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4-26-1996

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Jones, Lee P. and McMillan, Joseph H., "Blacks, Basketball, and the Predominately White Institution: The Maafa Continues" (1996). *Different Perspectives on Majority Rules (1996)*. Paper 16.
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Blacks, Basketball, and the Predominately White Institution: The Maafa Continues

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"Along with the effect of the Maafa, Blacks have been programmed to accept only dehumanizing instance that gives the illusion of freedom, fame, and fortune. One such illusion is college athletics."

In her brilliant analysis of the human condition in the African community title Yorugu, Marimba Ani (aka Dr. Donna Richards) accurately defines the condition known as the Maafa (Ma-aah-fah). The Maafa, which is an Akan term, represents her definition of the most devastating and destructive human experience in world history. It is the physical enslavement of a people, but it is more than that-it is torture, pain, physical and psychological suffering and death. It is the Middle Passage, but it's more than the Passage itself. It is the separation by language; it's a sickness; it's a disease. It is more than the West Indian seasoning which was like "fattening the frogs for snakes." It was a dehumanizing project that sought to undermine the human agency of self-determination, a key feature of freedom. The Maafa represents the comprehensive program designed to dehumanize Africans and African Americans by first physical enslavement, then by mental enslavement. Along with the effect of the Maafa, Blacks have been programmed to accept any dehumanizing instance that gives the illusion of freedom, fame, and fortune. One such illusion is college athletics. Blacks, particularly males, have been willing participants in a de facto slave system-a system in which universities use black college athletes primarily in revenue-earning sports that earn the school profits-that uses their bodies for profits while ignoring their full human potential.

In 1972, Michigan State professor Dr. Joseph McMillan, along with Drs. Gunning and Tom Green described this process of the Maafa in a careful examination of the bias and racism in the Big Ten Athletic Association, *Integrated Education* (1972). Following the earlier work of Harry Edwards and Roscoe Brown, these activists/scholars threatened to enjoin the Big Ten for its discrimination and its perpetuation of white supremacy. The Big Ten Athletic Association acquiesced by opening a minority affairs office, hiring more African American officials and referees, promoting the hiring of more Black coaches, and providing more benefits for college athletes. However, the compromise with the Big Ten resulted in practices that reflect the Maafa in its worst and present form-the mental enslavement of black college athletes who fatally pursue the illusion of million dollar jackpots, despite the miniscule odds. These athletes do raise millions of dollars, but not for themselves. They earn this money for their respective institutions, most often with no return on their physical investment. This system of the Maafa, with its program of dehumanization and de facto slave system is still operational today in college athletics.

Coaches and athletic departments are obsessed with recruiting athletes with superior athletic abilities. This fact is best described in Darcy Frey's important book *The Last Shot* (1994). College recruiters scour the inner-city looking for the most gifted athletes to come to their university or college to earn their institutions (including the coaches) huge profits. As prominent sports sociologist Dr. Harry Edwards states, "They come into the black community and make their annual recruitment and haul away our finest, take them to academe, flunk them out and then come back for another load next year." At Michigan State University the common practice by recruiters was to approach a black male in the ghetto with a $100 bill on their forehead and pictures of white females in their wallets to show the recruits. Other routine practices that are still present today are organized groups of mostly white female college students who "assist" athletic department recruiters by accompanying prospective college athletes on their recruitment visits. Also, there are promises of in-kind benefits, such as use of cars, summer job opportunities, etc., that seek to lure the black athlete into their program.

The marketing and peddling of human flesh, specifically blacks, which is not unique in today's postmodern capitalist America, is one of the glower features of the Maafa. It is manifested in the building of stadiums, the surplus budgets of athletic departments, the enormous contracts of coaches, the partnership with major corporations such as NIKE, Converse, CBS, and others interested in the college athletic pie. It results in chicanery and unscrupulous endeavors to win.

In most college programs, football generates the most revenue. However, there are a few regions where basketball reigns supreme and subsequently is the "cash cow." One such region is the Southeast. One such state is Kentucky. In Kentucky, basketball generates far more money than football, probably second only to the horse racing industry. This is true not only for college athletics, but for high school basketball as well. Many young African American males view basketball as their ticket out of poverty and into fortune and fame. There are countless numbers of "Hoop Dreams"-like stories present in many of Kentucky's black neighborhoods.

We intend to show how one such school continues the Maafa against African Americans. We want to use the University of Louisville's basketball program as our case study. We will discuss how the University's basketball program systematically perpetuates the Maafa at the expense of young African American males, much in the same way that chattel slavery operated in early America. This program routinely recruits young black male athletes who are set up for failure, then after their eligibility is expired or are found academically ineligible, are returned to their communities-often in worse shape than when they left. We contend that the Maafa not only operates within the University of Louisville's basketball program, but that it is widespread among many of the elite college basketball programs in the U.S. This system of extreme exploitation will serve as proof that the Maafa exists systematically in college athletics.

PRESENTERS

Lee P. Jones is currently a Ph.D. student in sociology at the University of Oregon. His research interests include race and ethnic relations, social stratification, sociology of

popular culture, sociology of sport, and research methodology. He is co-regional representative for Alaska, Oregon, Washington, and Idaho, and on the Board of Directors for the National Council for Black Studies, 1995-1996. He is a member of the editorial collective for *Critical Sociology.* His forthcoming journal publications include a class analysis of the film *"Hoop Dreams"* for *Jump Cut,* as well as articles in *Sociological Inquiry* and *Monthly Review.*

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