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INTERVIEWS

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Sneakers, corporate attitudes, and the Black Lives Matter movement: An interview with sneaker expert Sean Williams

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Figure 1: Sean Williams, Obsessive Sneaker Disorder & SOLEcial Studies. Courtesy of Sean Williams, 2021.

INTERVIEW SYNOPSIS

Since the introduction of the sneaker in the early nineteenth century, the shoe has served its primary purpose as functional equipment to be used for physical and recreational activities (such as tennis). However, the sneaker also has long been used as a tool for social and political discourse. According to historian Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, the sneaker was often politicized and associated with delinquency, nationalism, race and class identity, as well as other social meanings. For example, after the First World War, various nations embraced eugenics and nationalism, encouraging their citizens to exercise for the purpose of physical fitness and preparation for the next war (Chrisman-Campbell 2016). In 2020, however, sneakers reflect fashion, creativity and cultural expression. The idea of sneakers as a fashion statement was particularly evident during the 1980s with the emergence of hip hop (i.e. Run DMC's 'My Adidas'). Then NBA player Michael Jordan influenced Black and youth culture through Nike Air Jordans. Sneaker fashion led the marketing success of shoe companies such as Adidas and Nike respectively (Miner 2009: 75–76).

Despite the marketing success and monetary gains of sneaker companies over the past 40 years, sneakers have been not just a subject of scorn but also a topic in political discourse. For example, at the 2004 NAACP Legal Defense Fund awards ceremony, Bill Cosby unfairly condemned (in the 'Pound Cake' speech) working-class Black parents for the state of Black youth in the United States (Nunnally and Carter 2012). Cosby specifically used sneakers as

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a reason why working-class Blacks remain in poverty. He believed that working-class Black parents should invest in their children's education rather than buying them \$500 sneakers (Lee 2004). While there may be some legitimacy in Cosby's critique, sneakers remain an important cultural form of expression.

During the Donald Trump presidency, sneakers again took the political stage. On 2 July 2019, Nike pulled its Fourth of July-themed sneakers (featuring an early flag of the United States, also known as the Betsy Ross flag). Former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick, a Nike brand ambassador, was influential in this decision. He pointed out – correctly – that the image was currently linked to racism in the United States. White extremist groups have used it as a symbol of America's return to traditional ideals (meaning White male patriarchal systems) (Chapel 2019).

Additionally, politicians such as Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) have taken to social media to condemn Nike for its support of the activist Kaepernick. Various people have burned their Nike products in protest against Kaepernick's activism against police brutality. However, despite such right-wing backlash, the business of sneakers remains strong. Sneakers have found a place with the re-emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement in the wake of George Floyd's death.

As we reflect on this political moment, it is important to consider how fashion – particularly sneakers – can add to the discussion surrounding Black Lives Matter. This interview features sneaker expert Sean Williams, the co-creator of SOLEcial Studies. Williams is with an educational partner programme of Pensole Footwear Design academy, with the mission of instructing young people about sneakers and the footwear industry. Previously, he served as the Rankin Scholar at Drexel University.



Figure 2: Sean Williams displays his sneaker collection. Courtesy of Sean Williams, 2021.

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Travis D. Boyce (TB): *The movement Black Lives Matter, born out of the repeated tragedy of unarmed Black people killed by police, seeks to promote change by fostering a public awareness that each Black person has a right to live. Is the fashion industry part of this message today?*

Sean Williams (SW): Now that the microscope has been placed on various industries' version of diversity and inclusion, and on the level of concern they show for their consumers' wellbeing (outside of the purchase experience), it turns out that most companies aren't doing as well as they thought. Fashion and footwear have long included examples of cultural appropriation and/or downright racial insensitivity, which folks like myself have shed a spotlight on for decades. It's not that the fashion industry has been getting across any message I see as sincere (at this point). To me, it's more about the fact that the level of acceptance for such negligent and disrespectful behaviour is now so low that brands have to acknowledge that certain things are no longer acceptable. They have acknowledged that there is a line that can be crossed. Yet no fashion brands (or footwear brands) have made public any plan of action that overhauls the systems in place that created the line.

TB: *Corporate attitudes about addressing racial justice have shifted, particularly in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. What can you say about the evolution of sneaker companies and that industry's involvement in racial and social justice politics?*

SW: Sneaker companies only historically acknowledged their 'fouls' when someone (or a group) brought it to their attention. They never proactively policed their own products and marketing internally before something reached the masses, thus exposing their insensitivity to many cultural and racial matters 'around the world', not just in the United States. As long as folks like me exist who are always on guard, the sneaker industry will never get away with the things that they are constantly called to task on. But they still have no internal voice to police themselves when things are being created from the beginning! This is where the true lack of diversity and inclusion rears its ugly head in the sneaker industry.

TB: *Major social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have limited hate speech on their platforms. Given the divisive political climate, do shoe and clothing companies (such as Nike) have a moral and ethical obligation to denounce White nationalism? If so, where does a firm such as Nike draw the line? In dropping the product, they lost their development money.*

SW: I feel that any company that has employees who are in a demographic that is affected by a societal challenge – a challenge that doesn't allow the employees to be their best selves – should support efforts to make a change and improve the lives of those employees who give their lives to that company. It has always been funny how a company can so actively get behind issues such as medical and health awareness, but can never see racial injustice, an issue that is just as important to the wellbeing of its employees. The not-funny part, which is also the reason for that lack of awareness, is because the people at the footwear companies have two problems. First, they're out of touch with societal challenges for everyday people. Second, they're less inclined to overhaul a system from which they have personally benefited for decades.

Companies will not aggressively denounce white nationalism, white supremacy or the microaggressions that are transacted daily that keep

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unjust systems in place until their financial bottom line is hit so hard that it humbles them. I have no faith that Nike (just as an example) will ever begin a campaign that boisterously denounces racial injustice. For example, when the Colin Kaepernick ads ran (for Nike's 30th Anniversary 'Just Do It' campaign), a government office in Kenner, Louisiana sent out a public memo saying it would no longer support any local entities that wore Nike sneakers and apparel. Where was the response by Nike? That was a racially motivated assault against the company, yet ... crickets.

TB: *Nike has made a strategic decision to endorse athletes (Kaepernick, as well as others such as LeBron James, Megan Rapinoe and Serena Williams) who either overtly or covertly challenge this nation's traditional ideals rooted in whiteness, Christianity and masculinity. In 2020 there are generational differences in attitudes when it comes to race, gender and sexual orientation. Furthermore, it is projected that people of colour will be the majority in the United States by 2042. In what ways do the nation's demographic changes influence corporate decisions such as Nike's endorsements?*

SW: Today the demographic changes don't alter anything because everyone with Nike has been with Nike, despite all we've heard about the internal plight of their employees. Not to take away from Colin Kaepernick at all, but he was signed to Nike long before any controversy started. So, with him being a leading voice in the movement for justice, it wasn't a stretch for Nike to make ads for his cause. In my opinion, it was convenient. Change must come internally at Nike and all other sneaker and fashion brands. We've seen through the trickery of flashy advertising. They all need an internal policy checker on staff every day.

TB: *Nike attempts to understand its customer base and seeks customers from all over the world. Perhaps this strategy is due to diversity at the decision-making table. As a sneaker expert and consultant, what advice would you give to people seeking to break into the sneaker business or fashion industry?*

SW: Nike does not have it all figured out. They are not even close to being a standard for what an ideal diversity and inclusion model should be. With that said, anyone who wants to join this industry – which I enjoy being a part of – should do three things. First, know where your personal skills can place you. No one needs to obtain new skills to work in the sneaker industry. Transferable skills can get you there. Second, build your network early. Third, do detailed research on any companies you think that you'd like to work for. See where they stand when it comes to representing their employees outside of work. Find out how they connect with communities.

TB: *Finally, what does it mean to you as a sneaker expert to witness professional athletes (many of whom are contracted with major shoe companies) fashion their sneakers with messages in support of the Black Lives Matter movement?*

SW: To be honest, it only served as an advertisement for the work that *still* needs to be done. Think about how many more cases of injustice and brutality have surfaced since the George Floyd case and you realize really quickly that 'tangible' results are what we need. Not an advertisement for work still undone. We need systems dismantled and rules changed. And think about this, now that the NBA/WNBA seasons are both over, we don't see those athletes and their sneakers anymore, yet the dangers we face still exist.

I love sneakers, but I also know what it feels like to be chased by angry white mobs through sections of Brooklyn, where I 'didn't belong' according to those racist mobs. So, sneaker messages just don't mean that much to me.

TB: As a follow up, what about the general public (who are not professional athletes with lucrative shoes deals) who chose to fashion their sneakers with messages in support of the Black Lives Matter movement?

SW: For people in general, it's cool if they use their shoes the same way as the athletes did, but I want to see them on people's feet as they march in protests or when they go vote. That is some powerful storytelling to me!

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