate what a comedian is "allowed" to joke about.[464]

This epitomizes the work of fantasy. The reason fantasy is considered "not real" is because it violates the routine performance that we call "reality." It exposes it as a routine simply by offering possibilities outside of its rhythm. Fantasy's very presence threatens reality by pointing out the absurdity of assuming "the real" without recognizing it as an ongoing production we participate in. In other words, fantasy disrupts reality by reminding us that it would not exist

[463] More could, and should, be said about this in another project. Suffice it to say here that some of the most controversial jokes are only controversial because they expose realities we despise. Yet, they are still unfortunate realities we must deal with.
[464] Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor," 38ff.

without our rhythmic re-creation of it; which began as fantasy in the first place. I have already demonstrated how the possibilities offered by fantasy, particularly when imbibed with power, can result in the construction of myths that become "reality." "Beast" is a case in point. This trope is an example of the way in which fantasy becomes reality, particularly realities of suffering in the lives of young black men. Returning to the *play* of fantasy not only disrupts the "reality" of this image, but it also invites persons into the imaginative possibilities of creating a world where we learn to *assume* the humanity of all human beings, namely young black men.

Act 3: Possibility Breaking In

Play signifies the inbreaking of "possibility."[465] It brings us to the boundary separating fantasy and reality, confronting us with the realization that possibility itself is that boundary; that what *can be* relies on our ritualized performance of possibilities as if they already are. The third layer of play's usefulness for care relates to the inbreaking of possibility, but of a more theo-spiritual sort.[466] If the essential freedom of the soul is numbed by routine performance, play invites the soul's creativity back into the world to liberate us. Dwight Hopkins argues from a Black liberationist perspective that there is a "spirit of liberation" that arises from humanity's connection with the Divine. He argues that human beings are (to be) co-laborers with God to

[465] I use "possibility" in a dual sense in this section. On one hand, I have chosen to depict "Possibility" in a proper noun sense to hold onto to the mystery I see in its presence. This singular (and capitalized) usage is also reflected in the heading of this section. Possibility, like Spirit in the following section, possess a mysteriousness that, for me, convey a sense of presence that is simultaneously bound, but not completely circumscribed, by the world. On the other hand, I do use the plural "possibilities" to note the variety of new performances one can choose from in any given moment. These are the possibilities – not divorced from Possibility – that populate the pool from which our exercise of agency makes choices about what will be our performances in relation to others.

[466] I use "theo-spiritual" here because I acknowledge both the Christian roots of theological reflection in this project, as well as the broader spiritual awareness to which Christianity and other religious perspectives allude. While this is a project within the tradition of Christian pastoral theological reflection, I do not privilege this approach over others. My analysis is meant to encompass religious perspectives more broadly as they seek to grasp our embodied connection with spiritual dimensions of life.

liberate the "earth's majority (that is, working people and the poor, and, through them, the remainder minority populations of the globe)."[467] Hopkins' argument suggests that there is a Divine intention for all human beings to be materially free, rich and poor included.

In his construction of an explicitly African practical theology, pastoral theologian Emmanuel Lartey also offers an analysis of a Divine intention to liberate. Liberation, for Lartey, comes in the form of decolonization, which moves beyond material liberation and addresses epistemology as well. Playing on the language of colonialism, Lartey says:

> God is seen as one who, in keeping with the divine nature, acts to decolonize, diversify and promote counter-hegemonic social conditions. As a verb 'postcolonializing' articulates the nature, acts and activities of communities, leaders or people who seek to establish communities of faith or else who produce or provide regularly or occasionally rituals or ceremonies that, reflecting the decolonizing nature of the divine, are plural in form, diverse in character and which subvert and overturn the hegemonic conditions established through colonialism creating forms of spiritual engagement that more truly reflect categories of thought and life that emanate from an African, rather than a European, way of being and thinking.[468]

Though Lartey's comments are specific to his proposal for an African practical theology, he alludes to the kind of creative disruption I have foregrounded in my analysis of play. The diversity of "acts and activities" Lartey names should all be understood as performances that – in his words – "subvert and overturn the hegemonic conditions established through colonialism."[469] In other words, God's decolonizing work in the world is directly related to the ways human beings disrupt patterns of dehumanization, both material and epistemological. Lartey and Hopkins are right to name the Ultimate intention to liberate, precisely because the essence of our souls is freedom. Hence, to pursue liberation in the world is to replace dehumanization with the

[467] Dwight N. Hopkins, *Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 183.
[468] Lartey, *Postcolonializing God*, xiii.
[469] Lartey, xiii.

humanizing activity that disruption occasions.[470] One element of these liberative efforts that Lartey and Hopkins do not mention, which is central to my understanding of the inbreaking of possibility (via play), is creativity.

Creativity: (Holy) Spirit, reimagined

For one to discuss the inbreaking of possibility means one is also talking about what I suggest is the essence of creativity. And if such conversations are situated in the context of God-talk, then one is also alluding to an image of God as *Creator*. In this sense, I understand human creativity to be linked directly (via Imago Dei) to the creative nature of the Creator. After all, if we are made in the divine image, then it would seem that it is also our nature to create. Hence, creative engagements could be seen as originating with the Divine; a kind of *inspiration*, which enlivens human activity in the world. In this perspective, one could see the Incarnation as the quintessential example of the inbreaking of possibility via creative disruption. On the other hand, however, we are agents with the *freedom* to choose (relatively speaking) how we engage the world. With varying degrees of consciousness, we can decide whether and to what extent we create. Herein lies a tension.

If creativity (only) originates with the Divine – however construed – then human agency, and choice, would be rendered a façade (of sorts). We would be merely vessels through which the Creator creates. We would have no real say in what would appear to be our own creative engagements. However, if human beings are truly agents, acting intentionally in the world, then the success of the Divine intention to liberate would be contingent on our willingness to

[470] The very (f)act of disrupting is humanizing due to the way it actualizes the essential freedom of the soul, even if our disruptive activity is not overtly oriented toward humanizing goals. In other words, all acts of disruption excite the soul because they break open the possibility for the soul to actualize its freedom through creativity.

participate in the Creator's agenda (whatever we assume that to be): to play God's game, in a sense. This dilemma raises questions about the nature (and origin) of inspiration.

On one hand, there are perspectives that suggest inspiration is always beyond, or outside of this world. Whether originating with Ion, the Muse, or God, the assumption in this perspective is that artists are but vessels through which some Other is creating (art) in the world.[471] This perspective, however, completely ignores the way artistic creations arise from, reflect, and even critique aspects of the cultures and societies in which they are created. It is hard to imagine (or interpret) the significance of works of art such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s sermon, "The Other America," without taking seriously the economic and racial context out of which that sermon was born.

Presuming artistic creations arise solely from (Divine) inspiration is not only not realistic, it can be politically dangerous. As religious scholar Steven Guthrie notes:

> If art arises from and reflects the values of a particular society, then the idea of divine inspiration is not only bizarre, but politically dangerous. It encourages us to regard particular and contingent artistic norms as universal and absolute. The idea of "inspiration" takes one, very human way of looking at the world and places a stamp of divine approval upon it. So (for example) if someone suggests that Bach's music is divinely inspired, or that it reflects some absolute standard of Beauty (with a capital B), or that it somehow arises from *the natural order of things*—in any one of these cases, McClary might say—we are potentially *blinded* to the ways in which Bach's music arises from and reflects perspectives, values, and prejudices of his own culture.[472]

Considering Guthrie's perspective, one can see how "beast" demonstrates the worst potential outcome of "inspiration" understood this way. "Beast," in this sense, is nothing more than a (mythic) artistic creation that was overlaid with a presumption of divine inspiration, and eventually performed into a second nature "reality" that continues to insidiously refer to "the

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[471] Steven R. Guthrie, *Creator Spirit: The Holy Spirit and the Art of Becoming Human* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2011), 95–105. These names refer to different sources from which Artists throughout history have claimed to receive inspiration for their works.
[472] Guthrie, 104–5. My italics.

natural order of things" as a rationale for the dehumanization of young black men. Much of the contemporary strength of "beast" has to do with the way in which its construction has been linked to a truth cast as "beyond;" how God presumably agrees that black men are less than human.

On the other hand, however, artists cannot take sole credit for their creations. Noting contemporary critiques of the aforementioned perspective, Guthrie also highlights the way in which art is always situated in, and bound by, context:

> Language and song, gesture and image—these are the tools by which we engage our world and one another. But these tools, the contemporary theorist insists, have been fashioned by our society, and are necessarily bound up with the (often oppressive) ideologies of our society. Our songs, poems, stories, and images are not clear windows but lenses, manufactured by our culture and shaped to admit certain vistas and to exclude others. Our art "encodes" certain ideologies in ways of which we are for the most part unaware.[473]

Guthrie here names the way postmodernists resist any claims of Divine inspiration, as well as even claims of the originality of an artist's voice. Rather, for proponents of postmodern perspectives, all art is the product of socially constructed meanings, images, etc. that can essentially be traced back to cultural life. The problem with this more radical view of the cultural rootedness of artistic creations is that it discounts the level to which creativity transcends cultural norms, space, and time. Whereas locating creativity with the Divine ignores the human handprint on it, situating it *only* in culture misses the ways in which artistic creations point beyond what an artist can anticipate (or imagine). Consider again the image of "beast." As ubiquitous and harmful as this creation is, it is asinine to assume colonialists knew precisely the kind of persistence and amalgamations this image would hold across the world centuries later. That kind of evil genius is simply untenable.

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[473] Guthrie, 105–6.

Guthrie turns to the "Holy Spirit" as a way out of this dilemma. In a way similar to Dwight Hopkins, Guthrie casts the Spirit in terms of liberation, suggesting that it is "both *free* and the *bringer of freedom*."[474] He connects his engagement with scripture to the aforementioned postmodern critiques of Inspiration to demonstrate how being bound (read: oppressed) is directly connected to being blind:[475]

> Jesus's words underline another important connection, one made in the postmodern critique in fact, that is: the connection between captivity and blindness. The oppressive ideologies of our society are hidden, encoded, the postmodern complains. We are not free to choose how we think or who we are; instead "the subject [is] only a product of language and thought." The source of our thoughts and actions is hidden from us. Likewise, social ideals such as beauty and justice contribute to our blindness and our captivity. These supposed commitments are in fact only an ornately crafted façade that hides self-interest, power, and privilege.[476]

As overstated as his comments might be in terms of the extent to which persons are effectively overdetermined by systems, Guthrie is right in naming the connection between captivity and blindness. Recall my methodological commitment in this project to holding together the local expertise of the young men I interviewed with the broader impetus of critical theory and theology.[477] In as much as our unique experiences disclose realities others cannot see, our perspectives are simultaneously near-sighted due to their cultural rootedness. Hence, we need help to see beyond ourselves. What Guthrie misses, and what relational performance demonstrates, is the way in which the blindness he speaks of is an ongoing product of cultural performances of routine ways of being and seeing. We create and recreate our own blindness by performing myths such as "beast" into reality, repeatedly. The deeper assumptions in images

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[474] Guthrie, 133.
[475] I capitalize Inspiration as a short-hand reference to understandings of inspiration as originating with the Divine.
[476] Guthrie, *Creator Spirit*, 133.
[477] See chapter two.

such as "beast" become "normal" to us, preventing us from "seeing" our own participation in their re-creation.

Where Guthrie gets it right is in his proposal for reimagination as he relates it to the indwelling of the Spirit; "indwelling," considered differently. Guthrie argues that *seeing* differently is what is needed in a world where persons have become blinded by familiarity. Drawing on the language of the Bible, he says, "The people already have eyes, but they do not see. What is needed is a radically new perspective on familiar realities, a point of view that reframes existing certainties."[478] He later connects this with a reframing of the Spirit of freedom that brings together the cultural and otherworldly perspectives on inspiration. Guthrie posits, "The artist is indeed 'inspired'—not in the way *Ion* conceives inspiration, nor even in the way that Christians speak of Scripture being inspired, but nevertheless, truly inspired in a very important sense. The artist lives in a world that is inspired—animated by the breath of God."[479]

Guthrie's artistic understanding of the Spirit is significant in the way he connects the Divine intention to liberate with what is also central to humanity. He reimagines Spirit, via artistic inspiration, as working to make us fully human. That is, liberation is not about seeking something other than what is already our essence. Rather, to be free is to be fully human. This insight is vital to this project because of the way this notion of freedom indirectly references the dehumanizing tendencies of "beast" specifically, and (the unconscious adherence to) routine performances more broadly. Human beings become less of who we are (meant to be) when we deny our creative nature and instead bind ourselves by our own preoccupation with predictability. Guthrie's comments further suggest that the inbreaking is not so much about

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[478] Guthrie, 134.
[479] Ion is a character from one of Socrates' dialogues that Guthrie uses to engage the idea of inspiration as something originating with the Divine. Guthrie, 149.

something from another world coming into this world. Rather, he alludes to the idea that the possibility for human freedom – alongside our own (sometimes unconscious) desire for it – is already present.

Though Guthrie's argument is situated within a specifically Christian frame, it lends itself beyond. By highlighting the way inspiration exists in the world via the animation of Divine *breath*, Guthrie paints a picture of a created (read: re-creating) order pulsing with endless possibilities. He points to a world where a creative spirit – whoever we consider this to be – is with us, existing between and within all human activity, and waiting for openings in which to spill "new" creations into our engagements.[480] The act of "spilling," however, is contingent on human efforts to be fully human. Creativity, then, being already present and impregnating our world with possibility, simultaneously wills, and needs us to invite her into our creations by being willing to *disrupt* what is for the sake of what can be.

Such is the work of play. Guthrie's comments about being blinded by familiarity echo my argument for the ways we create "reality" via ritualized performance. However, in making his case for the need to reimagine our familiar world, he misses a crucial step: disruption. Play, in a world over-occupied with "work," disrupts the routines that deny our humanity; because routines in and of themselves, devoid of disruption, deny (the creativity) our humanity. Play breaks open the possibility for an inpouring of Creativity. It occasions the "pause" in which we can create and re-create a (re)humanizing world; a world that actualizes essential freedom; a "reality" that more adequately cares for young black men.

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[480] Stressing this point about how the Energy that exists with us is not monopolized by Christianity is important for this project, but unfortunately, I am not able to go into depth on this idea here. I want to at least note, however, that young black men come from, and represent a variety of religious backgrounds. They also engage with persons from a variety of religious backgrounds. Though I come from a field (Pastoral Theology) that exists in the Christian tradition, the trajectory of my work – particularly with young black men – seeks to encompass more than just this religious approach. My language, illustrations, and frameworks will likely still represent this religious perspective. More foundationally, however, I assume that we share the same creative energy that enlivens us all.

Care, Reimagined: Moving Beyond Disruption

If this is to happen, care needs to be reimagined. Pastoral theological imaginations have been caught by regimes of *response*.[481] Despite at least a decade of clear evidence in the field of a shift toward understanding care in public perspective, there continues to be the need to imagine what public care looks like based on an explicit understanding of "reality" as something that is produced. By "public" I mean care that is primarily oriented toward transforming the social order. This trajectory builds on understandings of the human self as relational, which prioritize the ways in which our "personal" and "public" lives construct each other synergistically. To conceive of care publicly assumes that persons (and/or society) cannot adequately care for another whose suffering is wrought by political forms of oppression and dehumanization unless one also addresses the broader systems involved.

This is not to discredit person-centered forms of therapeutic care. Psychological aspects of suffering remain central to young black men's experiences and social-psychological perspectives continue to help pastoral theologians better understand how to address these difficulties.[482] Over the last few chapters I have highlighted several of the coordinating factors that form the cultural onslaught that produces young black male suffering. I would be foolish to assume that care should not be equally as multifaceted. That said, focusing care in personal or even familial ways contributes primarily to the tradition of adjustment, which assumes a

[481] Pastoral theologian Emmanuel Lartey offered a similar critique as one of five "essential elements" to his proposal for an Intercultural approach to pastoral care. Lartey suggests that pastoral caregivers should also be concerned with anticipatory efforts aimed at prevention to complement what he calls an "ambulance-service" image that has been hard to escape. Though his critique is not as explicitly concerned with public political intervention as my proposal is, Lartey's underlying impulse is consistent with the critique and invitation to reimagination I offer in this section specifically, and this chapter more broadly. See: Emmanuel Yartekwei Lartey, *In Living Color: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 2nd ed (London ; New York: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2003), 30.
[482] Nicholas Grier's work is especially relevant here. See: *Care for the Mental and Spiritual Health of Black Men* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020).

(primary) purpose of healing meant to help persons adjust to societal systems; to "reality," as it is.[483] Since society is the problem in this case – its systems, structures, and cultural performances – helping young black men "adjust" will only prolong, mask, or potentially exacerbate our suffering.

Consider, however, the underlying logic of person-centered forms of therapeutic care. This approach to care highlights a way to give healing *attention to* those who suffer. There is something that has presumably gone wrong, to which caregivers take restorative action. Persons should not experience pain, we might say, but rather they should be at ease.[484] Therefore, we *respond* to their suffering by providing resources to help persons survive, make sense of, and hopefully flourish *in* their circumstances. But that part – "in their circumstances" – is precisely the issue. Person-centered therapeutic approaches do not prioritize the transformation of circumstances that give life to suffering. Hence, "care," as defined by the variety of methods use to "heal," all highlight the ways pastoral theologians might try to put back into place something that has apparently gone awry; a *response*, based on the hope of restoration.

Pastoral theologians are right to turn "public," then, based on more complex analyses of privilege, oppression, and the ways these are held in place socially, culturally, and politically. As mentioned previously, there has become a well-established trajectory or pastoral theologians seeking to address the public and sociopolitical dimensions of care.[485] However, even in this

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[483] Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America*, 210ff. Holifield's history illustrates how therapeutic theories and practice following WWI began to prioritize "adjustment" and "insight" in that the primary purpose of care was to help persons adjust to and think differently about the circumstances of their lives. Also see Barbara J. McClure, "The Social Construction of Emotions: A New Direction in the Pastoral Work of Healing," *Pastoral Psychology* 59, no. 6 (December 1, 2010): 799–812, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-010-0301-z. Using critical race theory, McClure critiques conceptions of care that prioritize "adjustment" because of their inability to address the social and political norms that occasion suffering in the first place. She explores this idea further in *Emotions: Problems and Promise for Human Flourishing* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019).

[484] Think: "status quo"

[485] Miller-McLemore, "Pastoral Theology as Public Theology: Revolutions in the "Fourth Area," in Pastoral Care and Counseling: Redefining the Paradigms, ed. Nancy J. Ramsay (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), pp. 45-64.

more politically centered stream of thought, there remains the residue of assuming a posture of *response*. Pastoral theologians may well realize that care requires sociopolitical analysis and action, but our interventions are often framed too narrowly in terms of specific structures.[486] In other words, many of the public pastoral theological proposals that have contributed much to pastoral theology's widening focus have also, at times, focused too narrowly on particular structures or publics. Logically, many public pastoral theological proposals are similar to therapeutic approaches in that they *respond* to reality even as they challenge many of political structures in its makeup. This project serves as an invitation to *imagine* more. Let me explore this idea further.

The Problem of Equilibrium

The reality of equilibrium frustrates approaches to care that are governed *only* by *response*.[487] Similar to how cultural equilibriums disclose the ways in which assumptions of young black male inhumanity become second nature, one should consider the same possibility in the context of suffering. Equilibrium discloses a "reality" that has been produced. It is something that is seemingly fixed because of the consistency of performances that hold it in place. Human suffering participates in equilibrium the same way, which is made possible by the interplay of

[486] One thread within pastoral theology's public trajectory that I think offers much hope is the widening focus on neoliberalism as a broad system of governance that deploys political structures and socially constructed norms of practice in its domination of the global majority. Bruce Rogers-Vaughn, Cedric Johnson, Ryan LaMothe are three contemporary thinkers who demonstrate recent analyses of neoliberalism in ways that connect to the broader analytical work and proposal this project offers. My project fits more narrowly into this particular thread of pastoral theology's public trajectory but offers a vision of care that tries to move beyond response. See: Bruce Rogers-Vaughn, *Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016; Cedric C. Johnson, *Race, Religion, and Resilience in the Neoliberal Age* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). Ryan LaMothe, *Care of Souls, Care of Polis* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2017).

[487] This includes both personal therapeutic responses and those that respond more directly to sociopolitical oppression.

human adaptability, vulnerability, and the need to survive.[488] Human beings are uniquely capable of adjusting to pain in ways that help us manage it.

One such tool for managing pain is to assume its presence, which makes it easier to adjust one's life around it and eventually forget it was hurtful. A state of suffering can become so second nature that it ceases to be painful. This can happen mentally, physically, and spiritually.[489] Recall Farley's concept "radical suffering." Farley argues that one's soul can be diminished simply by the *persistence* of suffering that has no rationale (or foreseeable end).[490] There is no point to it; and it may be unjust, but its persistence renders it something that – because of my need to survive – I adjust to in ways that lessen the pain. What ensues, then, is a new equilibrium that presumes the very pain for which one needs healing. What was previously experienced as pain becomes the new norm. Hence, person-centered forms of care that prioritize adjustment are grossly incomplete when dealing with matters of dehumanization.

On the other hand, however, pastoral theologians in the public trajectory tend to approach this aspect of care in ways that also do not take equilibrium seriously. We tend to use terms like "resistance," "protest," and the like to describe the *kind* of engagement with society we envision. The same could be said for many contributions outside of pastoral theology that have "justice" as

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[488] Vulnerability and adaptability, plus what I believe is human being's will to survive, are key features of my theological anthropology. Holding these in tension provides a backdrop for my understanding of how persons – by nature of their need to survive – adjust to, and are deeply affected by, social norms that may not have their best interest at heart. I hope to explore these deeper anthropological aspects of my argument in another project. For now, I merely want to briefly highlight these deeper theological and anthropological aspects of human participation in political life.

[489] My own experience as an athlete illustrates this. My career almost ended due to a fracture in my foot that I played an entire season with. What I experienced initially as pain eventually became second nature to me because nothing was done to fix what went wrong. I took pain medication, shifted the way I walked (and ran), and did all kinds of things to lessen the discomfort. I became so good at managing my pain that it eventually stopped hurting. Consequently, the injury continued to worsen to the point of threatening my ability to play, run, or even walk in the future. Fortunately, we caught it just in time, I had surgery, and was back on the field a year later. However, I basically had to learn how to walk again because of all I had done previously to manage the pain.

[490] Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 57–59.

their primary goals.[491] These terms are problematic because they imagine change can happen in oppositional ways. There is a presumption of *force* at play here. Hence, we "fight" to "make" a difference in the world. This approach ignores the way in which equilibrium functions productively in terms of relational performance.[492]

Equilibrium is something that is created based on the continuous consent to perform rhythms of relating that render themselves "reality." Every system has an equilibrium. For example, our bodies have a certain equilibrium that seeks to maintain itself by signaling its various parts to perform their respective roles. Our stomachs will tell us we are hungry and for some of us, if we do not eat fast enough, we begin to feel it in other parts of bodies (headaches, etc.). So, in a way, equilibrium has the power to dictate (read: script) the performances of those who actually maintain its balance. Participants are, in effect, recruited (read: coerced) into the continuous recreation of the routines that maintain equilibrium; or, status quo.

To the extent that pastoral theological efforts are disruptive, the emerging "public" trajectory in pastoral theology does take the field further. Efforts to resist, critique, protest, and the like have all proven to be effective in significant ways. Even person-centered resources and therapies have done much good for helping persons, families, and communities bear the brunt of

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[491] This kind of language can be heard in the many (necessary) protests we continue to witness related to the deaths of black men and women at the hands of state-sanctioned officials. "Fighting" for justice is a necessary goal. However, the underlying impulse is oriented toward a broader hope for a new reality born from new ways of relating to black Americans. Understood this way, protests function to disrupt reality as it is – which signifies the continued need to "fight" to be heard – but the messages themselves are the recommendations being offered by activists that, if taken seriously, can fund new relational performances out of which new realities can emerge. Hence, the oppositional claims of activists and scholars alike are valid, there is just a tendency to use language that does not truly reflect the fundamental goals of such efforts.

[492] Conceptions of care that are governed by *response* – even those that are more politically oriented – allow too much. To the extent that they are *called forth by* the dictates of equilibrium, they are powerless for changing its nature. They will continue having to respond, which will allow the power dynamics of the rhythm to remain as is. "Beast" is a prime example. This image undergirded the rationale of practices during slavery, Jim Crow, and the like. Now, we are confronted with cycles of containment, crucifixion, and commodification. Despite the ways our society has shifted in terms of the legality of dehumanization, the same myth of inhumanity funds new amalgamations of "beast" that continue to be used to foreclose the lives of young black men.

societal mistreatment. To this end, these are all necessary. Each of these interventions – to some degree – disrupt aspects of suffering that relate to personal and familial experience. However, disruption is not enough. While it is necessary for social change, it is only half of what is needed to re-create reality. Remember, disruption only breaks open possibility. It creates the "pause" in existing routines; routines that disclose the cultural equilibriums that seek to dictate how persons in/and societies perform. "Reality" itself is a kind of equilibrium in that it self-stabilizes based on the coordinated cultural performances of its participants. In actuality, though, it does not stabilize itself at all. We do it (via routine performance).

It is vital that pastoral theologians – and others concerned with liberation and flourishing for all human beings – understand that equilibrium is a coordinated balance that *follows* performance. Consider again the example of our bodies. We may well experience hunger pangs that affect us in other ways, but this is based on an appetite that has been produced via performance (eating habits). What if I went on a diet? I change my eating habits, I cut back on certain foods, the list goes on. Eventually my body will *respond,* and I will notice changes in my appetite, my body's functioning, and even my appearance. The seemingly fixed equilibrium (read: "reality") of my body has changed because that which constitutes it *performed differently*. Said another way, the seeming strength of equilibrium is only as strong as our collective consent to continue performing in ways that recreate its stability.

We find hope, then, in just how fickle the nature of "reality" is. "Reality" can change in an instant.[493] In fact, I have tried to demonstrate how realities are always changing, and how quickly they can be disrupted and re-created via new (ritualized) performances. What is needed

[493] For example, reality as the world knew it came to a full stop when the coronavirus outbreak spread over the globe. This large-scale disruption upended even the most commonplace kinds of interactions among human beings, thrusting us all into a new existence that will forever have to reckon with the effects – and future possibilities – of global pandemics.

then, is an approach to care that is more explicitly oriented toward inspiring cultural performances that not only disrupt, but also inspire new performances around which new patterns of relating can be ritualized. Pastoral theologians have demonstrated our capacity to imagine care in ways that "heal," and those that disrupt (for the sake of healing). What we lack is a creative impulse that inspires us to think more strategically about how we can populate the pauses occasioned by our disruptions in the process of remaking realities. Disruption in and of itself is not what changes equilibrium. Rather, it is the persistent presence of something new in relation to which equilibriums are forced to adjust. It is the new normalcy of a foreign body that produces new equilibrium. And in this case, it will be the "new" normalcy of young black male humanity that will fund performances that cause reality to *respond* in ways where our care becomes as second nature as our dehumanization has been.

How, then, should pastoral theologians think more broadly about care in a way that addresses the problem of equilibrium (and "reality")? How can our definitions of care more adequately reflect the rhythms of reality we forget to pay attention to? Pastoral theologians must look beyond the variety of ways we might *respond* to dehumanization. Again, these necessary efforts do a lot of good. We continue to see, however, the creative way in which underlying myths about young black men have taken on new forms at every turn throughout history. Slavery, lynching, incarcerating, and murder have all relied on a more pervasive cultural equilibrium that has built within it the belief that black men are "beasts." It is in the air that we breath. And despite the pauses we have created through a variety of disruptions – both theological and practical – pastoral theologians need fresh air if we are going to re-create the realities of those whose complex suffering justifies our discipline.

Hence, my proposal is for a shift in focus as much as it is also an invitation to create. "Reality" needs to be our focus, in addition to persons, communities, and publics.[494] By pursuing alternative realities proactively, we not only recognize the need to attend to persons, communities, and society, but we also recognize that the most sustaining way to address young black male suffering is by changing the very realities in which it exists. Said differently, rather than focusing on "care" (of the person), pastoral theologians should focus also on *creating* a society that more fully cares for itself and all its participants; one that can truly liberate the humanities of young black men so we too can flourish.

"Care" for Young Black Men: Normalizing the "Myth" of our Humanity

Before proposing a new image of care, I first want to address what should be the function of care for young black men. Young black men are human. But the "reality" of this truth does not exist. Each time a young a black man is treated like property, or contained like an animal, or crucified for all to see, the reality of our (perceived) inhumanity is reproduced. Each time we subject ourselves to the rules of a game that does not have our best interest at heart – even if we did not have a real choice in the matter – we reproduce the reality of our own inhumanity. In this coordinated performance that we call "reality" we routinely *play out* the assumption that young black men are not human. Consequently, our humanity does not exist (in reality).

The (unfortunate) reality of our inhumanity in this country is obvious. The evidence abounds. Whether our lives are snuffed out prematurely, or our athletic bodies are used for

[494] This is more than rhetorical. I am critiquing our unquestioning commitment to "reality" as a way to bring the world of new possibilities out of its "fantasy" existence. I am demonstrating, very sincerely, the space available to us to creatively contribute – intentionally and politically – to the remaking of our world for the better. We live a life where everything is in motion and is being constantly remade. Therefore, our awareness of this, and commitment to re-engage intentionally, will position us to make great contributions to what "reality" can eventually look like.

entertainment, the performances that makeup reality continue to tell the story that young black men are not human. This is due, in large part, to myth. Myth undergirds the ways persons in/and society – namely white persons in/and a white supremacist society – perform in relation to young black men. The myth of "beast" colors our interactions in productive and death-dealing ways. One could also argue that it is the persistent myth of inhumanity that funds dehumanization more broadly. Presuming that persons or communities of color are in some way of lesser quality, a different kind, or wholly other than human has been a primary rationale for material mistreatment in this country, especially in the case of young black men. It is perhaps the most foundational way in which humans can convince ourselves that it is okay to treat other humans like animals; not that animals should be treated like this either.[495]

Normalizing the "myth" of young black male humanity, in all its complexity, must be central to any conception of care that seeks to address the unique plight of young black men.[496] I am using "myth" intentionally. One might prefer if I said the "truth" that young black men are human, and personally I would agree. However, we should remember that "reality" does not default to some cosmic, or Ultimate Truth. Rather it is, and will continue to be, an ongoing product of what we bring to fruition via our own coordinated performances. Since this is the

[495] In fact, in many cases, dogs are treated better than black people in the United States. This is not hyperbole.
[496] This point – that of complexity – is central. It is not enough to acknowledge young black men as human. We must also recognize what that means, and effectively allow young black men to be human. At various points in our development we go through a similar set of questions, emotions, developmental milestones, etc. While these are qualitatively changed because of how thoroughly cultural our existence is, they are still features that all humans deal with. Learning to see this in young black men is central to truly recognizing us as human, rather than merely acknowledging this fact in a surface way. Further, perhaps we will know our vision of black men has been successfully transformed when we do recognize complexity, making the same allowances for us we make for others. One example. I know I cannot have a "bad day" in public because I will be "read" in a way that might risk my life. A white man can have a bad day at work, which can show up in his demeanor and the way he relates to others. Our societal default is to assume the white man's humanity, which informs the way we might even say to ourselves, "Oh, he must have had a bad day." While our internal conversation about black men might assume something more deeply held about this person's character, and/or their "nature." This has to stop.

case, "truth" will forever be something that is subject to collective consent.[497] Therefore, I use "myth" intentionally to take seriously the level to which the reality of young black male humanity needs to be (re)created.

Care, then, must humanize. Conceptions of care for young black men cannot take the fact of our humanities for granted. Despite what I might hold "true" about the reality, complexity, and beauty of young black male humanity, this truth is not *legible* to society. My return to legibility here is important. As I argued previously, legibility denotes a political process wherein one's unique way of seeing is continually adjusted based on prevailing norms for interpretation. It is important to understand, though, that performance is central to shaping the very norms that dictate routine ways of seeing. In other words, what is legible in society is born out of the synergistic interplay of sight and performance: how persons *see* based on routine ways of being that reproduce existing ways of seeing.[498]

This notion of legibility suggests that (re)humanizing care is the responsibility of all who participate in society. While this project is meant to raise public consciousness by critiquing existing patterns of legibility, and to offer a way of understanding care accordingly, the actual work of (re)humanizing young black men is a task that implicates us all, but it implicates white people especially.[499] This may seem like an obvious point, but white people also perform

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[497] I should mention that a key assumption in this project is that "care" is something we all exist with the capacity for. Even to think broadly about society, there are ways in which our cultural equilibrium assumes the need to care for certain segments of the population. These forms of care, however, are extended in asymmetrical ways; some are "naturally" cared for while others are not. Much of the reason our field exists is to imagine and construct models of care for those populations that are often forgotten about or remembered persons wo are experiencing a variety of difficulties. We have responded to needs as they have arrived. This project is oriented differently. While recognizing the need to continue responding to specific populations and suffering, I propose we also imagine ways of normalizing the humanities of forgotten populations. That if we can make legible the humanities of those assumed to be "beasts," care will begin to be built into the realities we live with. In other words, I am inviting pastoral theologians to think with me about how we might remake realities that care.

[498] This cycle reinforces its own reality until something disrupts it and offers new ways of performing, which reconstitutes our capacity to see differently.

[499] This point is vital. Due to the ways in which black bodies are read regardless of performance, white performances that disrupt existing realities are necessary. We know that racial profiling is an issue. However, we also continue to

identities in ways that relate to prevailing political norms in society.[500] Whether one is gay, straight, wealthy or working class, white folks are as varied within their whiteness as the variety of persons that makeup other racial groups. Naming the heterogeneity within whiteness, however, should not blind us all to the central role white people collectively play in reproducing racist realities based on their routine ways of performing in relation to black people.

Despite however mythic the categorization of the world in "black" and "white" may be, there is a "real" political power that manifests materially when one has white skin. Even when one tries to disavowal white privilege in moments of (realized) injustice, the performances of persons with white bodies are read as sincere and ultimately human. White people live in relation to reality in qualitatively different ways than blacks do, which comes with a responsibility that is also unique.[501] It is not enough to simply avoid certain expletives, targeted violence, or other overt performances typically associated with being "racist." Racism is not something that refers to one's character or specific acts, it is a "reality" that is continually produced via those specific acts and the ways they reproduce the underlying assumptions that normalize their rationales in every working part of this country (and world).[502]

Hence, this project is as much a call for white people to begin to perform differently in relation to black people broadly, and young black men specifically, based on the commitment to

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hear stories about black men and women who are dehumanized even while embodying (respectability) norms set forth by white society (i.e. "proper grammar," particular kinds of dress, living in certain neighborhoods, etc.). Hence, assuming that black folks are the only ones who must change their performances in relation to racial reality is short-sighted at best, dangerous at worst.

[500] Making whiteness – and the productive performances of white bodies – explicit disrupts the "zero point" history of white people being able to function (invisibly) as the reviewer. It puts whiteness on the table for examination (and scrutiny) along with everyone else, which contributes to the recreation of the ways persons and societies continue to miss this opportunity for epistemic equity.

[501] In another project, I will explore how this idea – when considered in the light of relational performance – suggests what I understand to be a social "ontology" that can further mitigate racial debates between proponents of race understood discursively and those who argue that race is more deeply an ontology.

[502] Blackness is unfortunately denigrated globally. This is reflected in language, policies, and the strange way in which the poorest parts of the world also seems to be where the darkest people live.

assume that we are fully human. Not only does this suggest the need for white people to pay closer attention to the ways their existing performances participate in the reproduction of sinful realities that are built on inhuman messages received through various kinds of media, it also means changing these performances and intentionally relating to black people in ways that reflect a reality where our humanity is not in question. Perhaps a few specific examples are in order. White people need to stop *playing out* assumptions that black men are dangerous criminals by crossing the street when they see a group of young black men walking together. White people need to stop citing murder statistics and the disproportionate number of black men in prisons as a way to insinuate something (supposedly) ubiquitous black men's character, particularly while refusing to take account of the cultural forces that create these circumstances. White people need to stop reading black athletic performances "on the field" onto black men "off the field," especially since "beast" performances have been deemed necessary for success in a sport that continues to be one of only a few options for young black men to survive; a barbaric sport that white created, I might add. These performances all participate, directly and indirectly, in dehumanization and the utter foreclosure of young black men's lives. By definition, these (willful) performances are sinful.

Pastoral Theology as the Art of Curating

I propose the image of *curating* as a guiding metaphor that can offer pastoral theologians a way of understanding how our work lends itself to re-creating realities that care. Curating can move the field beyond *response* to *creating*. Again, this is not to discredit the necessity of personal, communal, and sociopolitical responses as legitimate forms of care. It is, however, to suggest that remaking reality is contingent on our ability to create new myths that fund

performances that (re)humanize young black men. And to be sure, this work can and should happen on personal, communal, and public levels. Curating invites all pastoral theologians to think more creatively, and strategically, about how to disrupt what is and inspire what can be. It invites us to embrace *creativity* as an approach to care that is oriented toward (re)humanizing.

Pastoral theologians are uniquely positioned to do this work. As I highlight in the next section, curators employ a unique cultural dexterity in their creative work. They exhibit an ability to do critical contextual analysis as they attend to, and even stage, the interactions between viewers of art and the pieces on display. Curators possess the ability to see, uniquely, in ways that lend itself to insinuating newness into the world. Pastoral theologians share these traits but bring a unique social and theological depth to our work due to what I suggest is our unique analytical advantage. As noted, pastoral theology has struggled to identify itself as an academic discipline in the past because pastoral theological reflection tends to be so interdisciplinary, which prevents our mode of inquiry from fitting neatly in (relation to) academic discourse. However, because critical analysis of the complexities of human suffering is so central to the methods and goals of pastoral theology, this interdisciplinary quality has been embraced as a strength that sets pastoral theological inquiry apart.

The fact that pastoral theologians can hold together whatever variety of perspectives most adequately helps us develop a "thick" understanding of the experiences of suffering persons in context means also that we are better able to provide proposals of care that can truly address the complexities of suffering. What was previously assumed to be an identity crisis, then, is more accurately understood as an analytical advantage that provides a way of *seeing* that is unique among scholars.[503] More importantly, however, pastoral theologians are also distinguished by the

[503] Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice*, 159.

ways we lean into, and learn from, the complexities of marginalized cultural experiences. There is concern and curiosity to understand the qualitative nature of human suffering, an awareness of the sociopolitical complexity that renders such suffering invisible, and a growing awareness of the need to engage publicly, all of which contribute to an angle of vision that lends itself uniquely to the kind of work curators do.

Curators as Bricoleurs: A *Playful* Approach

The work of curators is most familiar in museums or other forums where art is put on public display. Largely behind the scenes, curators strategically assemble pieces (of art) together to create a display that tells a story or emphasizes some aspect of the artifacts' significance. In a facetious and intentionally oversimplified way, art and culture critic David Balzer uses the phrase "arranging and editing" to capture the work curators do. He connects curating to French ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss' concept of "bricolage,"[504] arguing that the curator functions in much the same way as the bricoleur. For Balzer, by way of Lévi-Strauss, the bricoleur employs a "free-form science" of improvisation to make meaning of the world.[505] Rather than predetermine one's approach to problem-solving, the bricoleur "tinkers" with whatever is at hand to accomplish a goal.[506]

Beyond the methodological connection Balzer makes between curators and bricoleurs – as seen in the willingness to accomplish an end using whatever combination of available means is necessary – there is also always a problem-solving intent embedded in this work. Balzer

[504] See: Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, The Nature of Human Society Series (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).
[505] David Balzer, *Curationism: How Curating Took Over the Art World and Everything Else* (Toronto, Ontario: Coach House Books, 2014), 29.
[506] Balzer, 29.

suggests, "The bricoleur is anyone attempting to plan, solve or create," even if the problems to be solved are merely aesthetic.[507] One of the curator's primary responsibilities is to create something out of the perception of nothing. They *play* with pieces to assemble a picture, narrative, or – in my perspective – a "reality" that re-deploys artifacts that have often become obsolete. However, to the curator, there is no such thing as obsolete. Rather, persons in/and societies merely forget to remember the value of something, to which the curator remains committed to both seeing that value and re-presenting it to the world so others can see it as well.

Where curating diverges from the work of bricoleurs, and what makes it a unique art, is in the curator's commitment to value. Balzer suggests, "The curator is someone who insists on value, and who *makes it*, whether or not it actually exists."[508] He depicts the art of curating as a kind of unique ability (and willingness) to "see" value in artifacts, as well as a commitment to *creating* ways to convey that value to the public. This unique ability to see value is where curators and pastoral theologians are most similar. As mentioned, pastoral theologians are positioned at the intersection of disciplines in such a way that gives us a unique ability to see the complexity of human beings. Being able to see such complexity, I believe, is precisely what allows pastoral theologians to appreciate humanity's value across cultural contexts and the lifespan. Where the image of curating pushes us further is in the creative impulse that drives the curator's work.

Insinuating Value: A Commitment to the Forgotten

Creating value is a central feature of contemporary curation that dates back to at least the early twentieth century. Contemporary curation is rooted in the *avant-garde*, a period where

[507] Balzer, 29.
[508] Balzer, 32. My italics.

artists began to lead exhibitions (outside of traditional establishments) in order to accentuate the value of art on their own terms. Despite perceptions of being anti-establishment, curators simply prioritized the creation of value over and against established mediums for telling their stories. In other words, artists' concerns were more about (re)creating art's value in ways that could be appreciated by the public, even if that meant *disrupting* established mediums for putting art on display.[509]

This creative impulse is more than stylistic. Considered in the light of my previous analysis of "myth," curators do not make the mistake of taking reality for granted. Rather, they assume the need to create whatever value they believe art has, which is based more deeply on the awareness that *legibility* is at stake. If the world cannot see value, then (for them) it does not exist. And since such value does not exist (for them), curators remain committed to creating it; to making it "real."

Curator and researcher Ebru Yetiskin develops this idea further regarding curation's potential for political action. She constructs the concept "paratactical curation" both as a way to expose the insidious ways oppressive realities are produced, and what she understands to be the subversive potential for reconstructing it:

> Paratactical curation emerges especially from various modes of artistic practice, composition and curations that are associated with tactical media, and evolves into popular entertainment, marketing, and the control and propaganda tool of governments, institutions and corporations. Tactic means to '[insinuate] itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance' (DeCerteau 1984: 229). Taken as a prefix, 'para' means alongside, beside or beyond. Thus, 'paratactic' refers to the imaginative collaborative practices alongside, beside or beyond tactic and tactical media interventions, which have been appropriated by governments and corporations in the recent years.[510]

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[509] Balzer, 40.
[510] Ebru Yetiskin, "Invisible Motion: Paratactical Curation of Bio Art and Performative Political Imaginaries," *Technoetic Arts: A Journal of Speculative Research* 15, no. 2 (June 2017): 206, https://doi.org/10.1386/tear.15.2.203_1.

She further explains:

> By exploring and reusing the operational processes of various protocols, such as scientific tools and procedures, or mainstream cultural event processes, paratactic curation aims to realize subversive actions and creative interventions, which do not represent and reproduce hegemonic associations and imaginaries. It aims to produce performative and intervening actions and compositions against ignorance, extinction, degeneration, corruption and destruction. Rather than being merely infected and pacified by the conditions and predications of its medium, paratactic curation *produces* – back-ground – information about its medium, its operational process, its users and the changing patterns of behavior. In this way, paratactical curation explores how the covert operations in global capitalist cultures are reappropriated in order to stimulate subversive actions, knowledge and perception.[511]

Yetiskin's analysis highlights the way in which "governments, institutions and corporations" use "tactical media" hegemonically to produce oppressive circumstances.[512] "Paratactic curation," for Yetiskin, is an approach that uses the same productive methods but for the purpose of remaking political realities. In other words, Yetiskin connects curating with a broader capacity to remake the world (for better) using the same "covert operations" that have been used to oppress.

It is important to note the deeper method built within Yetiskin's construction. Recall again her emphasis on "tactic," when she states, "Tactic means to '[insinuate] itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance'."[513] Yetiskin imagines transformation taking place from within the thing that is being transformed. To *insinuate* refers to a way of imbuing something, subtly, in a way that changes its composition. Rather than attempting to oppose something, which is based on the presumption that I exist separate from it, insinuating entails working within it to change its makeup.

Yetiskin's concept reflects the underlying theory of change built within this project. By nature of the ways human selves (and societies) are bound up together relationally, and the extent

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[511] Yetiskin, 206–7. My italics.
[512] Yetiskin, 206ff.
[513] Yetiskin, 206.

to which our realities reflect the productive nature of our coordinated performances, pastoral theologians (and people more broadly) should never assume change can happen outside of, or other than, whatever it is we imagine transforming. We participate in it even as we intend to transform it. This point refers back to my argument about the way in which human beings are all participants in our collective existence, for good and for ill. Assuming we can oppose something presumes we exist apart from it. This approach to transformation runs the risk of only temporarily disrupting oppressive systems, while new forms of reproducing existing power dynamics are created. Disruption without newness allows dehumanization to be reproduced, but in a new costume. Newness is vital to transformation because its presence forces a new equilibrium.

Taken together, Yetiskin and Balzer's insights can help pastoral theologians realize the role of creativity in the process of remaking political realities. Balzer illustrates the playful cultural dexterity curator's exhibit when they "arrange and edit" artifacts to tell new stories about their value. Embedded in Yetiskin's proposal is the assumption that such stories, insinuated strategically, have the power to subvert oppressive realities predicated on ideological stories used to maintain the status quo.[514] What both of these perspectives offer pastoral theologians is a way of seeing the connection between creativity and the kinds of transformation (read: remaking) our field envisions.

To Curate: Embracing Creativity as the Crux of (Re)Humanizing Care

Curation provides pastoral theology a new way to (re)engage pastoral theological praxis more creatively and strategically. This image can help pastoral theologians nurture our creative

[514] Yetiskin's attention to "back-ground" information is key.

impulse based on a reorientation toward "reality." The variety of unique analytical contributions in the field offer a theological depth (and complexity) that – if used strategically – can transform cultural performances in ways we are not currently considering. This metaphor can help pastoral theologians approach our work with a creative impulse that will complement our responsive tendencies. In other words, curating can orient pastoral theologians toward creating new myths that inspire new realities, rather than merely operating inside the taken for granted equilibriums of "reality" as we know it.

The practical benefit for pastoral theology to adopt (and adapt) curation as a metaphor is found in the curator's method of creating new narratives. The curator *plays* with forgotten pieces, assembling them in new ways to remind onlookers of their value. Similar to pastoral theologians, the curator is not bound to any particular approach. The overall point is to re-present the art strategically where it can tell its own story about its own value. In effect, curators assemble a picture based in a reality they imagine and know is possible. Hence, embracing the image of curator also means embracing creativity as central to the work pastoral theologians do. This is more than strategic, despite the way in which Yetiskin emphasizes "tactics." Rather, as I have highlighted, there is a theological depth to creativity that is uniquely disclosed by pastoral theological reflection.

Recall my analysis of soul. Human beings exist to be free, which also means to be fully human with the capacity to create. Freedom is the soul's essence, but such freedom seeks to be actualized politically. As Farley and Copeland remind us, our souls, however conceived, are not unaffected by what happens to our minds, bodies, etc.; the totality of our selves. Souls exist with a political consciousness that can be bound by routine, particularly routines that dehumanize. As mentioned, there is a way in which persons reproduce our own blindness through routine

performance. One can become so familiar with a way of being that they forget the absurdity of it. This explains how a myth such as "beast" can become so second nature that it disappears right in front of us even as it continues to shape the ways we perform-in-relation to young black men.

To create, then, is to be human. It is to actualize the essential freedom of our souls in political life. Creativity enlivens the soul, which in turn invigorates performances that disrupt and contribute to the remaking of realities that liberate others to do the same. It is more than strategy, though it is uniquely occasioned by it. Adopting this image, therefore, invites pastoral theologians to see ourselves as curators who are uniquely committed to re-creating realities where everyone can be free, especially young black men.

Pastoral Theologians as Curators: Making Legible What Is

Because there is no science to curating, naming specific strategies is difficult. Curating is more about *a way of* approaching our work than it is a specific method. It is an art. Therefore, I do not try to name specific steps for pastoral theologians to follow.[515] I will, however, name three distinguishing commitments curators have that can help us imagine our work similarly. After highlighting these commitments, I offer one example that demonstrates what curation looks like practically.

Consciousness Raising

Curators are committed to the work of consciousness raising. I recognize that not all curators are concerned with critical theory, or politics in general. However, the curator's

[515] Providing specific examples here could function counterproductively because of the way in which it might limit the imagination of other pastoral theologians who can employ this image in their specific contextual work. One might see an example too literally and try to hold to its specific features, rather than embody the spirit of this kind of work in ways that better fit their contexts.

commitment to seeing value, then (re)creating it, is a distinguishing characteristic that I suggest has to do with raising consciousness. Consider this distinction between curators and connoisseurs. Connoisseurs of art can also see value in it, perhaps even as uniquely as curators do. Yet, their ability to appreciate art is sufficient. It stops at the level of enjoyment. Curators go further. They are unique in that their work is governed by translating their appreciation of value to the public; creating it, to be more precise. It is not enough that they see the value of art. Others must see it as well. In this way, consciousness raising is a commitment in curatorial work.

Consciousness raising is also a vital aspect of this specific project and has been a central commitment in pastoral theology over the last few decades. As the field has continually become aware of the relational complexity of human suffering, critical theory has taken on an importance that is now vital to pastoral theological work. Critical theory helps scholars recognize the ways persons get seduced by ideological narratives told hegemonically. Understood in terms of relational performance, my own critical theoretical approach has helped to highlight the ways "reality" itself is a product of the ways persons in/and societies perform ideologies such as "beast." However, critical theory also prioritizes the need to become conscious of the ways pastoral theologians participate, based on the assumption that such awareness is a prerequisite to performing differently; changing legibility through sight and performance.

Contextualization

Curators also exhibit an ability to contextualize. As mentioned previously, "arranging and editing" is central to the curatorial task. Despite the simplicity of this phrase, the work is complicated. Curators must have the kind of cultural dexterity that allows them to attend to the many moving parts surrounding an exhibition. They must consider the potential audience, the

space being used for displays, the pieces they want to highlight, how they fit together to tell a story, the list goes on. Additionally, curators must consider the context more broadly, and how the stories they are telling relate to the world of politics, sports, or other realities. This is especially the case when curators intend to tell a story with explicitly political ramifications.

Contextualization is crucial for pastoral theological engagements with young black men. Knowing the particularities of black men's social positions as more broadly situated in communities, cities, and the United States are all factors pastoral theologians must consider when "arranging and editing" new performances that bring the "myth" of young black male humanity to fruition politically. Central to pastoral theologians' ability to contextualize is the need to assume a participatory posture *with* young black men. Hearing the voices of these men and inviting their local expertise is vital for understanding the kinds of questions, concerns, and contextual opportunities that might inform and/or revise pastoral theological work. Holding these perspectives alongside pastoral theology's unique scholarly angle of vision will be useful as pastoral theologians think strategically about how to insinuate (re)humanizing stories about young black men into public consciousness.

Creativity

Finally, creativity is central to the curator's work. Both in terms of the act of creating something new, and the impulse to do so, curators engage existing realities with the purpose of transforming them. Creativity builds on the commitment to consciousness raising and contextualization in order to think strategically about how to insinuate newness into the world. In this project, the newness I am concerned with is the "myth" (read: narrative) that all young black men are fully and complexly human. Creativity, particularly as considered with the theological

depth I noted previously, works in two directions. On one hand, it seeks to exploit points of absurdity in the shared (political) existence of human beings. In this regard, being creative means "playing" like that of a comedian; breaking open possibility by strategically disrupting taken for granted realities, while drawing on imagination to offer alternative possibilities.

The second direction has to do with the way creativity can enliven the souls of young black men (to create) specifically, but also how it can enliven the soul of our society more broadly. This is inextricably tied to the strategic in that the depths of our soul(s) participate in the ways we create politically. In other words, strategically insinuating newness opens the door for our soul(s) to be actualized in reality. Moving beyond disruption, creativity insinuates newness, which in turn participates in the re-creation of the "real." This way of understanding our creative work also addresses legibility in terms of sight and performance. Insinuating newness – whether new narratives, new images, or new ways of valuing young black men – all contribute to new ways of seeing, which inspires new ways of performing-in-relation, which ultimately brings to fruition new realities.

The Praxis of Curation

To illustrate what curation might look like for pastoral theologians I want to highlight one example from within the field that demonstrates how this kind of work is already being engaged. It comes from pastoral theologian Cedric Johnson's proposal for "prophetic soul care."[516] Johnson's proposal illustrates a brilliant example of how consciousness raising, contextualization, and creativity can be used to disrupt and offer new possibilities in a communal setting. I cast Johnson as a curator in this regard not because he claims this title, but because his

[516] Johnson, *Race, Religion, and Resilience in the Neoliberal Age*, 127ff.

presentation of "transformative theater" demonstrates the *kind* of work I imagine pastoral theologians engaging.[517]

"Transformative Theater"

In his book *Race, Religion, and Resilience in the Neoliberal Age*, Johnson engages neoliberalism with an explicit focus on the way black communities in the United States are uniquely targeted by the Market. He analyzes the historical antecedents to Neoliberalism's rise, as well as the confluence of policies and practices that converge on the black community to create racialized forms of economic oppression. After laying bare the interworking of our political economy in this way, Johnson proposes a pastoral theological approach called "prophetic soul care" to attend to the specific social and political care needs of black communities.

Johnson proposes "transformative theater" as one key strategy within prophetic soul care that prioritizes the need to empower black communities in relation to the onslaught of the Market. Drawing on narrative theory and contributions from the field of psychodrama and sociodrama, Johnson describes the purpose of transformative theater as follows:

> Transformative theater…is a group-oriented psychodramatic healing modality. It utilizes improvisational dramatic reenactments to facilitate the process of "re-authoring" to disrupt and revise problematic narratives. Here, small to midsized groups participate in the process of building preferred narratives for individuals, families, congregations, communities, and cultural groups. In the neoliberal age, transformative theater functions to challenge demeaning dominant narratives. Problematic narratives are disrupted, deconstructed, and displaced as "counter-stories" are re-membered, reenacted, and integrated.[518]

[517] I do not intend to be anachronistic, or to impose any agenda on the persons or people involved in these efforts by using this example. Johnson may not consider himself a curator at all, and his particular goals might be focused differently than what I am trying to do in this project. That said, I find this example useful for the ways he illustrates how the commitments of curators can be used communally and publicly with the goal of remaking reality. He exhibits how "play" (read: disruption), imagination, and creativity play out in the public sphere in transformative ways.

[518] Johnson, *Race, Religion, and Resilience in the Neoliberal Age*, 136.

Johnson's description alone would suffice for demonstrating how consciousness raising, contextualization, and creativity come together in his proposal for transformative theater. The curatorial connections, here, are obvious. However, I specifically want to underscore the way Johnson's transformative theater not only engages "play" in the sense of disruption, but how it takes the next step to *create* new legibility in terms of sight and performance.

In further describing transformative theater Johnson suggests, "Taking enactments out of the flow of life, symbolically, to examine, replay and reframe them, provides a vehicle for influencing and changing existing patterns of thinking, feeling, behaving, and interacting." What Johnson describes is precisely what I have tried to argue about developing pastoral theology's creative impulse in a way that reorients the field's imagination for care toward re-creating realities. It is one thing to take seriously the many forms of suffering that have visited black communities in general, and young black men specifically. It is another thing to recognize that this "reality" is a product of our "existing patterns of thinking, feeling, behaving, and interacting" and can be changed by normalizing alternative stories that enliven new performances.[519]

I want to make one last observation. This act of curating a reality remaking experience – as a form of pastoral care – does not take place *only* in the Academy. And yet, the research that informs it reflects the rigor of the Academy generally, and the particular angle of vision that is unique to pastoral theological contributions.[520] Embracing the image of curator into our work –

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[519] Johnson, 137.

[520] I lift this up because rigorous academic reflection does have the potential to transform existing patterns in society. My decision to name the usefulness of the Academy grows from my critique of the "Ivory Tower" as too often disconnected from the lives of those it claims to serve. Whether using unapproachable language, or theorizing in ways that do not reflect the messiness of people's lives, academic theorists must continue to work to ensure that the countless hours of our reading, reflecting, and writing remain in service to the very persons and communities we claim to be theorizing on behalf of.

and with it a fundamentally creative impulse – means stretching ourselves to make contributions outside of the typical mediums we are accustomed to. There are many examples from the world of sports, film, etc. If pastoral theologians want to make full use of the way we see uniquely, I invite us out from our academic silos and into the public where we can contribute to the work of remaking realities that more adequately care for young black men.

Conclusion

Playing the Game is forever incomplete. In this project, I have tried to lay bare important complexities in the societal mistreatment of young black men. Society continues to play out the assumption that young black men are "beasts," and thereby we reproduce reality as such. This, however, does not have to be the case. To the extent that human beings are all involved in the continuous production of our collective existence, we are also collectively capable of (re)creating cultures, societies, and realities in ways that can better care for young black men and others who are marginalized based on problematic scripts that continue to be written. The extent to which this project is successful cannot be known at this point and perhaps can never truly be realized. Human beings will continue to learn more tomorrow about what we get wrong today. And we will perform differently as a result. There will continue to be blind spots in pastoral theology, which will continue to show us our own near-sightedness in the complexities of suffering in the word. What matters is that we continue to work creatively to bring about the realities we prefer rather than taking existing ones for granted as just *is*. Reality never just is. It is what we make it, repeatedly.

Summary of Findings

My engagement with the young men in this study confirmed some of the suspicions I had about "beast," while also extending my thinking in important areas. In one sense, our conversations solidified the extent to which I believe "beast" to be something that is simultaneously disavowed and valued among young black male athletes. Each of these young men were acutely aware of the problems built within this image. To varying degrees, they all related to the way "beast" discloses the normalcy of being seen as sub-human in society.

However, they also related to the ways athletes in particular are celebrated (as "super-human") in commodifying ways simply because of what our bodies can do. And collectively, these young men wanted to be appreciated as human beings outside of their participation in athletics. In this sense, these conversations confirmed many of the suspicions I brought to this research.

One area where our conversations extended my learning was in the way my interviewees helped me see the limitations of who could be considered a "beast," even in the context of sport. While holding out the possibility of white players being "beasts" based on dominant performances, which was an assumption I came into this project with, any allowance for such was grounded in a qualification that reserved the term uniquely for black players. This unforeseen insight opened my eyes to the extent to which this image was uniquely racialized in addition to being constructed around gender ideals. Said differently, while confirming my assumption that "beast" was inscribed based on explicitly aggressive masculine ideals, my co-researchers pushed me to also recognize that its racial constitution uniquely targeted black players.

This insight also helped me realize how the best white players' greatness is often associated with qualities assumed to be synonymous with humanity (intelligence, leadership, skills, etc.), while the best black players were thought to be great by nature of only their extraordinary physical abilities. In this way, these interviews showed me the extent to which even ascriptions of "beast" as a way to signal greatness participates in the reproduction of whiteness being rendered human while blackness is thought to signal inhumanity. As Bilal so critically highlighted, this separation completely ignores the normalcy of hard work, dedication, and the like in black players who achieve the highest status in their respective sports.[521]

[521] There are implications of this that potentially point outside of sport as well that could be explored in other projects.

Possibilities for Future Research

The process of doing this research has raised important questions for me that point to possibilities for future research. One such question, particularly as I reflect on the conversations I had with these young men, is related to the role of "beast" outside of sport. To what extent do young black men who are not athletes resonate with either the problematic nature, or appeal of this image? In other words, how "real" do they consider this image to be in their lives? Because this study has focused on the context of sport as a way to speak to some of the broader politics of being a young black man in America, particularly as I have also acknowledged that young black men are not a monolith, how might young black men outside of sport relate to my research more broadly? Is "beast" real for them? And if they do not aspire to it like young black athletes do, how might this change the relevance of my analysis of neoliberalism's ability to "recruit" young black men into productive performances of "beast" as such? Future research might explore these questions, which could necessarily strengthen, critique, or extend this project's understanding of the circumstances in which young black male suffering takes place in the U.S.

Another possibility for future research relates to the growing attention to neuroplasticity in pastoral theology. In future projects I will consider relational performance in terms of recent research in neuroscience. Considering the ways society performs the "reality" of young black male inhumanity, juxtaposed with what the field is learning about neuroscience, further investigations could add much depth to pastoral theology's understanding of the potential consequences of ideological images. In other words, how might performing "beast" literally constitute someone accordingly? How might the "reality" of our bodies and our brains be wired

in ways that reflect such stereotypes?[522] This trajectory of research could change political conversations about representation, incarceration, and the like in significant ways. This is just to name a few possibilities that invite further exploration.

An Invitation

In addition to performing the goal of consciousness raising in relation to issues affecting young black men, this project serves as an invitation to other pastoral theologians to join me in thinking about other aspects of care for (young) black men. I invite colleagues to consider the work I have done as an invitation to join a conversation that scholars in the field like Greg Ellison, Nicholas Grier, Lee Butler, Ed Wimberly, Cedric Johnson, and others have begun before me. I invite us also to think together about how issues affecting black men cross paths with much of what black women continue to deal with. Scholars such as Chanequa Walker-Barnes, Phillis Sheppard, Anne Wimberly, and several others continue to help pastoral theologians understand the ways our field can contribute to the personal and public care of black women. I am indebted to all these thinkers, and many others who have contributed to ways of seeing that have shaped my vision as a scholar and activist. Finally, I invite all pastoral theologians to continue thinking critically and creatively about the ways we might collectively curate realities that care for marginalized persons and communities both here in the United States and all over the world.

[522] I am curious about the neuroscientific implications of relational performance because of research that focuses on the brain's neuroplasticity. Beyond the ways I am aware that even our bodies (down to a cellular level) respond to our performances, I want to learn more about the ways in which our brains can also be formed via performances. This would help me answer the question as to whether or not performing "beast" constitutes one's brain based on the problematic norms built within it. I suspect there is a connection to be made, but I will need to explore this in another project.

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