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Play matters| Playground hoop, streetball, and possibility in racialized, contested terrain

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Play Matters: Playground Hoop, Streetball, and Possibility in Racialized, Contested Terrain

By

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This essay examines the influence and significance of basketball, specifically playground hoop, in African American communities. I'll attempt to place basketball within the cultural context of the black folk arts of story and song. Just as music and storytelling have long been used as mediums of transcendence and healing, I will argue that the play of basketball also provides a cultural space of recreation, Signifying, and, ultimately, salvation within African American communities. The work of W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, particularly in relation to the transcendent power of cultural practices, provides the preliminary theoretical entrance in situating playground hoop as a folk art. John Edgar Wideman's *Hoop Roots* will be the central text through which I explore basketball's endowment of possibility and growth. An autobiography of Wideman's love for the game of basketball, *Hoop Roots* captures basketball's great value as a cultural site of artistry, where the players are empowered to see their greater potential, to say, "I am," and to enjoy the sweet freedom of play.
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Play Matters: Playground Hoop, Streetball, and Possibility in Racialized, Contested Terrain

Introduction:

Know what it is. It's the warrior spirit. Don't frown at me now. I know what I'm saying sounds like some dumb knucklehead macho shit, but playing ball's about being a warrior.

And how many times does a man get to feel like a warrior round here.

JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN

Two Cities, 1998

The play of basketball resides in the American cultural consciousness. Invented by Canadian James Naismith during the fall of 1891 in Springfield, Massachusetts, basketball's presence and popularity now dots the American cultural landscape. From a small gym in Springfield, Massachusetts with two peach baskets serving as the game's first goals to the contemporary National Basketball Association (N.B.A.) arenas filled with 15,000 plus fans paying to watch the play of others, basketball's influence and significance can be traced throughout the communities of the United States. In the introduction to their critical analysis of basketball's place in the cultural landscape of contemporary America Basketball Jones: America Above the Rim, editors and contributors Todd Boyd and Kenneth L. Shropshire claim, "basketball has become the preeminent American sport" (10). This preeminence is largely due, they argue, to basketball's media accessibility in which fans can easily identify players, who, unlike in football and baseball, are not covered and masked, and, often due to the expansive size of their respective fields, out of the camera lens for the majority of the game; furthermore, Boyd and Shropshire assert that the game's fast pace and highlights of dunks and three-
point shots appeal to a wide audience (3-4). At the grassroots level, where the field of play is concerned, basketball’s broad appeal in America and globally is in part a response to its minimalist nature. The game of basketball can be played in full by teams of five or in games of one-on-one; also, basketball can be practiced alone, unlike football and baseball that require at least two people to simply play catch. The bare simplicity of basketball’s required equipment—a hoop and a ball—further espouse itself to a wider audience (Boyd, Young 11).

The opening of Spike Lee’s *He Got Game* brilliantly portrays the ubiquitous cultural presence of basketball in the United States through a juxtaposition of scenes showcasing the play of basketball in a variety of settings and forms. The montage moves between pastoral shots of the New England countryside courts and the barn-backed courts of Middle America to the urban playground courts of New York City and beachside courts of Los Angeles. Each scene a display of basketball’s omnipresent and polyglot forms; each with contexts and meanings that are unique but ultimately joined in the unifying principle of play. It is, however, significant that the montage finally stops at a court in an urban-setting embodied by high-rise tenements, the ceaseless noise of sirens, horns, and voices, and the bodies and presence of African Americans in-play upon the court. Although these opening scenes certainly depict basketball’s vast reach throughout American culture, it is basketball’s identification with African Americans that presides. “The basketball court,” writes Colin Howley, “undoubtedly signifies one of the few American spaces in which African Americans have come to dominate both physically and culturally” (79). It is within that symbolic cultural arena and community that I hope to tease out basketball’s importance in formulating identity and achieving possibility for
black America within and beyond the basketball court. Along with the distinct cultural traditions of song and story, basketball today is markedly black. Howley continues, “the importance of basketball as a signifier of success, agency, and racial identity in black America has never been more pronounced than it is today” (80). This complicated and fluctuating symbolic space of racialized, contested play is what’s at stake.

Basketball, as portrayed in He Got Game’s opening montage, enjoys a broad spectrum of settings for play and a diverse audience of players and fans; but, it is basketball’s relationship to urban America that is most pronounced. Pete Axthelms’s The City Game captures the reciprocal bond between basketball and urban communities:

Basketball is the city game.

Its battlegrounds are strips of asphalt between tattered wire fences or crumbling buildings; its rhythms grow from the uneven thump of a ball against hard surfaces....

Basketball is more than a sport or diversion in the cities. It is a part, often a major part, of the fabric of life (ix-x).

This simplicity and ease of access offered by basketball makes it “uniquely suited to the urban environment” (Boyd, Young 11). Thirty-five years since the publication of Pete Axthelms’s The City Game the beat and rhythms of the playground game still resound. As inner city baseball diamonds seemingly disappear, playground courts, new and old, are alive with participation, particularly within African American communities (Ogden, “Collective” 214-215). David Ogden’s compelling essay, “Collective Identity and Basketball: An Explanation for the Decreasing Number of African Americans on
America's Baseball Diamonds," further illuminates basketball's preeminence in much of the United States' urban, black communities:

Faced with a lack of resources, facilities, services, goods, information, and jobs...poor black communities have taken a previously white-dominated activity and constructed it as an arena in which they find accessible recreation, entertainment, stimulation, and opportunities for self-expression and creativity. (218-219)

Basketball stands as the sport "par excellence" and plays an integral role in shaping much of black culture. It is basketball's cultural influence beyond the court, not necessarily as an economic means or even commodity but as a site of cultural performance and self-expression, a place to expand and grow, which, for the purposes of this essay, are most important.

Until recently, culture was generally believed to have a lesser effect, even superficial one, upon the conditions of the "real" world, as opposed to economic and political methods that seemingly provide tangible and concrete results. The work and effort of Cultural Studies programs and institutes has greatly altered such misconceptions. Renowned cultural critic and scholar Paul du Gay qualifies culture's importance and influence:

Because cultural processes dealt with seemingly less tangible things—signs, images, language, beliefs—they were assumed...to be 'superstructural', being both dependent upon and reflective of the primary status of the material base[...].
In recent years...the cultural has come to occupy a much enhanced position in the social sciences. Rather than being seen as merely reflective of other processes—economic or political—culture is now regarded as being as constitutive of the social world as economic or political processes. (du Gay, Hall, et.al, Doing 1-2)

Although particularly difficult to quantify within social paradigms that favor precise numbers and measurable results, culture's influence upon a society’s character and well being plays a significant role in shaping its progress and potential; furthermore, the modes of agency and creativity embedded in culture can provide meaning and purpose for lives regardless of economic or political benefit. This emphasis on the intrinsic value of cultural practices, specifically within African American communities, is precisely the contested terrain that Cornel West, a renowned contemporary philosopher and organic intellectual, works to articulate and nurture.

Cornel West’s Race Matters stands as one of the seminal pieces in the canon of Race theory and is particularly helpful in discussing the crucial characteristics of cultural structures in providing hope, possibility, purpose, and meaning in the face of racism, poverty, and disenfranchisement. Coming on the heels of the Los Angeles “riots” of April 1992, Race Matters bemoans the social structures of oppression fueling the outrage and explosion. Cornel West rigorously addresses the pressing concerns of black America in the 1990’s: black leadership, black conservatism, affirmative action, black nationalism, black sexuality, and the legacy of Malcolm X in relation to black rage; however, it is West’s examination of black self-nihilism that is most important for the analysis of playground hoop at stake in this study. “The most basic issue now facing black
America," writes West, “[is] the nihilistic threat to its very existence” (19). Not solely a matter of economic disparity or even political incapacity, although, as West concedes, ultimately overcoming and conquering these injustices are necessary for continued “meaningful black progress,” self-nihilism speaks to the most basic concern of black progress, as “it is primarily a question of speaking to the profound sense of psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair so widespread in black America” (20). This perilous nihilism, West suggest, is not simply an existential perception of life’s absurdity or irrationality; rather, West defines nihilism as “the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness” (23). For West, what’s at stake or what’s threatened are again the “souls of black folk,” which inspired W. E. B. Du Bois’ energy and philosophy at the turn of the 19th century: “For as long as hope remains and meaning is preserved, the possibility of overcoming oppression stays alive” (23). The health and well-being of African Americans, and for that matter all human beings, fundamentally depends upon souls sustained by love and care, fueled by self-worth and self-affirmation found in a variety of cultural structures.

The participation in and expression of cultural structures, from music to storytelling, provide the salve and vitality for well-being; such participation empowers the participants and players with subjectivity, grants them refuge and respite, honors them with dignity and possibility, and bestows upon them hope and meaning. Contemporary generations of African Americans are heirs to a rich heritage of cultural protection passed on to them from the generations of their African American ancestors. As Cornel West puts it:
The genius of our black foremothers and forefathers was to create powerful buffers to ward off the nihilistic threat, to equip black folk with cultural armor to beat back the demons of hopelessness, meaninglessness, and lovelessness. These buffers consisted of cultural structures of meaning and feeling that created and sustained communities; this armor constituted ways of life and struggle that embodied values of service and sacrifice, love and care, discipline and excellence. (23-24)

This cultural armor—families, friends, churches, schools, and community activities—that had long sustained black life in America and energized Civil Rights movements had somehow been displaced and shattered in the evidence left by the “riots.” Unsure of precisely what had caused the disempowerment of the cultural structures, Cornel West does assert that immoral corporate market institutions, driven by a compulsion for profits, “have contributed greatly to their collapse” (25). Already constrained by grim poverty and the fractures left from rising violence and imprisonment, seductive market images of “comfort, convenience, machismo, femininity, violence, and sexual stimulation” enticed many African American consumers, like most other Americans, looking for a salve and balm (27). “These seductive images contribute to the predominance of the market-inspired way of life over all others,” writes West, “and thereby edge out nonmarket values—love, care, service to others—handed down by preceding generations” (27).

Further compounding the threat of black nihilism are racist market driven images of beauty and success that denigrate black character and black self-worth (27-28). Ultimately, the failure of the market driven images to provide sustainable salve “to ward
off self-contempt and self-hatred, results in the possible triumph of the nihilistic threat in black America” (27).

So, is it too late? Is the hope and meaning vested in the cultural armor old and tired? Do we simply have to accept the images being produced and lifestyles offered? West, always the pursuer of possibility, answers such questions of doubt and pessimism with faith in the capacity of humanity and suggests what is to be done through acts of "politics of conversion":

There is always a chance for conversion—a chance for people to believe that there is hope for the future and a meaning to struggle. This chance rests neither on an agreement about what justice consists of nor on an analysis of how racism, sexism, or class subordination operate. Such arguments and analyses are indispensable. But a politics of conversion requires more. Nihilism is not overcome by arguments or analyses; it is tamed by love and care. Any disease of the soul must be conquered by a turning of one’s soul. This turning is done through one’s own affirmation of one’s worth—an affirmation fueled by the concern of others. A love ethic must be at the center of a politics of conversion. (29)

One cannot quantify the value of one’s cultural armor. There is no scale to measure the power of music, literature, art, or sport in providing self-worth and self-affirmation only a life clear of self-loathing and self-contempt and rich with hope and meaning. In her powerful and moving text, All About Love, bell hooks adds to Cornel West’s “love ethic”:

"Embracing a love ethic means that we utilize all the dimensions of love—‘care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect, and knowledge’—in our everyday lives" (94).
Such a love nurtures and sustains hope for and meaning in life, in living lives full of potential and possibility.

For the purposes of this essay, it is basketball's everyday influence and significance within African American communities that is being wrestled with and struggled over. What basketball in the African American community still allows for is a rescue and conversion of "play," of play for play's sake in place of any economic and commodity potential. Whether it's the play of music and song or literature and poetry or baseball and basketball, these once hallowed spaces of freedom and self-expansion can be and need to be reinvigorated with the purposes of love and care.

The proper starting point to determine play's purpose and value would seem to begin in defining "play." Dictionary definitions commonly define play as "exercise," "activity," and "amusement." Often the definitions reduce play to mere frivolous acts of pretense and inconsequence. Like culture, play, too, has often been demeaned for its seemingly ephemeral and reflective nature. Play's seriousness and importance have recently been championed, though, by such organizations as The Institute for Play, which describes play as an integral "part of how a [human being] adapts and survives anywhere on Earth" ("Importance of Play"). As the foundational creators behind PBS's 2000 series "The Power of Play," The Institute for Play fundamentally insists upon play's absolute importance in developing creative, healthy individuals and communities. "Play," the Institute suggests, "teaches us how to manage and transform our 'negative' emotions and experiences, it supercharges learning, and is a foundational factor in good mental and physical health" ("Importance"). In terms of play's definition as it impacts playground hoop, I would like to suggest two working definitions. First, one of the definitions of
play offered by the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests play, in general, is "free or unimpeded movement (usually from or about a fixed point)" ("Play," 5a). Such a definition speaks directly to playground hoop’s interest in a style and form of play that is not bound to the fixed point of basketball; moreover, that the players are empowered to improvise and create new styles, moves, and forms. The second definition comes from John Edgar Wideman’s *Hoop Roots* as he defines playground hoop’s intrinsic worth that is centered upon the principle of play:

> [P]layground hoop...[is] about creating pleasure, working the body to please the body, about free spaces, breaks in the continuum of socially prescribed rules and roles, freedom that can be attained by play, by a game not without rules but with flexible rules, spontaneous, improvised according to circumstances, rules based on a longstanding, practical consensus about what’s important—rules whose only reason for being is to enhance play[...](167)

Playground hoop, as such a form of play, is not mediated anarchy or chaos; rather, the play allows for individuals to achieve self-realization and self-affirmation through modes of agency, creativity, and development that intertwine and engage with the play of other ball players.

Put simply, basketball’s modes of agency may not solve all the racial and economic disparity affronting African American individuals and communities; however, as a space of subjectivity, where choices are made to enrich and empower lives with cultural meaning, the play of basketball can be an integral part of the “turning of souls” in acknowledging self-worth and self-affirmation. Only with healthy notions of self-
potential and self-possibility coupled with love and concern for others and from others will there be hope for a better future and a desire to struggle for continued meaning.

Basketball is certainly not the only avenue through which such self-worth can be realized, but its rightful place among the great cultural vehicles of song and story grants it significant importance and honor.

For decades the black church, rich with a legacy of “Sorrow Songs,” Gospel music, and promise of deliverance, has stood as the central cultural structure for many black individuals and communities. There are and have been other cultural intimacies shared as both participants and voyeurs in black communities through storytelling and folklore, Blues music and jazz, song and dance, cooking and gardening, and sports and athletics. It is in these transcendent expressions of self, these moments of self-sufficiency coupled with communal sustenance where the threat of nihilism is thwarted. Even if it’s just for a moment, these acts of artistry and creativity can fill one’s soul with a confidence and trust in their own greater potential and possibility.

A thorough discussion and examination of each one of these unique cultural signifiers is certainly warranted. Much scholarly work concerning African American music, namely Gospel, jazz, and Blues, has been ongoing for over a century now. Critical attention to the literature, poetry, and essays of African Americans, too, has enjoyed well over a century of insight. The breadth and range of Cultural studies in recent years enjoys unmistakable interest and analysis of African American influence in popular culture and sub-culture from fashion and design to film and television to hip-hop and Soul. The quality of scholarship and criticism working with the importance and influence of sports in the African American communities has seen a dramatic increase
over the past decade or more. The work and concentration of this thesis will be to join with other scholarship and analyze the cultural significance and importance of basketball play within African American communities.

The first section, "A Gift of Story and Song," places basketball in the cultural context of significance and meaning for African American communities. This section will further explore basketball's identification with African Americans, particularly the Signifying of basketball as "playground hoop." The fundamental work of this section is to elucidate basketball's position and role as a source of transcendent healing power through play. The drive of this section will come through a thorough analysis and application to playground hoop of W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* in which Du Bois provides the foundational wisdom to further explicate the value and meaning of basketball in the black cultural community. Du Bois essentially argues the health and freedom of African Americans is inextricably tied to their participation, performance, and (re)creation in culture. I wish to argue that basketball, like the music of the black church or the oral folk stories of various black communities, provides a valuable space for African American individuals and communities to create identity, sustain hope, and tap into boundless potential. A close look at Du Bois' cultural critique of the "Sorrow Songs" will serve as a touchstone to test basketball's influence and significance in contemporary African American communities.

In working through *The Souls of Black Folk*, I will also utilize Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey* as a vehicle to understanding the power of revision, which forms the backbone of African American cultural transcendence. Playground hoop represents the African American revision of "official" modes of basketball through the
vehicle of Signifying, “the repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference” (Gates, Signifying xxiv). This analysis and application of the works of Du Bois and Gates will assist in positioning basketball within the company of cultural soul sustenance: Gospel music, jazz, blues, literature and poetry. Finally, what I hope to establish is basketball’s invaluable gift of play, which offers opportunity to create and re-create. In other words, play matters; the kind of play where self-fulfilling choices are made, when the soul is able to expand its horizons and know there is something deeper, something possible.

The second section, “A Gift of Sweat and Brawn,” works to examine the commodification and exploitation of basketball by corporate market institutions, specifically, the company AND 1. I chose AND 1 because of their current cultural relevance as a signifier of basketball, distinctively streetball. Nike, Reebok, and Adidas certainly have vested interest in streetball through many of their marketing strategies and advertisements, but streetball remains only a fraction of their overall profits pursuit; however, AND 1 fundamentally is dependent upon the signifying, marketing, producing, and selling of streetball. AND 1 is only in the business of streetball. In sections one and three I often choose to use the term “playground hoop” as my signifier of basketball rather than “streetball” because of playground hoop’s primary connotation with play, which I am arguing is at the center of basketball’s significance in African American communities. Streetball, however, is specifically what’s at stake in section two, and the weight and significance of this term that will often call into question AND 1’s position.

The work of this section will be to understand and decode the popular proliferation of streetball via AND 1, particularly their methods of marketing, imaging.
and reproducing streetball. Specifically, there will be a line of questioning surrounding AND 1’s motivation to “expose” streetball, and, subsequently, the company’s slippery investment in a commodification of blackness. The initial examination of AND 1 will involve a brief history of AND 1’s beginnings, their entrance into the sneaker and sport apparel industry, and, subsequently, their appeal to the terrain of streetball. AND 1’s marketing expansion of streetball through their Mix Tapes, and eventually their Mix Tape Tours, will come into question in an examination of AND 1’s mobility between “grass roots” venture and corporate enterprise. The central questions will focus upon AND 1’s commodification of blackness, their record of profit drawn from these athletes and communities, and, finally, their displacement of basketball’s inherent gifts of agency, love, and care.

The final section, “A Gift of Spirit,” will discuss basketball as a site of transcendence and possibility, discussing basketball’s contemporary value as a potential space for creative performance, enhancement, and opportunity. The preliminary discussion of this section focuses upon John Hoberman’s contentious argument in Darwin’s Athletes that “African American preoccupation with athletic achievement…has subverted more productive developmental strategies founded on academic and professional achievement” (Darwin’s xxxiv). As I will argue, Hoberman’s contention, although a compelling call for enhanced appreciation and admiration for academic and professional accomplishments, fails to see basketball’s intrinsic value. Even though the game and its players (primarily of African descent) may be commodified and manipulated by corporations seeking profits, the playground game of “democratic,
inclusive, grass-roots participation, on play for its own sake,” still remains an important
cultural site of struggle and triumph.

John Edgar Wideman’s Hoop Roots will be fundamental in further elucidating
basketball or, as Wideman signifies, “playground hoop” as a site of sanctuary,
community, and play. This section will look at the qualities basketball offers enabling it
to be such a multidimensional space of potential. Although basketball’s worth and value
certainly exceeds sanctuary, community, and play, these qualities speak to the “politics of
conversion” proposed by Cornel West, in which a recovery of self-worth and self-
affirmation can be fostered. For Wideman, playground hoop offers a fluid space of
narrative identity, a place to grow, to discover potential, and to return to but having
always changed and transformed—“the present tense presides” (48). Finally, the non-
commensurable value of playground hoop rises above any ulterior motives of
best reward.”

I owe the titles of each section to the work and brilliance of W.E.B. Du Bois. In
the final chapter of Du Bois’ The Souls of Black Folk, “The Sorrow Songs,” he
powerfully suggests that America’s greatness and success is indelibly tied to the poignant
gifts African Americans infused within the very fabric and foundation of America. The
gifts of “story and song,” “sweat and brawn,” and “Spirit” bear testimony of black
America’s “song...toil...cheer, and warning [that] have been given to this nation in
blood-brotherhood” (163). Challenging social, political, and cultural epistemologies
dependent upon denigrating and enslaving black artistry, black intelligence, and black
humanity, Dr. Du Bois emphatically declares the greatness of America is engendered by
the strivings, work, and gifts of African Americans. But, the greatness of these African American gifts is ultimately the gift of self-love, to see within one’s own self the fabric of humanity and radiance of possibility within one’s soul.

I wish to dedicate this study and practice to my younger brothers, Joseph and Taylor, who at the young ages of eleven and ten are members of a flourishing multicultural generation. They attend the same elementary school I did some twenty years ago, but theirs is a school and community enriched with friends from throughout the United States and globe. Their circle of friends and neighbors include boys and girls from Mexico, the Philippines, Hawaii, Korea, and Japan. They are familiar with the multifarious communities of the world, both from the distance of literature and film as well as from the intimacy of travel and shared experiences. I see their power of love and acceptance in their concern and care for others suffering injustice. In them I see the hope of further extinguishing racialized paradigms of relationships of power. Perhaps racism may never be entirely eradicated, but within this global system of political, economic, and cultural relationships inextricably dependent upon others of varied racial and ethnic backgrounds there is today greater possibility in achieving peace and benevolence.

Theirs, like that of the Civil Rights generations of the 50’s and 60’s, their parents, and their eldest brother, is the responsibility, the call to achieve a country and globe free of the “racial nightmare.” Theirs, like mine, is the agency to infect change and alter the course of violence through a sincere love and care for the well being and growth of others regardless of racial difference. They, too, are now heirs of James Baldwin’s prophecy:

Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise. If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites
and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. (Baldwin, *Fire* 104-105)
"The Gift of Story and Song": Linguistic Turns, Sorrow Songs, and Hoop Roots

To rename is to revise, and to revise is to Signify.
HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.
The Signifying Monkey, 1988

However they came, when or why, the minute the leather of their soles hit the pavement—there was no turning around . . . They stayed to look at their number, hear themselves in an audience, feel themselves moving down the street among hundreds of others who moved the way they did, and who, when they spoke, regardless of the accent, treated language like the same intricate, malleable toy designed for their play.
TONI MORRISON
Jazz, 1992

W.E.B. Du Bois remains one of the 20th century’s seminal authors, scholars, political activists, and “organic intellectuals.” Considered by many to be the “father” of the Civil Rights Movement, Du Bois was often a target of political criticism and censure for his socialist (later communist) leanings. One of the founding figures of the NAACP in 1909, Du Bois’ persistent articulation of the injustices of segregation and active protest against the nation-state sponsored racial segregation formed the backbone of the American Civil Rights Movement that would culminate with the passage of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In his preface to Norton’s critical edition of The Souls of Black Folk, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. honors Du Bois as the “black ‘Person of the Century.’” Gates continues, “Few African Americans shaped the course of African American history more centrally in the twentieth century than did
William Edward Burghardt Du Bois... As a scholar, a journalist, a creative writer, and a political activist, no one did more to give full voice to the American Negro than did W. E. B Du Bois” (vii). A prolific essayist, Du Bois founded the *Crisis* magazine as a vehicle of voice for the NAACP in 1910 furthering imprinting Du Bois’ influence upon the Civil Rights Movement.

Du Bois’ most acclaimed work remains his collection of essays, *The Souls of Black Folk*, which unequivocally declares the humanity of African Americans and pronounces the authenticity of African American culture. First published in 1903, *Souls* gave a unified voice to a fledgling culture marked by the violence of slavery and Jim Crow segregation. Although African Americans had long enjoyed a culture of significance and meaning—not even the horrors of slavery could impede cultural processes of resistance and transcendence—*Souls* places the cultural structures of black-America alongside the privileged structures of white-America in value and importance.

In introducing the continued significance and importance of Du Bois’ century old text, Terri Oliver and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. assert, “In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois has left the world a document that articulated the individual black voice... that is as timely and compelling now as it was at the turn of the century” (*Souls* xxxvii).

*Souls* was not, however, without its detractors. Norton's critical edition of *Souls* takes an excerpt from David Levering Lewis' Pulitzer Prize winning *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race*, in which Lewis quotes a number of the early reviews of *Souls*. Unsurprisingly, the reviews coming from the Southern newspapers were generally negative. Nashville’s *American* warns that “[*Souls*] is indeed dangerous for the Negro to read” (223). The Houston *Chronicle* even charges Du Bois with “inciting rape” (223).
The Northern press reviews did not necessarily respond with glowing reviews. One of *The New York Times*' reviews, written by an anonymous white southerner, claims that because Du Bois was raised and educated in the North he only had a "superficial understanding of southern black people and of the history of the South"; furthermore, the reviewer asserts that Du Bois’ real agenda in writing the book was to "smoke a cigar and drink a cup of tea with the white man in the South" (223). Such slanderous and frivolous accusations did not hold significant sway as *Souls* was repeatedly reprinted amid glowing reviews, such as the *Independent’s* claiming *Souls* "the best and most logical expression of the clear facts of race hatred yet made by any student of the negro question" (226). By provoking white and black audiences to question and (re)consider racialized dynamics inhibiting black progress, *Souls* offered, Lewis writes, "a revelation of [African American’s] social, economic, and psychological realities and prospects of such lyricism, lucidity, and humanity as to leave its mark on a white America guilty of evasion, obfuscation, and hypocrisy" (226). It is for these reasons of insight and prophecy that *The Souls of Black Folk* remains as relevant and applicable today as it did a century ago.

In the opening pages of *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois articulates the paralyzing dilemma hindering African American progress at the turn of the 19th century—"double-consciousness." "The Negro," writes Du Bois, "is...born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, —a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (10-11). Double-consciousness is not only the objectified "sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others" but also of "measuring one’s soul" through the vision of "a world that look[s] on in amused contempt and pity" (11). Only
four decades removed from the Civil War and in the midst of resisted Reconstruction, Jim Crow segregation sanctioned by the U.S. Supreme Court's 1896 Plessy vs. Ferguson ruling of "separate but equal," and widespread racial lynching, Du Bois expresses the political, social, and cultural stasis experienced by African Americans made inert in the seemingly irreconcilable "two-ness,—an American, a Negro." Du Bois focuses his theory and practice on the quest "to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American" through the health and well being of black souls (11).

If the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color-line, then, as Du Bois contends, subjective, creative artistry offers the hope of something more, the confidence in self determination, and the liberty of choice to rise above racialized social structures.

[T]he ideal of fostering and developing the traits and talents of the Negro, not in opposition to or contempt for other races, but rather in large conformity to the greater ideals of the American Republic, in order that some day on American soil two world-races may give each to each those characteristics both so sadly lack. We the darker ones come even now not altogether empty-handed: there are to-day no truer exponents of the pure human spirit of the Declaration of Independence than the American Negroes; there is no true American music but the wild sweet melodies of the Negro slave; the American fairy tales and folk-lore are Indian and African; and, all in all, we black men seem the sole oasis of simple faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness. (16)
The initial pages of *Souls* clearly present the keen insight and vision of the 20th century's great philosopher, whose devotion to the humanity of African Americans, though not exclusively, propelled the critical and practical significance of African American artistry, culture, and souls.

Both the opening and closing chapters of *The Souls of Black Folk* evoke Du Bois' profound sense of the worth of black souls characterized and engendered through both cultural practices and texts. Although Du Bois righteously laments the anguish of injustice, the horror of slavery, and the seditious oppression of segregation, Du Bois also celebrates the spiritual transcendence and strivings of black America’s Sorrow Songs or Negro spirituals. Beneath the weight of one of the millennium’s grossest atrocities, the Sorrow Songs of the American slaves “are the articulate messages of the slaves to the world” (156). The songs certainly pronounce the despair and agony of slavery’s violence, but they also signify the transcendent capacity of humanity: “through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things” (162). These sacred songs reach through time’s boundless realms mingling voices and sounds of African ancestors with a blend of African American voices rising above the fields of slavery offering the sacrament of “the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas” (155).

The invaluable purpose of singing the Negro spirituals went beyond church settings filling the slaves’ secular life of work and play with songs of redemption, hope, and freedom. The editors of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* further affirm the spirituals’ value in everyday life: “That the songs were sung not just in ritual worship but throughout the day meant that they served as powerful shields against
the values of the slaveholders and their killing definitions of black humanity" (Gates and McKay 5). These Negro spirituals served as formidable cultural armor for the chattel-constrained slaves, who could find non-linear escape in the music and language of possibility beyond slavery. Norton’s editors continue, “[A]long with a sense of the slaves’ personal self-worth as children of a mighty God, the spirituals offered them much-needed psychic escape from the workaday world of slavery’s restrictions and cruelties” (5). From “Swing low, sweet chariot” to “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen” to “Steal away,” the Sorrow Songs resonate with the spiritual and temporal strivings of the slaves.

The birth of these holy Sorrow Songs, though, did not miraculously spring up from within the plantation fields of the New World; rather, the birth of the Sorrow Songs began thousands of miles away and generations earlier in the cultures and souls of Africa’s beautiful people. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. captures the great wonder of the African slaves’ will to grasp cultural practices that provided a continued sense of their cultural identities, thus sustaining their souls.

The black Africans who survived the dreaded “Middle Passage” from the west coast of Africa to the New World did not sail alone. Violently and radically abstracted from their civilizations, these Africans nevertheless carried within them to the Western hemisphere aspects of their cultures that were meaningful, that could not be obliterated, and that they chose, by acts of will, not to forget: their music, their myths, their expressive institutional structures, their metaphysical systems of order, and their forms of performance. (Gates, The Signifying Monkey 3-4)
For Du Bois, the Sorrow Songs of the African slave are a personal witness to his lineage of an African great-great grandmother who was enslaved by Dutch traders two centuries earlier. Enchained across the “Middle Passage” to the Hudson Valley, Du Bois’ great-great grandmother still carried with her the music of her soul: “[B]lack, little, and lithe, she shivered and shrank in the harsh north winds, looked longingly at the hills, and often crooned a heathen melody to the child between her knees” (Souls 156). So, from generation to generation the soul of an African ancestry traveled through the music of exile down to Du Bois, who, like his father before him, knew little what the words meant, but knew well the meaning of the music (156-157). This most transcendent capacity to somehow hold onto any glimmer of hope and self-identity despite the disjoining atrocity of slavery manifests the resiliency of the human spirit embodied by the African slaves.

This resiliency of the African slaves, however, should not be equated with cultural isolation. Slavery, rather, forcibly combined African cultures and peoples often unknown to each other. As a “seething cauldron of cross-cultural contact,” Gates writes, slavery “served to create a dynamic of exchange and revision among numerous previously isolated Black African cultures” (4). The European colonizers, furthermore, not only displaced the African slaves geographically but culturally, psychologically, and politically as well. This violent commingling unquestionably cannot be defended; however, coupled with the resiliency born within their human souls, these culturally polyglot African slaves repeated, revised, and recreated cultural signifiers old and new in order to sustain themselves.

Inadvertently, African slavery in the New World satisfied the preconditions for the emergence of a new African culture, a truly Pan-
African culture fashioned as a colorful weave of linguistic, institutional, metaphysical, and formal threads. What survived this fascinating process was the most useful and the most compelling of the fragments at hand. Afro-American culture is an African culture with a difference as signified by the catalysts of English, Dutch, French, Portuguese, or Spanish languages and cultures, which informed the precise structures that each discrete New World Pan-African culture assumed. (Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*)

The Signifying of the European languages, through repetition and revision unique to the newly formed African American, became culturally critical for the African slaves who would not adopt the European languages wholesale. “Free of the white person’s gaze,” Gates writes, “black people created their own unique vernacular structures and relished in the double play that these forms bore to white forms” (xxiv).

Analysis of the act of Signifying is the hallmark of Gates’ astute scholarship, *The Signifying Monkey*. “Signifying,” writes Gates, “is synonymous with figuration” (80). In other words, the black linguistic act of Signifying plays upon the literal meaning of words and myths in order to “say one thing but...mean quite another” (82). Inherent in the act of Signifying are the characteristics of indirection, the metaphoric, irony, rhythm, pun, and the play on words (94). In terms of Signifying’s sustenance for the African slaves brought to America, John Edgar Wideman’s *New York Times* review of *The Signifying Monkey* summarizes the importance of the African American linguistic turn.

It is not difficult to understand why Africans forcibly transported across an ocean would be suspicious of a language that gave them the status of
chattel slaves and defined them as less than human. Mastery of that language entailed internalization of the master's values, paying lip service, at the very least, to the notion of white superiority. Slaves learned to resist this literal process of self-destruction by saying little, saying no, saying to themselves and each other a different version of the new tongue, a version that slipped the yoke and turned the joke back upon those who would destroy them. (Wideman, “Playing” 7.3)

As Wideman concludes, this precious act of playing with language is not insignificant or frivolous; rather, this linguistic, cultural play is a matter of survival, resistance, and transcendence. Although Gates’ primary focus is to “explore the relation of the black vernacular tradition to the Afro-American literary tradition,” the guiding principles he proposes of renaming and revising not only apply linguistically but across the cultural scope for the diaspora of Pan-Africans, specifically for African Americans (xix). For example, whether or not the Sorrow Songs and Negro Spirituals of the African American slaves are related to Christianity often perpetuating the slave trade and plantation foundation fundamentally does not finally matter. In fact, the Christian Gospel, Bible, hymns, even the promised Redeemer are re-“colored” black. In other words, they’ve been revised, renamed, recreated, and newly voiced Signifying an African American vision, understanding, and sustenance.

As the twentieth century unfolded, the African American spirit of story and song inspired the genius of blues, jazz, poetry, and prose. The “souls” of the African American slaves were passed on from generation to generation recreated and re-Signified in cultural forms necessary for the new generation to negotiate the heavily racialized
terrain. Blues music, with its rasp and timbre, its rhythm and repetition, and its quintessential lyricism of tragedy and transcendence, resounds in the structure and technique of the slave spirituals. The blues, however, held no promise of eternal redemption but sought to characterize the perpetually precarious position of black life in America. The blues are, as Ralph Ellison writes, “an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism” (Margolies 116). The blues bespeaks the continued struggles for African Americans emancipated from chattel-slavery but still constrained within social, political systems of racialized hierarchy.

Jazz, too, embodies Signifying’s modes of figuration, as Gates writes: “Signifyin(g) in jazz performances and in the play of language games is a mode of formal revision, it depends for its effects on troping, it is often characterized by pastiche, and, most crucially, it turns on repetition of formal structures and their differences” (51-52). Emerging in the early decades of the twentieth century, jazz came as a response out of the vast migration of black Southerners who left the rural towns of the South for the industrialized, urban cities holding rejuvenation. Toni Morrison’s Jazz captures this sense of renaissance embodied by the African Americans engendering the formation of new sounds to Signify their new selves:

However they came, when or why, the minute the leather of their soles hit the pavement—there was no turning around.

... [T]hey stayed to look at their number, hear themselves in an audience, feel themselves moving down the street

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among hundreds of others who moved the way they did, and who, when they spoke, regardless of the accent, treated language like the same intricate, malleable toy designed for their play. (*Jazz* 32-33)

Morrison’s metaphoric “City,” the parallel to Harlem of the early 1900’s, creates a people who are free to move, to change, and to recreate. For the freed black slaves, entering the North, even if it was only an illusion, an imagined entry, was the jazz-like improvisation in their lives that allowed them to claim authenticity, to claim their other-self, and still trace the self they once were. This physical movement from the rural South to the North, away from the tyranny of slavery, reconstruction, and segregation, is profoundly influential on them. They are metaphorically being reborn into a new world. In the City, they are able to rename themselves, reinterpret their history, redefine their hopes and dreams, and review life. “Jazz music,” writes *Norton’s* editors, “heralds the human capacity to do more than merely survive, to create an individual self or voice that can maintain itself, under pressure, with style and equipoise, that can confront trouble and improvise ways of coping no matter what changes or disjunctures may get in the way” (56). Jazz, influenced by this immense movement of bodies and souls, “horns” the cadence and style of a newly Signified musical trope.

The poetry and prose of Langston Hughes reverberate in the rhythms of jazz. At times criticized for frequently returning to the trope of jazz, Hughes found in jazz “one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America” (“The Negro Artist” 1270). Hughes’ literature is a canonical celebration of the souls of black folk. At the heart of Hughes’ artistry lays a conviction that the culture, art, and play of African Americans matter
because they are the means to climb the “racial mountain” of inequality and impasse for black America. A champion of African American folk culture, Hughes saw the greatness emboldened within the stories and songs of black folk and sought to encourage new black artists to also express their own sense of experience. Hughes’ Harlem Renaissance manifesto “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” asserts this ambition:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful.

And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves. (1271)

This journey to the top of the mountain evokes the Biblical mythologies of Abraham and Isaac, Moses, Isaiah, and, finally, Jesus Christ, who sought refuge and inspiration at the mountaintop from God. For the African American slaves and their descendents, the mountaintop of freedom is found within their resilient, transcendent cultural expressions. There within their souls is the god of agency, creation, and possibility.

For the purposes of this essay it is finally the Signifying—revising—of basketball, creating a newly stylized “playground hoop,” which speaks to the fluid and fluctuating, yet always perpetuating, legacy of cultural armor sustaining the souls of black America. “Playground hoop, like... stories and music, is also rooted here, in the vital remnants of African-derived folk culture and in the dynamics of struggling for survival in a hostile land” (Wideman, Hoop 172). In the contested terrain of an “always-already” racialized...
United States, African American artistry flourishes despite a legacy of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, lynching, disfranchisement, poverty, and despair. As the early years of the 21st century roll on, the cultural presence of African Americans significantly shapes cultural dynamics throughout the globe. Along with music, the field of sport is perhaps most rich with the influence and distinction of African Americans, none more so than basketball. Todd Boyd’s *Young, Black, Rich & Famous* articulates the cultural significance of these two spaces, music and basketball, as representative of African American expression: “These are the two rarefied spaces where the most fundamental elements of Blackness are articulated and played out, both internally and for the masses” (12). From the Sorrow Songs to the blues and from jazz to hip-hop, the soundtrack of the playground game resonates in the rhythms of African American music and the storytelling legends of playground excellence; moreover, the beats and rhymes of many black musical and literary artists are seemingly a “call and response” to the nuances, style, and rhythms of playground basketball. In other words, playground hoop is not isolated from the other prominent cultural structures of story and song. The game’s style and performance mirrors much of the music and stories also generated within the community; for example, today’s generation of playground ballers often reflect the hip-hop music style of minimalism and individualism, whereas the playground players of earlier generations seemingly modeled their game after jazz-like styles of improvisation. Outside of the playground courts, the game’s presence is (re)played in rap lyrics, filmic depictions, and the stories of many black artists.

The basketball court is a “theatre of black style,” as Colin Howley insists, where the play and performances signify the style and formations of African American
traditions. This type of Signifying is very much within the framework Gates lays out in his criticism. "[O]ne does not signify something; rather, one signifies in some way" (54). George Nelson describes what, in playground hoop terms, it means to "signify in some way":

In basketball...how you score can be as important as scoring itself. The no-look pass, the behind-the-back pass, the crossover ankle-snapping dribble, and the 360-degree-hangtime-tongue-out space jam only result in two points, but what a pretty two points they are. (Hip-hop 52).

Basketball, Signified as playground hoop, enters the fold of black folk artistry. Rooted in the cultural ancestry of music and stories, playground hoop embraces the “vital remnants of African-derived folk culture” and is empowered in the “dynamics of struggling for survival in a hostile land” (Wideman, Hoop Roots 172). Highly stylized and performative, the art of playground hoop, “like any other African-American art form, expresses and preserves, if you teach yourself how to look, the deep structure, both physical (material) and metaphysical (immaterial), of a culture” (Hoop Roots 185). Basketball’s rebirth as playground hoop highlights cadences and nuances rich in a legacy of black style that insists on the freedom of something more, something beyond the surface.

Playground hoop was created as, and still is, an avenue of re-creation, re-interpretation, and re-production of basketball; it plays within the structure and form of basketball, but provides creases and fissures for Signifying. In the Derridian sense, playground hoop is not isolated from ‘mainstream’ basketball; or, in other words, traces of basketball’s fundamentals—dribbling, passing, shooting, and defending—feature
prominently within the playground game. Playground hoop’s distinction and difference from basketball is part stylistic and part intrinsic. Stylistically, playground hoop privileges how points are scored over simply scoring points. Each shot or slam-dunk may be scored equally, two or three points, but, for the playground game, attention and respect is garnered through developing unique, flashy ways of scoring points.

“Essentially [playground hoop] is basketball—but with a little summin’, summin’” (“What is”). Although the basic rules of playground hoop are effectively the same as basketball’s, the rules are “bent” or revised in accordance with the style and performance.

“Style is often the determining factor in what is and is not legal in a [playground] game—if it looks good, it’s not against the rules” (“Streetball”). Through an array of dribbling and passing moves—crossovers, jab steps, around-the-backs, through-the-legs, and more—the rules of traveling and double-dribble are essentially obsolete in the playground game.

Part of playground hoop’s African American identification belongs to the jazz-like qualities of improvisation, syncopation, and antiphony of playground ball. In speaking of jazz’s identifications with the African American, Kwame Anthony Appiah notes: “Jazz...belongs to an African American, whether she likes it or knows anything about it, because it is culturally marked as black” (“Racial Identity” 612). Todd Boyd further connects jazz and basketball with the African American: “Basketball is an excellent example of what jazz used to be for African American[s]...a cultural space where aesthetics, politics, and an overall sense of Blackness could be communicated to both marginal and mass audiences” (Young 134). Basketball, and specifically playground hoops, like jazz, “belongs to an African American.” Playground hoop is the
manifestation of the subjective and creative African American playing within the margins of the mainstream, transcending boundaries of repression. Wideman's connection of jazz to playground hoop stems from the importance of the present tense that resides in both.

Like classic African American jazz, playground hoop is a one-time, one-moment thing. Every note, move, solo, pat of the ball happens only once. Unique. Gone as soon as it gets here. Like a river you can't enter twice in the same spot. Each performance created for/within an unrepeatable context, a specific, concrete situation that hasn't appeared before or since.

(Hoop Roots 48)

The power of agency and self-determination embolden the significance of the present tense where players are molded by the constant flow and motion of the game's ever-changing shape and potential. The flux and fluidity of the game provides re-visionary instruction through perpetually creating fresh styles and forms of play, so that each new moment is capable of fruitful possibility and exploration. These artists, ball players, human beings make significant and important choices that matter in the formation of cultural armoring.

Intrinsically, playground hoop heightens the principles underlying Signifying as John Edgar Wideman insists, "Playground hoop repudiates the 'mainstream'" (Hoop Roots 173). Notice playground hoop does not "borrow" from basketball, nor does it imitate the "ideal." Playground hoop rejects mainstream basketball, or in the parlance of playground ball it states "gets that weak stuff outta here." Playground hoop "insists on separate accommodations, separate destinies.... Playground hoop is partially a response
to the mainstream’s long, determined habit of stipulating blackness as inferiority, as a category for discarding people, letting people crash and burn, keeping them outsiders” (Hoop Roots 173). Like the Sorrow Song crooner, these players, these ballers are challenging the normative modes of figuration; they are “co-workers in the kingdom of culture” (Du Bois, Souls 11). Rhetorically, Gerald Early ponders, “Is not basketball a perfect example of how African Americans took an American invention and made it their own, of how they defined the meaning of being American in their own terms through this game?” (“Why Baseball” 29). These playground ball players don’t care that basketball was the white man’s invention (Appiah, Is the Post 357); no, playground ball is their game, their subjectivity, their endowment; playground hoop is there because it “breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things” (Souls 162).

If the horrible history of slavery teaches us anything it is that nothing is outside the boundaries of commodification. Today’s market place of commercials and advertisements “is awash in images of black athletes” (Hoberman xxiii). If the trade and market of African bodies verifiably built the United States, then it is not surprising that the sweat and brawn of African Americans today is again manipulated to serve as the means of comfort and convenience for much of mainstream America. The communication and commodification of blackness, via basketball, is what’s at stake in the next section, “The Spirit of Sweat and Brawn.” The prolific and fluid images of black men playing on basketball courts highlight the richly racialized arena of basketball, specifically urban playground hoops, dense in images of black bodies, black culture, and even black stereotypes in contemporary popular culture. This cultural positioning of
urban, black images within the boundaries of basketball reemphasizes basketball’s connection with an African American identity, within and outside black communities.
"The Gift of Sweat and Brawn": AND 1's "Streetball" Commodity

You've taken my blues and gone—
You sing 'em on Broadway
And you sing 'em in Hollywood Bowl,
And you mixed 'em up with symphonies
And you fixed 'em
So they don't sound like me.
Yep, you done taken my blues and gone.

LANGSTON HUGHES,
"Note on Commercial Theatre"

The game is pure because it's a product of the players' will and imagination.

JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN
Hoop Roots, 2001

Like many others, I stumbled upon the AND 1 Mix Tape scene one night in the summer of 2002 at 2:00 a.m. on ESPN2. And like many others with only peripheral streetball experience ("streetball" in the suburbs just isn't the same), AND 1's style of play, exciting personalities, and, of course, the highlight reels of slam dunk after slam dunk immediately captured my attention. For about an hour, I sat enthralled with the antics, hype, and creativity in play within the AND 1 streetball game. As a basketball enthusiast for over 20 years, I, of course, was not previously ignorant of streetball, or even some of the names of players and places associated with streetball; however, this was the first time that I was able to see and notice the unique flair and play of streetball on mainstream T.V. Initially taking a "popular ideological perception" that the televising
of "streetball" speaks to racial progress, I just laughed and smiled at the showmanship and play never thinking about the representation and/or misrepresentation of blackness also being in play. Later, upon a closer viewing of more shows caught at 2:00 a.m., I began to wonder about the economic status of the players on the AND 1 team: "Are they paid? How much? Who?" "Do they work for AND 1 year-round?" "Is this a profession? Or, is it treated like a single game/tour 'cash-prize'?" "Has this exposure given any of the streetball players further basketball opportunities in college and professional leagues?" Furthermore, I began to question my position as voyeur and consumer of this product: "What and who is being represented?" "Who's doing the representing?" "Who is being targeted by this marketing? Am I?" "Can 'streetball' be mainstream?" These and other questions weren't just academic gratification at 2:00 a.m.; I quickly began to notice the reach and scope of streetball across the cultural board.

The birth of the AND 1 Mix Tapes is a mythic narrative invested in authenticity. The AND 1 website provides a narrative history of the discovery, marketing, and franchising of a highlight VHS tape of basketball and streetball play in and around New York City. The central player caught on the first tape was high school phenom Rafer Alston, a.k.a. "Skip to My Lou," who incidentally has now played in the N.B.A. for several years and is currently a member of the Toronto Raptors. AND 1's web narrative describes receiving the "home-video" tape through one of Alston's basketball coaches, Ron Naclerio, who had recorded games and highlights of Alston playing. Presumably, Naclerio was initially making a promotional highlight tape to send out to colleges in hopes of receiving recruiting visits from coaches and athletic directors to offer Alston a scholarship. The reason for Naclerio's giving the tape to AND 1, however, isn't clear,
nor is anything mentioned about compensation for Naclerio or Alston. What is made apparent is AND 1’s immediate attention to and interest with the tape:

The legend goes that the people at AND 1 first used the “Skip tape,” as it became known around the company’s corporate office just outside Philly, merely to amuse themselves and people who came to visit the office...it was easy to gather everyone to watch the tape over and over and over again, accompanied by groans and screams and “no he didn’ts” everytime Skip embarrassed a defender. While the marketing people at AND 1 intuitively knew that tape had some value beyond personal amusement, they didn’t quite know what to with it. (“History” 1)

Needless to say, they found something to do with it.

Part of AND 1’s marketing appeal to mass-audiences is their marriage of streetball and the N.B.A. As a fledgling athletic gear company amid the already well established companies of Nike, Reebok, and Adidas, AND 1 worked to appeal to an urban demographic, while simultaneously endorsing professional basketball players to million dollar contracts. This marketing strategy served as the catalyst and introduction of the “Skip tape” into the mainstream. At a commercial shoot during the summer of 1999 featuring a number of AND 1’s N.B.A. players, AND 1 provided a green room of recliners, video games, films, and snacks where the players could relax and lounge. One of the many entertainment supplements was the “Skip Tape.” The narrative history describes these professional players as being mesmerized and enthralled by the moves and performance of this high school kid, some even trying to emulate Skip’s moves out on the set’s court. With such high praise by the N.B.A players, AND 1’s marketing team
wasted no time and quickly reformatted the "Skip Tape," adding some music and hype, and gave away 50,000 copies of the "Skip Tape" by the end of the summer to basketball players, coaches, and clinics throughout the country.

Following an overwhelming response of "give us more," AND 1 took the mix tape to the shoe mogul FootAction in an effort to further distribute the tape and simultaneously promote their new footwear. The AND 1 and FootAction partnership created a gift-with-purchase promotion, so that regardless of whether you bought Nike, Reebok, or AND 1 you would receive a complimentary Mix Tape from AND 1. In less than three weeks, 200,000 copies of the revamped "Skip Tape" moved from retail shelves into the VCR's of American homes ("History" 2). AND 1's incredible distribution of the "Skip Tape" begs the marketing question of supply by demand or demand by advertisement. It isn't clear whether AND 1's marketing strategists "knew" exactly what they had; however, what is made clear is that AND 1 knew they had "something" and that "something" could make "somebody" rich.

This troubling paradigm of economic exploitation is compounded by the display and presence of performing black bodies; the black bodies, not the tape, are ultimately the "something" making somebody rich. As the vehicle of mass-media transportation, the AND 1 Mix Tape communicates, represents "streetness" or "blackness" to mass and marginal audiences. There is no mistaking the savvy marketing strategies employed by AND 1 to generate an appearance of "grassroot" ideals and appeal. Streetball, by its very name, is invested with "street cred" and "street smarts." AND 1 works to productively position itself as "authentic" representatives of the "street" by predominantly portraying athletes playing in the streets or playing a "street" style of basketball. Their marketing of
the first Mix Tapes as gift-with-purchase was further emblematic of their grassroots appeal. Although seemingly innocent, a way to provide opportunity for vision and participation of streetball by multifarious mass and marginal audiences, the Mix Tapes, too, were about the exposure and franchise of black bodies in play.

Following the wide distribution of the first Mix Tape, AND 1 “realized pretty quickly that in order to create a franchise out of this Mix Tape concept, they would need a lot of footage pretty quickly” (“History” 2). So, with camera crews as advertising agents, AND 1 hit the streets “like a virus to document summertime ball and find the best moves (and subsequently the best ballers) they could capture on film” (“History” 3). The other form of obtaining footage was to sponsor games that encouraged streetball performance with an opportunity to be on one of the next Mix Tapes. This type of request appealed directly to the streetball mantra of “respect.” Unlike the high-paid NBA players, streetball players were/are compensated in general by community respect. Streetball games are often played for cash, but very few can make a living playing cash games; moreover, most playground games are pickup games where earning respect as a playground legend is all the compensation available and needed. The medium of the Mix Tape exponentially enlarged the boundaries of the streetball community. The AND 1 Mix Tapes would provide a wider distribution of potential respect among a larger, diverse community of streetball players nationally, even globally. Respect and reputation are often sufficient compensation for the players of a streetball game founded in a philosophy of intrinsic value, and the game of basketball, the folk art of streetball, may or may not be threatened by the AND 1 Mix Tapes; however, the troubling commerce and exchange of
performing black bodies poses a violent threat to the subjectivity of the players and performers.

By the summer of 2002 the Mix Tape Tour “was a much more professional affair” ("History" 6). The tour expanded to twenty-four cities and increased the number of sponsored players, but the biggest expansion came with a television program agreement with ESPN to air eight episodes of highlights, document behind-the-scenes conversations, and portray life for the players at home and on the tour bus. That summer also marked a change in the marketing of the Mix Tapes themselves as “AND 1 began selling its tapes for the first time, in both VHS and DVD format, at the even larger retailers of Circuit City, Blockbuster, and Best Buy” ("History" 6). AND 1’s franchising of the Mix Tapes and Mix Tape Tour strikingly conflicts with AND 1’s identity as a “grass roots” company. While the “grass roots” entrepreneurial disguise could certainly be called into question, AND 1’s drive to appeal to the “streets” remained a central advertising and marketing ploy:

Things got a lot hotter after that second tour. Nike and Reebok both tried to go playground in their advertising and even approached some of the AND 1 players to be in the spots. But despite the many pretenders to the throne, AND 1 was holding it down on the playgrounds and got much love for it from ballers, fans and retailers alike ("History" 5).

With the threat of larger corporate moguls working to also promote themselves as credible purveyors of the “street,” AND 1’s continued wide distribution of its Mix Tapes along with their persistent pursuit of streetball games and highlights gave AND 1 the necessary niche to compete against Nike, Reebok, and Adidas.
There is no mistaking AND 1’s interest with the urban market of young, black America upheld by their promotion and recognition of authenticity. What is, therefore, problematic is their vested performance as street reps with street cred, while simultaneously embodying a burgeoning, capitalist enterprise coded in signs and signifying systems of identification for young, black America. The nihilistic reality, again, is the fractured identity of so many African Americans hopelessly beset by dualistic and romantic images of street success that are seemingly within reach, but are perpetually re-positioned, re-presented, and re-moved so that possibility and mobility remain paralyzed within paradigms of oppression, depression, and annihilation.

Douglas Hartmann, Sociology Professor at the University of Minnesota, skillfully examines the manifestations and ramifications of sport and race, particularly looking at “Sports as a Racial Force.” Central to Hartmann’s inquiry is the work of distinguishing the alternate views of sport as a racial force. Hartmann divides the views into two camps: First, “The Popular Ideology,” or the general conception of sports by the populace, which assert that sports are “a positive and progressive racial force, an avenue of racial progress, and an arena of racial harmony”; Second, “The Scholarly Critique,” a position proposed by an increasing number of scholars, sociologists, and athletes since the 1960’s, which works to “demonstrate that racial inequalities and injustices are not so much challenged and overcome in and through sport as they are reproduced and reinforced there” (232, 234-235). Hartmann further distinguishes the camp of Scholarly critics into two additional approaches to criticism: Institutional and Cultural.

The Institutional approach looks at race and racism in sport, paying particular attention to “sport’s concrete policies, practices, and structures” (235). In other words,
how the sport itself is constructed, maintained, and governed in ways that reproduce and reconfigure racial discrimination and disparity. For example, the continued lack of hiring of minority head coaches in the NFL, the absence of minorities in positions of management throughout professional and collegiate sports, and even the growing void of black baseball players in the major leagues due to deficient little leagues and insufficient playing fields in the inner cities is an Institutional discrepancy. The Cultural approach is concerned with the “symbolic role of sport in the formation of racial meanings and practices broadly conceived…. [And] to study the ways in which sport is implicated in the larger racial structure of American culture” (235). In other words, how the presentation and production of sport plays an integral role in forming racial identities and definitions in American culture. For our purposes here, I will primarily be utilizing the Cultural Studies approach in examining AND 1’s proliferation within the market of streetball and African American identity, but the Institutional critique will often intertwine and provide further elucidation of the intricacies and nuances of streetball’s racialized terrain.

One cannot “tune-in” to popular culture and ignore the abundant imagery of streetball. Within the framework of popular ideology—the terrain of popular culture—the rise in streetball imagery often misleadingly portrays streetball as a site of economic success and racial transcendence. Commercial after commercial, film after film, streetball is depicted as a representation of black identity, black community, and black possibility. Images of streetball stream throughout popular culture: films such as Levity (2003), “O” (2000), Love and Basketball (2000), Finding Forester (2000), Black and White (1999), He Got Game (1998), Above the Rim (1994), Grand Canyon (1992) and others signify urban America through scenes of African American men playing...
basketball in dilapidated neighborhoods; countless television advertisements by Nike, Reebok, AND 1, Adidas, Hanes, Gatorade, Powerade, Sprite, Mountain Dew, Lays, Nintendo, and still more, push products within the backdrop of streetball; much of the music and music videos of P-Diddy, Snoop Dogg, Jay-Z, Nelly and others pronounce basketball’s influence and significance to their identity and community; the weekly magazine covers of Slam, Sports Illustrated, and ESPN the Magazine obviously feature basketball players regularly, but, from time to time, basketball players will even appear on the covers of People and GQ; the fashion and style of basketball’s sneakers, jerseys, and athletic gear, endorsed by the usual suspects—Nike, Reebok, AND 1, Adidas, etc.—is culturally significant on and off the basketball courts; T.V. programming is host to a number of programs each season, most recently, ESPN’s “Streetball: AND 1 Mix Tape Tour,” MTV’s “Who’s Got Game: hosted by Magic Johnson,” and NBA TV’s broadcast of Rucker Park’s “Entertainer’s Basketball Classic”; finally, an explosion of websites and blogs with everything streetball—insidehoops.com, streetballonline.com, streetballhiphop.com, hoopsworld.com, and literally thousands more—span the world wide web.

In “Playing for Keeps,” Robin D. G. Kelley notes the troubling romanticization of these “crumbling urban spaces” found in the proliferation of streetball images: “These televisual representations of ‘streetball’ are quite remarkable; marked by chain-link fences, concrete playgrounds, bent and rusted netless hoops, graffiti-scrawled walls, and empty buildings, they have created a world where young black males do nothing but play” (196). Absent, or at best peripheral, from this romantic imagery of play are scenes, images, and articulation of unemployment, poverty, violence, depression, oppression,
exploitation, and commodification. It isn’t the act of play that is troubling; rather, it is the myopic constraints posited upon the African American identity that reduces the seriousness and qualities of play and denies visual confirmation of rich and fulfilling lives beyond the basketball courts. Such imagery again speaks to Cornel West’s concern of market images of “pleasure”—“comfort, convenience, machismo, femininity, violence, and sexual stimulation” that erase, displace the values of love, concern, and care and denigrates the cultural significance of play unfettered by racist, capitalistic motives of power and wealth (West, Race 26-27).

Many cultural criticisms specifically note this marketing gap between the reality of black urban experience and that portrayed in the mass-media marketing strategies. “At the core of this [cultural criticism],” notes Hartmann, “is the enormous gap between the class position and racial experiences of highly visible and often highly paid African American celebrities and entertainers as compared with the vast majority of African Americans and the fact that many mainstream, middle-class, Americans are unable or unwilling to realize this disjuncture” (237). Even more disconcerting and troubling is the re-representation of economic achievement posited upon streetball players by marketing strategies, when in reality, the streetball players themselves are “far from rich.” I will return to this problematic strategy of appeal as AND 1’s marketing maneuvers are questioned.

Hartmann outlines the damaging effects these mass media market-based representations of streetball and blackness have upon both the African American and white audiences. One effect is the distortion of “real” experience within the black community. By presenting these images of black athletic success, the continual crises of
racial inequality and racism throughout American society are minimized and altered; furthermore, the success of a handful of black athletes, in comparison to the general black population, is portrayed and imagined as a general possibility for African American identities. John Edgar Wideman, too, condemns the proliferation of such commodified versions of basketball:

America’s neurotic ambivalence toward African-rooted cultural practices continues: commodified versions of hip-hop style aggressively exploit a lucrative worldwide market, while at home ‘black’ kids are demonized, marginalized, and victimized by the stunted versions of themselves that hip-hopped commercials imprint. (Hoop 172)

Echoes of Langston Hughes can be heard as Wideman seemingly bemoans “Yep, you’ve taken my game and gone.” Finally, these pervasive images of racialized black athletes function as models of racist ideologies. For the white community, “sport allows white audiences to interact as capitalist consumers in seemingly risk-free, value-neutral ways with some segment of the African American population” (Hartmann 238). This “risk-free” interaction becomes heightened in the case of the AND 1 Mix Tapes, where a white audience doesn’t even have to leave the living room to be in “play” with black identities and communities.

The racialized arena of sport is a hotly contested space, or “contested terrain.” Borrowing the term “contested terrain” from Stuart Hall, Douglas Hartmann argues: “sport is not just a place (or variable) whereby racial interests and meanings are either inhibited or advanced but rather a site where racial formations are constantly—and very publicly—struggled on and over” (241). Generally perceived as a “black man’s sport,”
basketball specifically "remains one of the few places in American society where there is a consistent racial discourse" (Boyd, *Basketball* 60). "In basketball," writes Todd Boyd, "race, directly or indirectly, is the conversation, at all times" (*Basketball* 60). Buoyed by these profuse images of African American participation, even prowess and dominance, basketball can often seemingly provide spaces of racial progress. However, upon further investigation, a looking beyond the visual prominence, there remains a striking and fractured racial identity caught in a liminal playground of Other. "Images of African American athletes," writes Hartmann, "are thoroughly racialized, indelibly linked with the racial stereotypes and controlling images that permeate the culture no matter what other symbolic functions they may serve" (238). These stereotypes, like the athletes, literally come in all shapes and sizes: black as spectacle; black as physical, not intelligent; black as dangerous and threatening; "sports prove that blacks don't need Affirmative Action"; "blacks are better athletes than whites because their bodies are made different or better"; "blacks can't be quarterbacks (coaches, general managers, owners, etc.) because they don't grasp the intricacies of the game, the business like white quarterbacks do (coaches, general managers, owners, etc.)." This spectacle of black success further conflates the fractured identity of African American, particularly youth, who see opportunity and possibility in sports as a "way out of the ghetto." For most though, the brutal reality is yet another "dream deferred" or "dream deterred."

For cultural critics, what is at stake, what is most in play within the contested terrain, is the ideological—metaphorical—communication of blackness. Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*, although concerned primarily with the literary representation of
blackness, offers a profound insight into the communication of blackness throughout culture. Morrison offers:

Race has become metaphorical—a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological “race” ever was. Expensively kept, economically unsound, a spurious and useless political asset in election campaigns, racism is as healthy today as it was during the Enlightenment. It seems that it has a utility far beyond economy, beyond the sequestering of classes from one another, and has assumed a metaphorical life so completely embedded in daily discourse that it is perhaps more necessary and more on display than ever before (63).

This prolific profitability of streetball—economically, politically, socially, and culturally—depends upon the flux and fluidity of metaphor to transmit, translate, and interpolate the meaning(s) of blackness. The language and discourse of streetball—film, T.V., advertisements, photography, insignia—productively uses these sets of signs and signifying systems to represent blackness and exchange meanings about it (du Gay, Hall et al. 13). An exploration of this communication of meaning, this display of meaning, is precisely the entrance into AND 1’s play with and representation of blackness via their streetball Mix Tapes.

During ESPN’s 2002 coverage of the AND 1 Mix Tape Tour, the camera crews went with a number of the players to their homes and neighborhoods throughout inner city America. Shane Woney, a.k.a. “Shane the Dribbling Machine,” one of the original
Mix Tape Tour players since 2000, welcomed the cameras to his “playground” at the Edenwald Projects in the Bronx, New York. The flair and glamour of the AND 1 Mix Tapes is stripped and replaced with telling images of economically deplete housing projects and playgrounds, financial uncertainty and anxiety, and deferred dreams of “gettin’ outta da projects.” Shane is one of the most highly marketed and presented players by AND 1 through posters, jerseys, and paraphernalia. Standing beneath the looming shadows of the Edenwald Projects, however, Shane’s real mobility is painfully obvious. Shane, too, is savvy of the marketability of streetball, particularly the stinging commodification of his own identity:

Streetball is, like, one of the hottest things out right now. The kids see you and ask for your autograph, not knowing that we just regular street guys. But to them, it’s like, I had a kid saying I’m a millionaire, and I’m his idol...he’s got pictures of me and posters...And I’d be like, “I’m not rich. I’m far from rich.” (Streetball)

Shane’s story repeats itself over and over in this particular episode. From Philadelphia to New Jersey, D.C. to Atlanta, player after player remains caught in a liminal space of immobility and poverty, while profuse images of them playing and performing circulate in the VCR’s and DVD’s of America, on the fast breaking shoes across urban hardcourts, and posterized upon the walls and lockers of an admiring, envious body of youth—black and white.

Perhaps, the most poignantly clear example of this liminal occupancy occurs while the cameras were filming the players riding on the tour bus out of the city of Trenton, New Jersey. As the camera pans from a shot of the interior of the bus to a shot
outside the bus of a parallel bridge, the camera captures the gigantic steel lettering along the side of the Delaware River bridge: "TRENTON MAKES, THE WORLD TAKES." This industrial slogan poignantly parallels the identity and role of the AND 1 players engrossed in the market and their commodification as goods. Trenton becomes the "Everycity" where black bodies, black performance, and blackness is mined, excavated, molded, harvested, canned, regulated, and purchased. The product of blackness sells on the stock floors of Wall Street and the dilapidated corners of Bronx; it is taken to the stylish shops of Rodeo Drive and the militarized neighborhoods of Compton; and it is replayed in the small-town homes of Bloomington, Indiana and the discarded communities of Gary, Indiana.

AND 1's exposition of streetball, its communication to the mass and marginal audiences, profoundly exposes AND 1's own culpability and interest in the cultural production, representation, consumption, identity, even regulation of blackness. Their grass roots representation of themselves critically fails to withstand the capitalistic endeavors and successes propagated nationally and globally; their ability, or interest, to provide productive and meaningful opportunities for its streetball players unsuccessfully comes to fruition; finally, and most troubling, their general facility and ease with which they move from body to body, community to community, through the language of signs and discourses further creates a disjuncture of identity and possibility associated with blackness.

Despite the continuing problematic racialized terrain of sports, there must not be a total condemnation of sports, specifically basketball, as a site of possibility, resistance, and transcendence. "While it may not be perfect," Hartmann posits, "sport is an
unparalleled institutional site of accomplishment for African Americans and remains one of the most integrated institutions in American life” (240). Later, Hartmann continues, “This distinctive cultural style is obviously useful in terms of its market value, but it is more significant still, in theoretical terms, for its capacity to inspire productive, creative labor among African American young people living in otherwise alienating and disadvantaged circumstances” (240). Within this fluid and contested “popular” and marketable space, streetball still provides an avenue for expression, expansion, and excellence. Again, streetball, like jazz, provides opportunities for “play” and communication that elides socio-cultural stratifications. One can find or form public spaces to play and perform, to be in a syncopated, antiphonic dialogue and discourse with others, and to create and re-create fluctuating identities and possibilities.
"The Gift of Spirit"—Hoop's Sanctuary, Communion, and Play

I assign myself no rank or any limit, and such an attitude is very much against the trend of the times. But my world has become one of infinite possibilities. . . . America is woven of many strands; I would recognize them and let it so remain. It's "winner take nothing" that is the great truth of our country or of any country. Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat.

RALPH ELLISON

_Invisible Man_, 1952

John Hoberman's controversial and highly acclaimed _Darwin's Athletes: How Sport Has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race_ pointedly questions the value of sport for black America. First published in 1997, _Darwin's Athletes_ comes at the height of professional basketball’s appeal in the United States. Michael Jordan, who had come out of retirement in 1995, would lead the Chicago Bulls to their second straight N.B.A. title that year and further cement himself as the face of the N.B.A. Jordan’s unprecedented appeal warranted multi-million dollar marketing contracts with Nike, Gatorade, MCI, and Hanes; furthermore, Jordan’s basketball contract with the Chicago Bulls of an estimated 30 million dollars for a single season in 1997 was at the time the largest in the history of sports. Hoberman most definitely had Michael Jordan in mind when he wrote, “The modern world is a wash in images of black athletes. The airborne black body, its sinewy arms clutching a basketball as it soars high above the arena floor, has become the paramount symbol of athletic dynamism in the media age” (xxiii). Basketball’s preeminence across the American cultural scope plays a significant role in Hoberman’s assessment of sports’ elevated position in black America. Hoberman,
a white scholar currently at the University of Texas at Austin, enters the dialogue with some reluctance of coming across as pathologically motivated, but he qualifies his position as one “to bring about the healing process made possible by knowledge, and that outsiders [whites] have a role to play in explaining the travails of people whose experience they have not shared” (xxi). *Darwin’s Athletes* comes as a response to Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray’s equally controversial *The Bell Curve*, which argues that African Americans are ethnocentrically the intellectual inferiors to whites and would be better served to cultivate their ethnocentrically superior athletic skills.

Hoberman blasts *The Bell Curve'*s essentialist notions of ethnicity and race:

Such ideas about the “natural” physical talents of dark-skinned peoples, and the media-generated images that sustain them, probably do more than anything else in our public life to encourage the idea that blacks and whites are biologically different in a meaningful way. (xxiii)

Hoberman further contends that *The Bell Curve’s* call for black America to develop athletic models of success has long been in place and, in fact, has even led to black America’s fixation of athletics displacing intellectual and other pursuits. Unlike Murray and Herrnstein who commend such athletic development as pragmatic, Hoberman labels this athletic fixation as an “entrapment” of African Americans that only fulfills racist stereotypes of success and potential (4). The manipulation and exploitation of African American athletes by whites “seeking entertainment,” “profit,” as well as a neutral medium where racial reconciliation can be visualized without challenging the fundamental paradigms sustaining racial difference, further compounds the ill effects of such an athletic fixation.
Hoberman’s central concern, however, is not white America’s disproportionate authority over black bodies, but black America’s own culpability in perpetuating the racial folklore of African physicality and the embracement of “athletic achievement...as a foundation of black identity” (4). The damage of such an emphasis is further compounded as black children and young adults are not well prepared for a knowledge-based society because education is often derided as “acting white” and effeminate (8). The glorification of black athletes by African American communities supercedes attention and praise for the doctors, lawyers, teachers, and other professionals coming from the African American communities (7). Particularly disconcerting for Hoberman is black intelligentsia’s lack of articulation concerning “the ruinous consequences of making athletic achievement the prime symbol of black creativity” (xxvi).

Not surprisingly, Hoberman’s assertions, in particular toward the failures of black intelligentsia, were met with heavy criticisms from many journalists and scholars. Kenneth Shropshire’s preface to *Basketball Jones*, “Shaka’s Revenge: Not All Black Men Jump,” takes exception to the “Hoop Dreams myth” that the majority of black men in the United States “single-mindedly and irrationally believe they can make it as [basketball] players” (xiii). Criticizing Hoberman’s assertions, Shropshire writes, “so, when I see statistics that we all think we can play the game, I know the commentators don’t really know us” (xvii). Shropshire’s contention, as a black Legal Professor and African American scholar, rests in the fact that Hoberman’s argument further inflates the false notion that African Americans cannot make intellectual distinctions—sports as a game versus sports as a career. Recollecting the intramural basketball team he played on his senior year of college, composed of “non-basketball players,” Shropshire and the other
members of “Shaka’s Revenge,” who all went on to be doctors, lawyers, professors, and one professional football player, were not delusional about their ability to one day play in the N.B.A. “It’s not hard to know when the game is not going to be a career” (xvii). Shropshire, like many other members of black intelligentsia (Todd Boyd, John Edgar Wideman, Gerald Early, and Houston Baker to name a few), honors the play and viewership of basketball but enjoys a full life away from the basketball court. “Lots of us are not obsessed [with basketball],” Shropshire writes, “don’t regret that we never made it, but still have a Jones for the game” (xvii). Hoberman’s own myopic vision of African American intelligence severely undermines his argument of black America’s self-imposed intellectual paralysis.

Although I find Hoberman’s criticism of The Bell Curve’s essentialist misinformation engaging and generally on the mark, I, too, disagree with Hoberman’s contention that sports, namely basketball, is a social and psychological “entrapment” for much of black America that is “emblematic of an entire complex of black problems, which includes adolescent violence and academic failure” (Hoberman, Darwin’s xxxiv). Such misgivings miss the mark and the true value of the game of basketball, and, frankly, sorely simplify the complex relations of power constraining urban America. The need for growing academic and intellectual opportunities in many of the predominantly African American communities is without question a great concern; additionally, the pervasive misrepresentation, commodification, and exploitation of African American athletes and communities by corporate market institutions—AND 1, the N.B.A., Nike, and others—must be questioned and brought into critical dialogue and analysis. But, a condemnation of sports, namely basketball, narrow-mindedly dismisses the intrinsic value of game
steeped in the cultural production of enriching lives with meaning. There remains a vitally positive space of identity and exploration endowed in the play of basketball. Basketball’s value as a cultural expression, in the DuBoisian sense, Gerald Early argues, “has been an act of the conservation of the race, its sensibility, its Negro-ness, its genius” ("Why Baseball" 30). The play of basketball will and must continue; additionally, the insipid commodification and manipulation of the signs of basketball, the players and communities, and “blackness” have to be questioned and challenged. In some ways this is a reclamation project set out to once again rename, revise, and Signify basketball. We must, instead, cherish spaces free of marketability and exploitation, free of design and determination; indeed, we need spaces—recreational, public, domestic, and national—endowed with mobility, possibility, and grace.

Conscientiously, John Edgar Wideman chooses to refer to outdoor basketball as playground hoop, and not streetball. Unlike the streetball of AND 1 and the many other commodifiers, marketers, and entrepreneurs, who depend upon a style and performance of the “winner take all,” Wideman’s playground hoop seems to offer much more: “[O]ne way playground hoop distinguishes itself from other varieties of basketball is by carrying forward the emphasis on democratic, inclusive, grass-roots participation, on play for its own sake” (Hoop 179). This choice reflects the significance and value Wideman endows the game with, so that regardless of whether or not playing hoops provides financial enterprise or even the joy of “winning” a particular game, the re-creation of play and transcendental essence of play is what is finally at stake: “The game remains, like virtue itself, its own best reward” (179). Playground hoop’s inherent qualities of love, care, and
concern for self and others don’t depend upon a marketing strategy like that of AND 1, which relies upon depictions of machismo, violence, and selfishness.

Through the narratives and storytelling of Wideman’s personal love for the game of playground hoop, of love for the community of family and players who promised him love in return, and of the supreme love of self, *Hoop Roots* expands the horizons of humanity. Wideman, a former Rhodes Scholar and currently a professor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, has published seventeen books to date that span five decades. Born in Pittsburgh’s Homewood section, a predominantly black community, Wideman’s narratives and stories often center on his African American legacy and community in Homewood. *Hoop Roots* returns Wideman to his hometown as he explores his lifelong relationship and commitment to the game of basketball, which, for Wideman, was conceived and nurtured upon the playgroxmds of Homewood. Although an Ivy League star on Penn’s basketball team, Wideman’s qualifications for writing a book on basketball’s importance aren’t dependent upon his prowess or skills as a ballplayer; rather, at fifty-nine, it is Wideman’s enduring love for the game of basketball because of the game’s remaining influence as a source of possibility and growth that gives Wideman credibility. In this final section, I hope to explore playground hoop as a site of sanctuary, community, and play through the narratives and storytelling of John Edgar Wideman’s *Hoop Roots*.

Although highly acclaimed, receiving prestige as a *New York Times* Notable Book, *Hoop Roots* frustrates many critics and readers for its “Widemanesque” layers of personal memoir and intellectual explorations. Charles Hirshberg’s *Sports Illustrated* review criticizes *Hoop Roots* as being too cerebrally ambitious claiming that “perhaps
there's such a thing as thinking too much” (R3). According to Hirshberg, “that *Hoop Roots* is too ambitious is evidenced by the inability of Wideman, a gifted writer, to make it work. He bounces like a basketball from one half-baked intellectual notion to another” (R3). The *New York Times'* Will Blythe similarly concludes, “*Hoop Roots* suffers from a herky-jerky movement between its various sections that dissipates its overall force” (G35). The *Black Issues Book Review* pedantically criticizes the book because “keeping the sentence fragments [in *Hoop Roots*] at a minimum isn’t an unreasonable expectation” from a Rhodes Scholar and accomplished author (Grant 69).

What Hirshberg and the others are missing is precisely the greater value and meaning endowed in the game of basketball that gives stylistic form to Wideman’s writing. Ira Berkow’s review in *The New York Times* compares Wideman’s stylistic ruminations and metaphoric explorations to the prestige of Melville and Joyce:

> This is no more or less a book than Joyce’s *Ulysses*, with its luxuriant language embodying much of its essence. This is no more or less a book than *Moby Dick*, with its similarly quixotic first sentence regarding one Ishmael, and then its sailing off into literal and metaphoric passions and ruminations and a kaleidoscope of personal events. A book is, for good or ill, no one thing. But the best books do illuminate…and teaches [its readers] to see in a new fashion. (E7)

Basketball’s always-already motion of flux and fluidity, improvisation and creation lends itself to Wideman’s compulsive writing style to keep moving in order to see beyond the surface. Wideman’s theoretical endeavors speak to game’s place within the cultural “canon” of African Americans striving to rise above the oppression and stifling of
hundreds of years of racism. So, just as *Hoop Roots* is not merely a book about basketball, neither is basketball a game determined by time and place; rather, it’s a game of boundless potential spilling over into avenues and ambitions beyond the playground court.

*Hoop Roots* honors the game of playground hoop as a space of refuge and subjectivity supplying a “break” from a world often unsympathetic and unwelcoming. “Playing the game provided sanctuary,” writes Wideman, it served as a “refuge from a hostile world, [which] also toughened us by instructing us in styles for coping with that world” (2). Growing up in Pittsburgh’s Homewood district during the 1950’s, Wideman recounts the severe poverty of his childhood personified in the “piecemeal jobs” of its men lined up every morning at dawn earning meager wages and in the daily meals scraped together by mothers and grandmothers lavishing love upon their children (8). The threat of hopelessness and meaningless persistently lurked in the “oppressive economic environment in which both kids and adults were trapped” (8). Playground basketball, however, supplied a protective field for Wideman to find shelter and trust in the possibility of something more.

Growing up, I needed basketball because my family was poor and colored, hemmed in by material circumstances none of us knew how to control, and if I wanted more, a larger, different portion than other poor colored folks in Homewood, I had to single myself out. I say *if I wanted more* because *if* was a real question, a stumbling block many kids in Homewood couldn’t get past. (6)
Unlike many of his peers and family members who struggled to find a space of refuge and something to be converted to that would prevent hopelessness and lovelessness, Wideman found peace at the playground. A game of layups and dunks, fastbreaks and no-look-passes, jumpshots and spinmoves supplied Wideman with a protective space to formulate and nurture an identity affirming his greater possibility.

Perhaps the skills and styles learned on the playground will never provide most players with lucrative earnings as professional basketball players, but the game’s space of creativity and growth can empower these players with a deeper sense of subjectivity and possibility.

Shot made or shot missed, lets you feel as if your fate’s in your hands, lets you decide with a flick of your wrist whether something good or devastating will befall you, a moment of power, win or lose, and what could be better than this rare, privileged moment served up to you by the playground game, what could be more like living large. (21)

Despite the hostility of the world and circumstance, even though there may always be exploitation and commodification of the playground game and its players, the game’s respite of re-creation can endow its players with the boundless promise of transcendental possibility. The playground, unlike other spaces occupied by lovelessness and hopelessness, makes room for a player to see a world in which he or she can triumph and excel. This healthy dosage of possibility can then be translated into further spheres of his or her life and serve as a valuable touchstone to know he or she is capable of achieving greatness beyond the playground courts.
Always and already constrained by the racialized context of the United States, playground hoop, as a member of black America’s cultural armor, works to confront racist ideologies of racial inferiority and revise the nihilistic constraints. Self-worth and self-affirmation are at the heart of Wideman’s playground hoop sanctuary:

The idea of race and the practice of racism in our country work against African American kids forming and sustaining belief in themselves. Wanting more doesn’t teach you there are ways to get there... You need the plausibility, the possibility of imagining a different life for yourself (6).

Playground hoop serves as a response to the constrictions of racism and the carelessness of “the main stream” to discard black souls and entire communities of African Americans and let them “crash and burn.” Often surrounded by the signs of crippling poverty, urban playground courts hum with possibility. The courts, too, may be dilapidated and decaying, but moving across the asphalt are the souls and bodies of black folk offering their articulate message of their experience to the world. Of the playground courts articulation, Ira Berkow writes, “It is where white society’s stereotyping roadblocks for a black boy can be hurdled, where others’ views of a black boy’s physical and mental standing in society can perhaps be exorcised by the muscle, creativity, skill, spirit and brains he may display on the playground basketball court” (E7). This message may be transmitted to those who will stop and watch the play and vitality of the playground ballers; moreover, the message of identity and potential can be transmitted back to the individuals, who have self-confidence and self-belief to reach further for something more thwarting the threat of self-nihilism; and, more importantly, this message of self-worth
and self-affirmation, of basketball's space to grow big is transmitted back into the
community equipping siblings, neighbors, children, and grandchildren with the cultural
armor necessary to uphold a legacy of hope and meaning.

The "conversion" and redemption playground hoop offers speaks to the hopes,
insights, and faith exemplified in the works of Du Bois, West, and Wideman. The
salvation of souls cannot be some ephemeral moment; rather, it is the continued work,
practice, and play in the "kingdom of culture" that will facilitate the "turning" or
"conversion" of souls, ultimately granting salvation. This turning or conversion is
symbolized through the embodied agency to make choices that will continually empower
the player. Sprinkled throughout urban communities, playground hoop promises more at
the local level: "If urban blight indeed a movable famine, playground ball the city's
moveable feast" (*Hoop Roots* 50). In the face of burned-out ghettos and decaying
neighborhoods, playgrounds can still be found bursting with the resiliency of its players
filling themselves with the game's momentary banquet of freedom and possibility.

Historically one of the blessings of the playground game is that it provides a
larger community of fellow ball players. "Communities," writes bell hooks, "sustain
life—not nuclear families, or the 'couple,' and certainly not the rugged individualist" (*All
About* 129). hooks' assertion echoes Hillary Clinton's famous contention that it "takes a
village to raise a child." For hooks, the importance of the larger community is directly
related to the need, more often than not, for communal love and kindness to fill the void
left from dysfunctional home-lives (131-132). Playground hoop's influential community
transcends individuality and shapes entire communities past, present, and future.
Playground courts bear witness to the game's cycle of life where "old heads" sweat
profusely working to maintain their position as the game’s caretakers, while “young legs” seemingly glide from one space to the next showcasing their presumed immortality. The game’s great truth is that “when you were born the game was here waiting, and the beat will go on without you” (Hoop Roots 4). In a cycle of reciprocity the game is passed on one generation to the next from the “old heads” down to the “young legs.” So, now at age fifty-nine, Wideman places himself in the greater community of playground ballers as he weaves through personal playground narratives of the past, present, and future.

Wideman’s own growth and resiliency flourishes because of the community of playground ballers that offered him more. Homewood’s playground courts often doubled as life’s classroom, where the veterans equally doled out instructions and punishments. As Homewood’s second generation of a Wideman basketball player, John Edgar inherited his father’s tough love lessons through the veterans, who as young players endured the bumps and bruises of the elder Wideman but now revisited their own retribution upon the young and coming up John Edgar Wideman. Wideman specifically recalls the reckoning of N.B.A. star Ed Fleming, who grew up on Homewood’s hard courts under the instruction of Wideman’s father, Edgar:

Ed Fleming’s hoop war with my father not over in one generation. He revisited it through me. Hard truths imprinted on Edgar Wideman’s will and flesh by some anonymous bunch of old guys hooping, then imprinted by my father on Ed Fleming, coming home to roost in my bruised feelings and meat (55).

Homewood’s threshing courts gleaned the weak from the strong, physically and psychologically; however, beneath the layers of machismo was the protective grooming
and nurturing of veterans entrusting the wisdom and power of the game to their young prodigies. The “old heads,” who were the “young legs” not so long ago, pass along “the game, its lore and lessons”:

For instance, *Never forget*—not where you came from nor what’s coming up behind you... The lesson reminds you to take seriously your place in time, in tradition, within the community of players. Ed Fleming and the other vets teaching me to take my time, no matter the speed I’m traveling. Teaching me to be, not to underreach or overreach myself... Above all learning not to be so intent on moving forward I turned my back on the ones behind who might need my hand or have one to offer. (56)

On the playground courts of Homewood’s moveable feast, their bread and communion of hoop is broken and shared by the court elders. The power and understanding to courageously state “I am” the holy offering of the veterans; respect and progression the covenant of the playground court’s new converts.

Basketball rightly takes its place alongside the folk art of African American communities passed on as a cultural heirloom linking new generations to a legacy of cultural resistance, survival, and transcendence.

You can pick up in the playing if you listen hard, listen easy enough, the chorus saying, *We are doing this together and it’s just out here but the game has been here before, other players have found themselves in the middle of this same deep, good shit and figured out how to deal.* (49)

Basketball’s “call and response” bridges generational chasms that separate fathers and sons, grandfathers and grandsons, and, for Wideman, a father and a daughter, who share
in the discovery and re-discovery of self. Just as centuries earlier when the music and stories of the African slaves were passed on from generation to generation, Wideman teaches his children his great love for the game of basketball founded in the knowledge that game transcends places, people, and cultures. The legacy of Homewood’s playground courts is passed anew onto his daughter Jamila Wideman, who following a stellar collegiate career at Stanford played professionally in the WNBA.

Todd Boyd emphasizes the game’s worth for its attributes of individuality within the structure and sustenance of the community. At length Boyd discusses basketball’s minimalist attributes in contrast to other sports, such as football and baseball. From the court itself, the modest equipment needed, even the number of players needed in order to play, “basketball is a game uniquely suited to the urban environment” (Young 11). Boyd further pushes basketball’s capacity to place the individual within the structure and whole of a community of players: “As a sport, basketball is again something that can be pursued by an individual. Individuals can perfect their own skills in solitude before going on to perform with a larger group of people” (Young 12). Like a jazz ensemble with a trumpet player that can practice individually and enhance his or her quality of sound and performance, the personal commitment and devotion of practicing in solitude is readily available for the basketball player. In order to work on one’s jumpshot or dribbling skills other players are not necessary. Like the individual trumpet player, however, whose greatness is finally realized only within the multiplicity of textures and grains of the entire ensemble’s performance, the basketball player’s greatness is only recognized within the fluidity and flows of the community game. Boyd’s overestimation of basketball’s individualistic worth negates basketball’s greater potential found in shared
progressions and ambitions. It is within the context and parameters of the “team” game where the cultural significance of the game flourishes.

Winning and losing serves an integral role in a player’s continued progression and pursuit of basketball. The lessons of determination and perseverance that accompany victory and defeat can carry over into the other facets of life within the greater community of education, employment, and domesticity. Ultimately, however, playground hoop is a game whose promise of redemption doesn’t solely belong to the winner; rather, playground hoop is finally about the pleasure of being able to play regardless of winning and losing. For Wideman, writing *Hoop Roots* enables him to cling to the joy of play as his ability to run up and down the court at age fifty-nine becomes more difficult: “[T]he deepest simplest subject of this hoop book is pleasure, the freeing, outlaw pleasure of play” (179). From the first dribble to the last shot, hoop promises pleasurable play.

In utilizing Cornel West’s case for a “love ethic” earlier in my argument it is important to define “pleasure” by distinguishing it from “hedonism.” Cornel West unapologetically condemns the markets of capitalism, driven by profits and consumption, on the grounds that they tirelessly portray images and values of hedonistic pleasure, violence, comfort, convenience, and sexual fantasy, which displace the vital values of love, care, and concern (*Race Matters* 26). This type of “hedonistic pleasure” takes no account for the past or future, but seeks for an immediate gratification. The “pleasure” of playground hoop, unlike the profligacy being marketed, endows its participants with mobility, unfettered by commodification and marketability, rooted in the love of self and the care and concern for the greater community. The pleasure found through playing
basketball may not inspire a Civil Rights Movement but it just might give the players a deeper understanding about and love for themselves and each other. This, again, as demonstrated by AND 1 and others, is not to say that basketball remains totally above selfish hedonism, but there are altruistic values of the game, which, if cultivated, provide liberating and joyous pleasure.

Play is the imperative characteristic of playground hoop’s act of Signifying. The “joke” is not that the players in the N.B.A. are predominantly African American; the joke, the play-on-words is that playground hoop, like linguistic Signifying, resists the normative models offered by the mainstream, defies the commodification of enterprise, and instead offers the defiance of improvisational play that perpetually presents fresh versions of basketball. In the face of restrictions and limitations, playground hoop’s ballers take the fundamental modes of basketball and create them anew. On the playground courts, simple dribbling moves are replaced by the “sick handles” of a player to spin the ball behind his back, simultaneously moving the ball inside his own shirt—a “disappearing act”—confusing the defender, and then somehow, without losing any momentum, removing the ball at just the right moment in order to make a break to the hoop without being contested by the hapless defender stuck somewhere between the hoop and where the dribbler left him.

Play, the space and time of liberated creative possibility, matters. The truth of such an axiom is revealed in the laughter and smiles of children and adults engrossed within a game of hoops, balls, motion, and hopefulness. As the cameras of AND 1’s film crew capture Shane Woney’s seemingly depressing surroundings of the Bronx’s Edenwald Projects, the smiles of two young boys playing basketball are contagious
What is even more remarkable is that the boys are not playing at the playground, but have transformed a garbage can beside a sidewalk into their hoop. Passing the ball back-and-forth, the young boys imitate the alley-oops and behind-the-back passes they have certainly witnessed at neighboring courts. Theirs is the freedom of play, the “outlaw pleasure” of rising above the economic and racial constraints that would rather deny them transcendence and possibility.

Playground hoop’s enduring salvation for Wideman is a testament to play’s immeasurable potential: “The ball court provides a frame, boundaries, the fun and challenge of call and response that forces you to concentrate your boundless energy within a defined yet seemingly unlimited space” (Hoop Roots 9). Bestowed with infinite possibilities this internal movement of play is the motion in which the players achieve self-presence and understanding by being mobile, supple, and fluid. Wideman articulates the transcendent possibility playground hoop benevolently offers:

Maybe the primary reason the game exists and persists is because it reliably supplies breaks, moments a player dreams of seizing and making his or her own when he or she thinks music or thinks basketball. Moments when weight, the everyday dominoes collapsing one after the other of linear time, is shed. When the player’s free to play. (49-50)

The internal movement of self-exploration for the players extends the fluidity and suppleness of play into the players’ thoughts, emotions, and desires. The game allows them to experience renaissance by continually improvising and recreating jazz-like hoop. Like the City of Toni Morrison’s Jazz, play “is there to back and frame you no matter what you do. And what goes on on its blocks and lots and side streets is anything the
strong can think of and the weak will admire” (Jazz 8-9). There upon the playground courts players constrained by economic and racial stereotypes can be “their stronger, riskier selves” (Jazz 33).

In closing I would like to return to basketball’s ubiquitous presence through American cultural life. Although I have sought to argue that the game of basketball is markedly an African American cultural venue, basketball, again, specifically playground hoop engenders a grass-root, democratic clarion call for all to play. As we grow into the 21st century, playground hoop, like many cultural and social institutions, must shed itself of racial, economic, and gender stigmas. “At a deeper level,” Wideman argues, “playground hoop transcends race and gender because it’s about creating pleasure, working the body to please the body, about free spaces, breaks in the continuum” (167).

The final line of Ralph Ellison’s epic novel, Invisible Man, the narrator profoundly secures his communion with humanity asking the reader, black or white, “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” (581). Invisible Man’s narrator speaks on the lower, subtle levels the blues for all human beings. And, perhaps, playground hoop’s inherent worth is that it can break down normative paradigms of difference and ask each of us to sit at its table of multifarious and polyglot players giving thanks and nurturing the moveable feast.
Epilogue: Repentance and Redemption

This is the urgency: Live!
and have your blooming in the noise of the whirlwind.

Salve salvage in the spin.
Endorse the splendor splashes;
stylize the flawed utility;
prop a malign or failing light—

but know the whirlwind is our commonwealth.

Not the easy man, who rides above them all,
not the jumbo brigand,
not the pet bird of poets, that sweetest sonnet,

shall straddle the whirlwind.

Nevertheless, live.

GWENDOLYNN BROOKS,


I hesitate calling this a “study,” a “thesis,” words I pause to trust because they

seem too clean, sanitary, library. On some level I understand Stuart Hall’s attempted
definition of Cultural Studies: to “dwell on the ‘dirtiness’ of it”; to move the “study,” the
“thesis” of it “from the clean air of meaning and textuality and theory to the something
nasty down below.” Yet, I’m even less confident in where I stand, where the tension of
whether or not I belong in the “dirtiness” threatens to topple any authentic, organic work
I may offer. This dual entrance—figurative and real—into “the something nasty down
below” reveals layers and contexts unfamiliar, untested and often uncomfortable. At
times I’m unsure of what’s really at stake for me. What do I have to lose? Or, is it
because I have something to gain, to appropriate? I carefully nudge myself on in hopes of avoiding the paralysis—the writer’s block—of such questions. Writing and analysis fluctuate between moments of severe introspection, even isolation, and the communal dialogue of oral and visual exchange. But, just when I think I feel secure about my being here, I ponder whether such a “study” really has merit in a world of such injustice and despair, or, in Hall’s words, “against the urgency of people dying in the streets, what in God’s name is the point of cultural studies.” I mean, what I’m talking about is basketball, right? This isn’t an inquiry of how the AIDS epidemic is linked to cultural, social, and political factors of representation, nor is it an attempt to disclose the relationships of power that are creating the genocidal ravages of Darfur. No, this is a study, a practice of basketball and of identity.

In some respects, I suppose I’ve been working on this integration of inquiry and play nearly all my life. I remember well as a fourth grader being invited by my mom to go to a local bookstore to choose a book of my own. I’m not sure what the circumstances were which solicited such an invitation but I do remember the sense of empowerment to choose any book I wanted. The moment of choosing the book is blurred in my mind’s memory leaving only the book itself, *The History of the Harlem Globetrotters*. At that point in my life I had never even seen the Globetrotters live, rather they were images of play and spectacle only real to me through ESPN. This wasn’t some “dumbed” down book overflowing with color photos; this was a basketball narrative of words and stories sparsely sprinkled with black and white photos. The book certainly didn’t improve my basketball game, as the smallest fourth grader at Rock Canyon Elementary the game was a constant struggle of discipline and tough love. But, growing up in the homogenous
community of Provo, Utah, *The History of the Harlem Globetrotters* bent the barriers of racial and cultural difference known only to me through televisual and filmic depictions. Just like John Stockton, who I’d meet the following year, the Harlem Globetrotters became real people with real ancestry and autonomy. A fraction of the nation’s legacy of racial divide and prejudice was suddenly opened to me; I could begin to see an injustice and oppression that as a fourth grader I didn’t have answers to resolve, but I could also see a world displayed through basketball and narratives transcending obstacles.

Perhaps my reading and rereading of the Globetrotter history is linked with the moment the following year when I borrowed from my fifth grade teacher, Mr. Harris, his classroom library copy of Martin Luther King’s *I Have A Dream*, a biography of King’s integral role in the Civil Rights Movement. I say borrowed because that is what I originally did, but now some eighteen years later I realize I no longer borrowed the book as it has become a part of my younger brothers’, Joseph and Taylor, reading collection. As second and third graders, Joseph and Taylor held my hands as we walked through Birmingham, Alabama’s Civil Rights Museum and crossed the street to the 16th Street Chapel bearing witness to the legacy of a Civil Rights Movement that they too have found in the pages of their childhood narratives, *The Watson’s Go to Birmingham* and *The Story of Ruby Bridges*.

Sure this is a thesis about basketball, an excuse to spend additional research time in the gym and at the playground so I can better grasp the flow and movement of the game, but it’s also a study, a practice to know and understand more clearly the depth and power of basketball that shapes the lives and communities of many African Americans. In part, it’s an attempt to call into question the prolific imagery of basketball throughout
popular culture transmitting and encoding signs of blackness, signs of identity and possibility. Ultimately, this project is also about redemption and transcendence, the unique grace of a playground game to enhance and empower the lives of its players and participants. If it's possible for a cultural study to have hopes and goals, to stake out confidently where the thesis will lead, in many regards the real work of this thesis will be an invitation for others scholars and ballplayers and “scholarly ‘ballers,” our version of Gramsci’s “organic intellectual,” to share their insight, to tell their story, to finally put up a jump shot of their own.

One recent Sunday morning, while reading in my apartment office, I heard a strange clang coming from outside in the parking lot. The sounds of a ball being dribbled and bounced had caught my attention earlier, as well as the playful jockeying among some of the boys in the neighborhood. Still though, I couldn’t figure out what the periodic clang was coming from. Curious, probably because I wished I could be outside playing rather than preparing to go to church, I opened the office window blinds to see four young boys—eight to ten years old—playing full court basketball on a makeshift court they had created in the parking lot. Using the two empty handicap parking spaces that faced each other as their court, they reassigned the handicap parking signs as their goals. Squaring up, facing their momentary destination, the boys took shot after shot aiming for the blue sign. Transfiguring, healing, even resurrecting, the boys renewed the previously determined handicap space. Watching the boys from my 2nd story apartment window, I felt a strange sense of lack and self-emptiness. I seemingly embodied the empowered position of the voyeur and the panoptic; however, the young god-like boys, with their power of possibility and physical poetry, playing regardless of whomever
might be watching or criticizing held the real power. Theirs was the peace of play and transcendence. Stumbling down the apartment stairs in my Sunday dress slacks, a shirt and a tie, I approached their Jacob’s well in hopes of quenching this great thirst. I asked if I could also play, if I could also take a shot, if I too could also feel their redemption and taste their water of everlasting life.
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