Nike and the Pigmentation Paradox: African American Representation in Popular Culture from ‘Sambo’ to ‘Air Jordan’

by

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ABSTRACT

NIKE AND THE PIGMENTATION PARADOX: AFRICAN AMERICAN REPRESENTATION IN POPULAR CULTURE FROM ‘SAMBO’ TO ‘AIR JORDAN’

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Martin Luther King Jr. once remarked: “The economic highway to power has few entry lanes for Negroes.” This thesis investigates this limited-access highway in the context of American culture by analyzing the merger of sports celebrity branding and racial liberalism through a case study of Nike and the Air Jordan brand. As a spokesman for Nike, Michael Jordan was understood as both a symbol of “racial transcendence” and a figure of “racial displacement.” This dual identity spurred an important sociological debate concerning institutional racism in American society by unveiling the paradoxical narrative that governed discourse about black celebrities and, particularly, black athletes. Making use of archival research from the University of Oregon’s Special Collections Department, this study sheds light on the “Nike perspective” in furnishing an athletic meritocracy within a racially integrated community of consumers. Positioning this study within the field of African American cultural history, this thesis also interrogates representations of black culture and identity in advertising to illuminate the barriers to representational racial equality in the twentieth-century United States. Sports advertising offered up individual black success stories like Air Jordan and invited a mass of disenfranchised African Americans to buy into symbolic sites of transcendence while simultaneously denying the institutional barriers that kept the vast majority of young blacks from ever being, “Like Mike.”
The case study of Nike and Air Jordan will further the emerging academic debate concerning racial liberalism in the US by charting its limits within the supposedly “color blind” cultural space of capitalism.
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Thesis Introduction and Literature Review

Introduction of Topic:

In 1996, the widely acclaimed African American academic Cornel West scathingly argued, “Black subordination constitutes the necessary conditions for the flourishing of American democracy, the tragic prerequisite for America itself.”¹ West identified a fundamental and troubling paradox that seems unique to the development of American democracy; the democratic ideals of America, indeed, the very ‘American dream’ itself, are predicated on the continued subordination of the nation’s black population. In American cultural history, the subordination of blacks has taken numerous forms, seemingly reconstructed with every ‘advance’ in civil and political freedoms. For African Americans of the twentieth century, especially males, advertising and sports represented two of the most transformative vehicles of representation and, somewhat paradoxically, unremitting subordination.² This thesis charts the history of African American representations in advertising and African American participation in US sport as part of the broader struggle for equality during the post civil rights when ‘racial liberalism’ came to inform sports celebrity branding and fandom.

‘Racial liberalism,’ as explained by historian Karen Ferguson and employed herein, was the postwar period in which liberal whites hoped to end racial disunity by promoting African American successes as evidence of the end of racialization in the US. Thus, the postwar narrative of black power and identity developed within a larger American context that was shaped largely by the imperatives of elite white power in an effort to “reforge a social consensus on race,” that

ignored the institutional barriers still restricting the successes of the broader black community. As a pervasive and persuasive form of communication in American culture, advertising presents scholars with numerous clues in unpacking the complexities of ‘American democracy’ in the twentieth century. For African Americans, advertising represented a ubiquitous cultural form through which a nuanced and racist understanding of “blackness” was presented to a national viewing audience. Sports were an equally important vehicle of American popular culture and often offered blacks a parallel story of marginalization.

Sports and advertising converged during the postwar era in an ever-growing industry known as sports celebrity branding, which, by the 1980s, seemed to offer black Americans an avenue for progressive representation by way of black celebrities who served as spokespeople for important brands and products. The realm of commercial endorsement worked in concert with athletic excellence to portray sport as one of the most democratic vehicles of social mobility. Yet, this romanticized portrayal of sport as society’s great equalizer reflects the mythologized and idealized vision of American sport more than its tangible social or cultural reality. Moreover, during the 1980s, this idealistic narrative of sport actually served to undermine American democracy through an ignorance of the institutional barriers still preventing upward social mobility for the majority of blacks.

The mythologized vision of sport as understood in the context of postwar racial liberalism and presented to millions of Americans is embodied in the advertising history of NIKE, Inc. and their relationship with an African American athlete named Michael Jordan.

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5 ‘NIKE, Inc.’ is the company’s preferred use of Nike when referring to the company, and “Nike” is the company’s preferred use when referring to the brand. Since this thesis seeks to tell a story about the creation of the Nike brand, ‘Nike’ will be used in place of NIKE, Inc., for the majority of in-text references to the company.
Through the Air Jordan brand, Jordan transcended his identity as a black male while paradoxically serving as a racialized token of black success and the American dream’s inclusion of racial difference. This thesis sets out to answer the questions that underlie this principal contradiction in modern American culture: What historically grounded racist codes and stereotypes about blacks appeared in American advertising during the twentieth century? How were these stereotypes understood and navigated by black and white audiences in a society that increasingly defined personality through consumption? To what extent did black and white Americans actively seek to use consumption to define their individual and communal identities? What is the myth of sport in the context of racial integration and how has this myth been exploited in popular culture and the media? What does the treatment of African American athletes throughout the twentieth century tell us about the broader social climate in which they performed? When black athletes were used in advertising, what sorts of products did they endorse and what image of “blackness” were the advertisers trying to present? How did Nike furnish and promote an idealized democratic cultural space in which black Americans could both belong and become representative figures of individuality? What made Nike’s partnership with Jordan so groundbreaking in the world of apparel marketing and how did this influence the broader discourse about race in American society? What were the limits to the ideal of racial liberalism in the context of sport and how were these limits negotiated and understood within popular culture and advertising?

Ultimately, the answers to these questions reveals a complex and nuanced system of racism that continues to govern ways of thinking about “blackness” in American popular culture. Understanding how scholars have explained and disagreed over America’s transition into an age of mass consumption while struggling with race is crucial to understanding the Jordan paradox.
This study hopes to further the academic debate about consumerism and identity formations through an analysis of African American representations in advertising and to understand how racial liberalism manifested in sports celebrity and apparel branding during the closing decades of the twentieth century. The racist depictions of the black identity in popular culture informed white and black attitudes about race well into the twentieth century. Black Americans drew important connections between citizenship and consumption, and advertisements were held as consequential clues for communicating identity. Nike was born into the baby boom generation and branded itself as the patron of the collective ideology of anti-authoritarianism and self-empowerment, and, in so doing, created a racially integrated consumption community not defined by traditional cultural fault lines but by a shared ideal of sport. Nonetheless, there were limits to racial equality that capitalism could do little to overcome and institutional racism and structural barriers still prevented absolute racial integration for the majority of black Americans. In fact, this manifestation of racial liberalism in sports and advertising served only to stigmatize African American males for lacking the personal resolve and morality required to achieve in a “colorblind” American society. In this cultural space, Nike created the Air Jordan brand, wherein Michael Jordan seemed to somehow transcend his racial identity while simultaneously celebrating and exploiting his distinctly black style. Jordan’s blackness was sold to white Americans as an exhilarating yet non-threatening encounter with the ‘Other.’ As bell hooks put it in 1992, within commodity culture, “ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is contemporary mainstream white culture.”6 This peculiar form of cultural appropriation represents the pigmentation paradox of black celebrity in the modern consumer society.

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Literature Review:

American social commentators began recognizing and discussing the significance of consumption around the dawn of the twentieth century. The most well known of these turn of the century texts is Thorstein Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Veblen is often called the founding father of the study of person-object relations and argued that elite Americans defined themselves in relation to the members of society they perceived to be inferior through conspicuous or ostentatious displays of consumption. In a burgeoning consumer society, elite Americans feared a loss of their traditional status and privilege and took to the practice of what Veblen famously coined “Conspicuous Consumption.”

During the early twentieth century, a host of literature emerged both celebrating and criticizing the increasingly accessible culture of consumption. Advertising, as a pronounced and potentially persuasive element of this culture, surfaced as a subject of increased attention. Not surprisingly, the primary thrust of this increased attention came from advertising executives interested in furthering their social influence and improving their profession’s reputation. These authors focused solely on understanding white consumers, and their theories were part of a consensus history of the early twentieth century that reflected contemporary advertising and political theory and ignored difference and conflict in American life. Through the willful neglect of black consumers and black cultural symbols, advertising seems to have intentionally perpetuated a system of repression that defined blacks as a monolithic mass of economically, intellectually, and culturally inferior consumers with little spending power or cultural influence.

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The early body of literature concerning consumption and advertising argued that spending was intimately connected to personal identity and a distinctly American practice tied to citizenship and democracy from which blacks and various minorities were willfully ignored and excluded by the white majority.

The 1929 crash of the US stock market and the Great Depression prompted heightened critical debate and increased impartial intellectual inquiry of advertising as an institution. Writing in 1939, economic historian Ralph M. Hower urged Americans to more closely consider the role advertising played in modern life; “The average man,” stipulated Hower, “does not realize the extent to which advertising has permeated and modified his whole life.” 9 Hower was among the first academics concerned with what is now called “consumer agency,” initiating an important historiographical debate by urging American intellectuals to examine whether citizens had a choice to participate in a consumer society that seemed to offer opportunity for self-expression and self-improvement but also imposed new expectations on individuality.

Prompted by an era of unprecedented American abundance in the aftermath of WWII, advertising became a subject of more meaningful academic debate. In 1954, historian David Potter urged that advertising was “one of the limited groups of institutions which exercise social control,” and challenged academics to recognize it as an institution of substantial public influence. 10 Vance Packard’s widely read 1958 criticism of the advertising industry, The Hidden Persuaders, warned Americans that they were being manipulated and becoming creatures of conditioned reflex rather than of rational thought. 11 Similarly, in The Affluent Society, economist John Kenneth Galbraith condemned advertising for its irreconcilability with the notion of

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independently determined desires because its central function was the creation of aspirations that previously did not exist.\textsuperscript{12} In 1967, Guy Debord, an intellectual of the determinately anti-capitalist ‘Situationist’ movement, condemned the entire enterprise of American consumerism as fraudulent for driving unnecessary wants and consumption.\textsuperscript{13} Considered in their entirety, these highly critical examinations of consumerism enlightened Americans to the understated structures of power within the postwar era of economic abundance.

These criticisms were part of the broad academic movement towards Marxism after WWII. For Karl Marx, the “fetishism of commodities,” which consists of seeing an inherent value within a good when in fact the value is produced by humans, served as a fundamental criticism of capitalism. Marx begins the chapter on the fetishism of commodities by stating: “A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.”\textsuperscript{14}

Marx, widely regarded as the most advanced and thought-provoking analyst of capitalism, understood the important correlation between goods and social relations in capitalist societies. Marx started with the commodity because he thought that if one can understand how the commodity was produced, distributed, exchanged and consumed, they could unravel the whole system, because objectified in the commodity are the social relations of its production.

Advertising is the most significant communicator of the symbolic meaning of commodities, and as such, became a favorite target of late twentieth century Marxist intellectuals.

The Marxist critique of advertising, which picked up on the intellectual current of Packard and Gailbraith, argued for the stupefying effects of mass advertising and the resulting

retardation of social reforms. The Harvard University economist Theodore Levitt argued: "Wherever we turn, advertising will be forcibly thrust on us in an intrusive orgy of abrasive sound and sight, all to induce us to do something we might not ordinarily do." Stuart Ewen contributed to this discussion in his highly critical evaluation of advertising, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*, arguing that advertising served to create a dependable mass of consumers by playing upon the fears and frustrations evoked by modern society, “offering mass produced visions of individualism by which people could extricate themselves from the masses.” Although the Marxist intellectuals perceptively furthered America’s understanding of commodity fetishism, they were slightly heavy handed in their analyses of consumption because they ignore or minimize the role of human agency and present consumers as helpless against the forces of advertising. The Marxist critiques overlook the important process of meaning transfer that takes place through consumers’ interaction with, and display of, marketed goods. This omission seems to be particularly inappropriate when writing about a visible minority because consumption and product display were often used to communicate ideas about ethnicity and identity in a repressive and restrictive cultural system.

In the closing few decades of the twentieth century, scholars from a variety of disciplines turned against such pessimistic appraisals of consumers as credulous and helpless and began investigating consumer goods as sites of meaningful cultural exchange. Anthropologist Grant McCracken has demonstrated that “the study of the relationship between consumer goods and

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social change will contribute to a long neglected inquiry into the full structural complexity of the North American social system.” Similarly, Lawrence Glickman suggested, “the study of consumption has become a framing device for many approaches to, and all areas of, American history.” Limited literature did show that advertising and marketing seemed ephemeral yet was so ubiquitous that it held extraordinary influence on people of all backgrounds. Nevertheless, McCracken and Glickman posed more of a challenge to be taken up by future academics than they did solutions to contemporary social disunity.

A few historians have discussed the history of advertising and its cultural influence with a more open mind. One of the first historians to approach advertising through the lens of culture was Michael Schudson in his 1984 monograph *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion*. Schudson argued that advertising was the most accessible form of popular culture and likened American advertising to Socialist realist art because it was a pervasive symbolic system, which served to typify and simplify the American experience rather than mirror its reality. Similarly, author and historian Roland Marchand approached advertising from a cultural lens in his 1986 monograph, *Advertising the American Dream*, to demonstrate how advertising both reflected and formed America’s consumer ethos: “Day by day, a picture of our time is recorded completely and vividly in advertising.” Marchand and Schudson share an emphasis on advertising’s propensity to distort reality through the presentation of idealized visions of American life that enhanced

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certain images while distorting or ignoring more challenging realities. Although Schudson and Marchand do briefly note the lack of representation for African Americans in advertising, they do not discuss the broader political and psychological impacts of black representation, or, the lack there of, on the African American community.

As America selectively freed itself from the baggage and internal anxieties of the Cold War, advertising and consumerism became the subjects of more diversified historical enquiry that engaged the challenge put forward by McCracken and Glickman a decade earlier. Gradually, the overlapping fields of advertising and consumer studies moved beyond the Marxist perspective that defined the analyses of the 1970s and much of the 1980s. Canadian historian Catherine Carstairs has demonstrated how during the 1980s, Roots Canada was part of a revolution in marketing in which corporations increasingly branded themselves based on idealized visions of lifestyle and nationalism. Much to the same effect, Nike branded itself during the 1970s and 1980s as the patron of a lifestyle embodied by the ideal of self-empowerment through athletics. In 1998, cultural historian Thomas Frank argued that advertisers were central to defining ‘hip’ in the consumer society, and that “hip is the cultural life-blood of the consumer society,” making advertisers central to the entire range of activities bound up in the consumption of marketed commodities. In 2002, journalist Leon Wynter analyzed the intersection of popular culture and advertising in the context of American race relations and suggested that commercial culture promoted positive racial progress by responding to minority

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22 Schudson terms this process “Capitalist Realism,” wherein the illustrations in American advertising portray the ideals and aspirations of the system more accurately than its reality. Marchand, meanwhile, calls advertising the “Zerrspiegel” or distorting mirror that enhances certain images at the intentional neglect of reality.

23 Catherine Carstairs, “Roots Nationalism: Branding English Canada Cool in the 1980s and 1990s,” *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 39, no. 77 (May, 2006): 235-255. Catherine Carstairs has generously agreed to lend her expertise in this field to furthering the study at present as a member of the advisory committee for this thesis. The author is much indebted to Carstairs for her guidance and expertise.

consumer demands in an era of increased racial liberalization.\textsuperscript{25}

Recent scholarship has begun to explore the particular relationship between consumerism and African Americans’ struggle for civil rights and equality. This body of scholarship, championed by historian Lizabeth Cohen in her expansive 2003 study, \textit{A Consumer’s Republic}, convincingly argues that consumerism and the struggle for civil rights were inextricably linked because African Americans understood equal access to the sites of consumption to be a right of all citizens.\textsuperscript{26} While these studies certainly filled the historical void of analyses of racialization and the activities of consumerism, they invariably seem to paint in broad strokes, shedding little detail on the particulars of the process through which some carefully selected blacks became representative figures in America’s consumer marketplace.

The particular subject of African Americans in advertising has been addressed most successfully by two historians. In \textit{Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus}, Marilyn Kern-Foxworth charts the pejorative use of African American figures in advertisements and on product labels between Emancipation and WWII.\textsuperscript{27} Meanwhile, in \textit{Madison Avenue and the Color Line}, Jason Chambers tackles the challenges faced by African Americans within the advertising industry precisely as it was emerging as an institution of tangible social control during the first half of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{28} Collectively, these sources illustrate that over the course of the twentieth century, advertisements gradually moved away from overt racist stereotypes that countered black

\textsuperscript{27} Marilyn Kern-Foxworth \textit{Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus: Blacks in Advertising, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow} (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994).
citizenship, and, by the 1960s, marketing experts began cultivating black consumer markets with targeted advertising that spoke to African American aspirations.

While academic approaches to consumerism and advertising certainly inform an important part of the historiographical base of this study, they are only one pane in a much larger window. Studies interrogating racial identity politics and historical analyses of African American culture and representation also form a significant body of scholarship that serves to contextualize many of the themes explored in this thesis. The many scholars who have looked broadly at African American expressive culture have largely ignored advertising because, quite simply, advertising ignored black culture. Instead, these scholars have focused on specific socio-cultural movements like jazz, religion, sports, fashion, and more recently, hip hop and “street” culture, which provide invaluable insight on the varied expressions of the black identity in American popular culture. Nevertheless, in the milieu of African American cultural history, advertising offers a hitherto underexplored site of identity formation and racial identity politics.

The historiography of sport also provides important context to the present study through the growing body of scholarly work interrogating sports in the context of American race relations. The majority of published sources on the history of sport pay particular attention to individual African American achievers or specific sports and their impacts on the broader African American community. These sources collectively demonstrate that black sport and

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individual African American athletes were a major source of pride for the black community who celebrated in their victories as if they were victories for the entire race. Nonetheless, the majority of this body of literature seems blinded by the myth of racial integration through sport and fails to problematize the role sports plays in influencing the aspiration of African American youths at the detriment of more practical educational or occupation pursuits. In fact, sports so consumed the attention of young African American males that some 55% of black teens surveyed by *Sports Illustrated* in 1997 believed they had the talent required to make the NBA. As we shall soon discover, this self-confidence actually negatively influenced the black community in a variety of ways.

Recently, some academic approaches to sport have broadened to interrogate the nuances of the cultural significance of sports as an expression of black communal identity. One of the most fascinating and dutifully researched works from this body is Gena Caponi-Tabery’s 2008 monograph, *Jump for Joy: Jazz, Basketball and Black Culture in 1930s America*, which sheds light on the significance of basketball, boxing, and various black athletes as an extension of the rhythmic music of jazz in the formation of African American identities. Caponi-Tabery alerts us to the value in looking beyond the star athletes and famous stories to ask about the effect of sport on black communities and cultural expressions. This study closely mirrors that approach in seeing sport as a complex aspect of African American expressive culture.

Nevertheless, during the tumultuous 1960s, a narrative that placed sport as a mythologized site of token racial progress without broader political implications for the black
community as a whole emerged and challenged what John Hoberman has appropriately termed “the integrationist romance with sport.”\(^{33}\) Harry Edwards, the renowned black sociologist and relentless crusader for civil rights, initiated this narrative during the 1960s as he worked alongside black athletes to organize the Olympic Project for Human Rights. Edwards asked black Americans to be critical of the deeply engrained belief that sports served as the great equalizer in society and that athletic success would lead to racial acceptance and freedom of opportunities.\(^{34}\)

The oft-quoted sports journalist Jack Olsen added to this discussion in 1968 with a special report for *Sports Illustrated* entitled “The Black Athlete: A Shameful Story.” Olsen argued, rather matter-of-factly, that while black Americans “tended to regard individual achievements as progress for the race as a whole,” white Americans compartmentalized their feelings towards black athletic performance and avoided connecting those successes to the broader black community.\(^{35}\) According to Olsen, sports are not an idealized site of interracial cultural exchange, but rather, a system of hegemony that has “helped perpetuate an oppressive system.”\(^{36}\)

This narrative remained largely peripheral until the debate regarded sports and racial integration in the US reemerged during the tumultuous late 1980s and 1990s. Volatile social events like the Los Angeles riots and the O.J. Simpson murder trial seemed to be evidence that many black and white Americans still viewed each other across a hostile divide.\(^{37}\) Such an evident racial divide in the post civil rights US prompted historians and sociologists to critically examine sports as a source of, rather than a solution to, America’s racial divide. Historian John Hoberman championed this field in his expansive 1998 text, *Darwin’s Athletes*, in which he

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36 Ibid.
effectively argues, “The presence of large numbers of black athletes in the major sports appears to have persuaded almost everyone that the process of integration has been a success,” granting white Americans a sense of closure Hoberman suggests is merely an illusion. In much the same vein, sports columnist William C. Rhoden argued that black successes in sport have been rejected or categorized in ways that reinforces the balance of power that has existed since slavery, “one in which the bulk of the rewards of black talent and labor are distributed to and serve to perpetuate white power.” American mass media, Hoberman, Rhoden, and a litany of other scholars argue, has long been engaged in the relentless promotion of individual success stories of black athletes that systematically evade all the deep conflicts between blacks and whites. This analysis of sport will be applied to the Michael Jordan phenomenon to demonstrate the limits of racial liberalism within the context of sports and advertising.

As America’s understanding of sports and racial divisions intensified during the 1980s and 1990s, there also emerged a distinguished body of scholarly work interrogating the “crisis of black masculinity” in the context of popular culture. The crisis of black masculinity evolved out of what sociologist Robert Staples identified in 1982 as the economic and racial subordination of blacks that excluded them from “legitimate” means to attain and prove their manhood. A decade later, Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson argued: “The humiliating double bind of having to prove manhood while being denied access to the legitimate tools with which to do so

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38 Hoberman, “Darwin’s Athletes,” 29.
creates emotional drudgery for black males.” During the 1990s, Cornel West argued that black males lived in a constant but misunderstood “existential angst,” derived from “the lived experience of ontological wounds and emotional scars inflicted by white supremacist beliefs and images permeating US society and culture.” More recently, the crisis of black masculinity was discussed by historian Michelle Alexander in her much acclaimed critique of America’s modern racial caste system, The New Jim Crow. Alexander argues that mass incarceration is, metaphorically, the new Jim Crow because in the modern era of “colorblindness,” it is “no longer permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion or social contempt.” Alternatively, argues Alexander, whites have used the criminal justice system and mass incarceration to control black males, reifying them as deviant and threatening, or “bad blacks,” and maintaining a system of white supremacy. This thesis employs this body of distinguished intellectuals as evidence of the challenges faced by black males in the post civil rights US.

Finally, this study relies heavily on corporate histories and business-oriented academic analyses of consumerism. Most business history or marketing studies of consumerism in the postwar US discuss the significance of Nike and their “cultural branding” initiatives in the context of consumer identities. Cultural branding can be understood as a process through which corporate entities both employ and create broader cultural currents to help establish a brand or identity in a crowded consumer marketplace. Also under this umbrella are select corporate

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histories of Nike and a few biographies of Nike’s founding fathers—Phil Knight and Bill Bowerman.\textsuperscript{46} Donald Katz’s 1994 book, \textit{Just Do It}, represents the most impartial and dutifully researched history of Nike. Nonetheless, Katz overlooks the importance of race within Nike’s cultural community of consumers. Other important sources on Nike include various inside accounts from many of the company’s earliest executives.\textsuperscript{47} Collectively, these sources argue for the business and marketing triumphs of Nike but do not problematize Nike’s success by addressing questions of exploitation in the company’s production or marketing initiatives.

\textbf{Outline of Arguments and Summary of Primary Sources}

This thesis interrogates the triangular relationship between racial identity politics, advertising, and sports through an in depth analysis of Nike’s creation and promotion of the Air Jordan brand when baby-boom consumers dominated spending between 1984 and 1996. In order to understand the struggle between representations in advertising and post civil rights race relations, we must first turn our attention to the decades that immediately followed the Emancipation proclamation of 1863 when newly freed African Americans struggled to formulate individual and communal identities in a society dominated by a racist white majority. During this era, advertising represented a structured institutional barrier through which an anxious white majority could disseminate demeaning stereotypes about black culture and identity. Consumer society, which consists of advertising, goods, and consumers themselves, offered a space for the continued exploitation and denigration of black Americans in a purportedly egalitarian society.

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Advertising, in particular, offered a ubiquitous yet innocuous platform for the dissemination of demeaning stereotypes and the reinforcement of established social roles. After the Second World War, however, as African Americans were increasingly woven into America’s middle-class, consumer society offered an avenue for fighting discrimination and presenting an alternative vision of blackness through which generations of African Americans could develop a positive self-concept.

Chapter One charts this process using a variety of primary sources like trade cards, early advertising, literature, and film, to illustrate the slow curve of progress in African American representations in popular culture and how black and white communities responded to broad social and cultural movements through the production and consumption of advertising. In this vein, the writings and teachings of black intellectual leaders of the early twentieth century, like Frantz Fanon, W.E.B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, and James Weldon Johnson, provide an analysis of how the African American community addressed and approached the challenges associated with their representation in popular culture. Particularly in the years when Nike was founded, this study draws from special interest publications like *Ebony, Journal of Marketing Research, and Journalism and Mass Communications Quarterly* to elucidate the advertising industry’s debate over the limited interest in black consumers. Finally, this chapter will call attention to contemporary newspaper articles, with a special emphasis on the “Letters to the Editor” section of the *New York Times*, which provide an approximate sense of the general public climate regarding race and advertising while also clarifying the emotional and psychological effects of systematic racial segregation at key historical moments.

Sports, much like advertising and consumer society, often offered a racist white majority a platform to maintain racial segregation and justify the maintenance of white superiority. At the
same time, sports have been so intimately bound to the American psyche that they offered blacks an underscored but significant avenue to penetrate American culture in ways that seemed apolitical. Moreover, the struggle for racial integration in segregated sports mirrored emerging debates over race relations and profoundly influenced Americans’ opinions of racial difference. Precisely as American professional sports were in the process of integrating, consumerism offered space to form cultural communities based around spending and product display that became intimately bound within Americans’ processes of self-actualization and communal identification. Through a dedication to the idea of authenticity defined by a democratic ideal of sport, Nike created a community of consumers based more on attitude than on socio-economic or racial identifications. In so doing, Nike created an important space for redefining blackness through the presentation of African American athletes as ideals of modern individuality and personhood.

Chapter Two investigates this process in greater detail using archival research into Nike’s corporate history. Personal correspondences between many of Nike’s earliest employees, transcripts of business meetings, corporate reports and memorandums, newspaper clippings, and many of Nike’s earliest sketches and advertisements, are all housed in the Bill Bowerman Papers at the University of Oregon’s Special Collections and University Archives. This study employs these records to tell Nike’s story as a company whose managers sought to be profitable by presenting their brand as socially progressive. In an effort to contextualize the significance of Nike’s corporate story, this study makes use of newspaper articles, special interest magazines like Runner’s World and Sports Illustrated, and trade publications like Adweek to paint a broader picture of the contemporary climate of consumerism and apparel marketing. Inside accounts from some of Nike’s earliest employees, like Geoff Hollister, Laurie Becklund, and the wife of
Nike’s top advertising executive J.B. Strasser, also explains the development of the Nike point of view.48

Chapter Three shows how Nike furnished black sports stars into American sports stars through an analysis of Michael Jordan as a representative figure in the American national body politic. Beginning in 1984, Nike promoted Jordan as an exemplary athlete and an ideal of modern masculinity and personal excellence, which, through the reach of their cultural influence, united black and white Americans in a fan-based consumption community. Nevertheless, Jordan seemed to exist in a promotional space in which his blackness was both acknowledged and exploited yet shrewdly severed from his identity. This peculiar contradiction problematizes both the integrationist romance with sport and the broader narrative of post-1960s social equality. Jordan’s “blackness” in the promotional context has been the subject of a meaningful sociological debate regarding the use of black celebrity in advertising and Nike’s relationship with Jordan constitutes a seamless lens through which historians can construct a more complete picture of American racial relations in an intensely consumer-oriented and media saturated age.

As such, the partnership between Nike and Jordan and the broader social importance of the Air Jordan brand in the world of sports marketing and race relations is the subject of Chapter Three. This chapter makes use of a variety of challenging but insightful historical sources like contemporary television advertising, which, due to its recent emergence in the field of historical inquiry, has yet to be catalogued or vetted for accuracy in traditional archives. The majority of the popular commercial advertisements from the 1980s and 1990s are nonetheless available online through media hosting sites like YouTube and Vimeo, and, using great care to ensure that these commercials have remained in their original unedited form, they provide the foundation of

48 Phil Knight’s memoir, entitled Shoe Dog, is due for release April 26, 2016, and so, could not be incorporated into the study at present.
the chapter’s analysis. Inside accounts of Nike and related archival sources once again provide context and present the corporate perspective on the Air Jordan phenomenon. Alongside contemporary advertising, many of the special interest publications used in the first two chapters are revisited to show the changing climate of sports and sports marketing. Because this chapter deals exclusively with the modern era of sports marketing, *Sports Illustrated* is a particularly useful source of information and advertising samples and reveals how Jordan’s brand was at once transcendent of race and an expression of black culture.49

Martin Luther King Jr. once remarked: “The economic highway to power has few entry lanes for Negroes.”50 This thesis investigates the limited-access highway of American culture through an analysis of the merger of sports celebrity branding and racial liberalism in the 1980s. In the process, this study will shed light on one of the many manifestations of entrenched institutional racism in American society by exposing the paradox that continues to govern discourses about black celebrities and, particularly, black athletes. This study begins with an examination of the representation of African Americans in advertising from the highly racialized ‘Sambo’ trope to their more realistic, but still limited, representations in popular culture during the postwar era of consumption. The struggle for control of black representation in popular culture was an element within the broader post-WWII trend towards empowering black consumers, which played a marked role in the 1960s struggle for Civil Rights, and post-1960s black liberation movement. Nike was born into the baby boom generation as a self-consciously progressive, iconoclastic company, whose managers sought to build a brand based on the ideal of self-empowerment through athletics. Nike branded itself as the patron of shared ideals and built

49 Much to my appreciation, *Sports Illustrated* offers one of the most user-friendly and complete free digital archives of any major American magazine. Visit si.com/vault to digitally access any article, cover, or complete issue. Many of the newer articles and advertisements were accessed in printed form through a personal collection generously contributed to my intellectual curiosity by my Grandfather, Phil McVittie.

an integrated consumption community in which black and white Americans could share equally. During the mid-1980s, Nike developed a brand around an individual African American athlete and presented this brand to its integrated consumption community as an ideal of modern masculinity. The partnership between Nike and Michael Jordan was truly innovative and spurred a significant sociological debate about the role of race in celebrity sports branding. Yet, the story of the Air Jordan brand also demonstrates the hollow nature of racial liberalism in the post-civil rights US because it offered one success story while ignoring or failing to address the institutional racism that persisted throughout much of the larger society. This institutional racism was brought to national attention when a wave of inner-city violence broke out and hundreds of cases of sneaker theft, and even some of sneaker murder, came to represent the pinnacle of consumer exploitation. In a consumer society, identities and social relations are largely dependent on the purchase and display of consumer goods, and black inner-city youths were so desperate to “Be Like Mike,” that they were willing to kill each other for something as seemingly meaningless as a pair of sneakers. The case study of Nike and “Air Jordan” will further the emerging academic debate regarding racial liberalism in the US by charting its limits within a democratic consumption community. Indeed, Cornel West’s warning to Americans in 1996 still rings true: “We must either come to terms with race and hang together, or ignore it and hang separately.”

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Chapter 1: Constructing Blackness: Black Consumers and Popular Culture from Sambo to the Huxtables, 1863-1984

*The white man is sealed in his whiteness. The black man in his blackness. We shall seek to ascertain the directions of this dual narcissism and the motivations that inspire it.*

-- Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952)

“Reflecting Black”: The Creation and Representation of African American Identities in Popular Culture, 1863-1944

In a media saturated society, individual and communal identities are formed and negotiated through the consumption of the most convenient and ubiquitous sources of information, the media and popular culture. When studied in the context of the twentieth century struggle for racial equality, the representation of racial identities in popular culture provides valuable historical insight on the interwoven structural barriers to the social and cultural acceptance of blacks in American society. This chapter will contextualize racially integrated marketing of the later twentieth century by demonstrating the significant links black Americans drew between their citizenship, consumption, and mediated popular culture from Emancipation to the post civil rights era within the context of African American cultural history. It will be argued that through structural mechanisms like advertising, white cultural producers perpetuated stereotyped images of blacks that confirmed African Americans’ marginality as a cultural community well into the twentieth century. In representing African American culture for economic gain, many white cultural producers isolated blacks as a subcultural community and, in so doing, altered the way they were understood by white Americans and the way they understood themselves.

Significantly, the construction and understanding of racial identities in the nineteenth century US was not confined to academic or scientific discourse. Rather, through the performance and appropriation of racial identities, various cultural producers taught audiences...

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how to view race and suggested that they mediate racial identity on those terms in everyday life. In the decades that followed the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, newly freed African Americans struggled against a society dominated by a racist white majority. In their search for an identity that reflected and celebrated their newfound freedom as American citizens, blacks looked to popular culture to express their culture and to define themselves in relation to American ideals. The increasing proliferation of degrading images of blacks in successive new media helped transmit the ideas of black inferiority precisely as real blacks tried to claim the full privileges of citizenship in the post-slavery United States. This created a paradoxical dilemma that informed black Americans’ struggle for civil rights for much of the twentieth century: they were tasked with reconciling their ‘blackness’ with their ‘American’ citizenship, largely in the absence of representations of blacks as deserving of equality.

Of the many mediums used for the construction of racial identities, none were more ubiquitous and denigrating than blackface minstrelsy. As a popular form of white entertainment, blackface minstrelsy spanned from the antebellum era right up until the 1940s, reaching a pinnacle of cultural influence during the Reconstruction era. As a general rule, the “Stage Negro” of American minstrelsy, played by whites adorned in blackface, was calculated to give the impression that all blacks were “lazy, shiftless fellows, careless of the morrow.” As a matter of routine, the “Stage Negro” of American minstrelsy stepped beyond his social position and invariably bungled whatever task lay before him. This immensely popular motif represented a reappropriation of the African American struggle for freedom in the post-slavery urban United

As such, minstrelsy was a significant source of respite for anxious white audiences because it presented a non-threatening image of black life and culture that was at odds with a rapidly modernizing and urbanizing social landscape. Moreover, “blacking up was not simply joyous or decorative,” explained David Roediger in *The Wages of Whiteness*, it involved a “conscious declaration of whiteness and white supremacy.” Minstrelsy acted as an intermediary in the acceptance and transfer of pre-emancipation social roles and stereotypical images of subservient blacks into contemporary society. Blackface minstrelsy was ubiquitous in American popular culture and amounted to nearly a century of inurement to the uses of white supremacy. This theme reemerged during the second half of the twentieth century when white Americans again used popular cultural to construct a false but comforting narrative of American race relations.

In 1934, James Weldon Johnson, an intellectual leader of the struggle for racial equality during the first half of the twentieth century, bemoaned the longevity of racist stereotypes in popular culture: “it was from the minstrel show that millions of white Americans got their conception of Negro character,” and, “to the minstrel stage can be traced the difficulty which white America finds in taking the Negro seriously.” Johnson recognized the ongoing struggle between representation in popular culture and African Americans’ social and economic denigration and employed his genius to teach black Americans that racial difference was largely socially constructed and maintained through both defacto and dejure systems of white domination.

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Many intellectual leaders of the black community worried that African Americans were also internalizing the racist stereotypes in popular culture. W.E.B. Du Bois elegantly communicated this in his 1903 treatise on race-relations, *The Souls of Black Folk*: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”59 Du Bois was amongst the first academics to note that racist whites were responsible for the dissemination of ideas about black inferiority and identified a consequential struggle between African American race pride and the dominant public representations of their search for democratic equality. According to Du Bois, there existed a nuanced and contradictory narrative of the black struggle for equality in the post slavery United States that yielded a “double-consciousness” wherein ‘blackness’ was presented as being peculiarly at odds with ‘Americaness’: “One ever feels his two-ness- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”60 Du Bois felt that blacks needed to live a simulated existence wherein they altered their behavior depending on the racial composition of their audience, to live in two disparate social worlds, one composed of black realities the other of white fantasies. Intellectual leaders of the black community were increasingly troubled by the maintenance of this “double-consciousness” and saw it as a product of their representation in popular culture and worked dutifully to revivify the presentation of black culture through a positive appreciation of its difference.

Nonetheless, due to the ubiquity of institutional and ideological racism in American society, the struggle for positive representation in popular culture was continually adjusted as

60 Ibid.
successive new media emerged throughout the twentieth century and provided alternative spaces for maintaining black subordination. This meant that precisely as black Americans seemed to penetrate the fabric of American culture during the first few decades of the twentieth century, new, often more challenging barriers were erected between blacks and their goals of equality. In a 1935 essay entitled “Black Reconstruction in America,” W.E.B Du Bois sagaciously remarked: “The slave went free; stood for a brief moment in the sun, then moved back again toward slavery.” One of the primary cultural mediums through which this redenigration occurred was advertising wherein racist representation of black figures on product labels, trade cards, and various forms of print advertising recast blacks in pre-emancipation social roles. Marilyn Kern-Foxworth, an expert on advertising and mass-communication, has shown that racist overtones in advertising were largely informed by the stereotypical Negro of the nineteenth century minstrel stage in order to ensure that anachronistic racist images, like subservience, docility, and imprudence, were carefully transferred into contemporary society. As a mass-produced communicator of symbolic meaning and an important shaper of identity performance and creation in the consumer-society that emerged in the twentieth century, advertising provided a highly-visible platform for the maintenance of white superiority through the perpetuation of racist stereotypes. Advertising, trade cards, and product labels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century provided commonplace, highly visible, and graphic representations that reflected a country enamored with consumerism but fraught with class, religious, and racial prejudice.

During its infancy as an American institution, advertising seemed so trivial that it escaped

political debate. Yet, it quickly became so ubiquitous that it carried immense transformative
cultural power. The first large-scale use of images of blacks in advertising came with the
introduction of trade cards between 1870 and 1900.63 Trade cards, which were colorful and often
humorous, were distributed in stores as a means of advertising products before the days of
widespread magazine and newspaper circulation. Significantly, many of the images presented on
trade cards were designed to encourage people to collect and display them as souvenirs or
decorations. In this setting, they became ephemeral reflections of a society that commodified racial
prejudice. (Figure 1.1) Blacks were presented as intellectually and socially inferior to whites, lacking
the morality, resolve, and intelligence to match the aspirations of a rapidly modernizing white America.
During the 1880s and 1890s, for instance, the St. Louis Beef Canning Company and several Alden
Fruit Company trade cards treated blacks as “chicken-stealing, watermelon-eating brutes,” a
highly racialized motif that cast blacks as deviant and mischievous, a people who were to be
closely monitored and controlled.64

It is no coincidence that these early manifestations of blacks in advertising as lazy and
unenlightened coincided with a period in which American society witnessed a peak in lynching
and a formalization of segregation, defacto and dejure, through the Supreme Court’s “separate

but equal” clause in the case of “Plessy. V. Ferguson” (1896). In the case of Plessy V. Ferguson, the Supreme Court ruled:

A statute which implies merely a legal distinction between the white and colored races — a distinction which is founded in the color of the two races, and which must always exist so long as white men are distinguished from the other race by color — has no tendency to destroy the legal equality of the two races, or reestablish a state of involuntary servitude.  

Plessy V. Ferguson openly argued that whites were intellectually “distinguished” from other Americans and resulted in the systematic disenfranchisement, segregation, and exclusion of blacks from the national economy. Furthermore, the “separate but equal” narrative gave white Americans a fabricated sense of racial progress by shrewdly veiling racism through the legal recognition of “equality” which ironically served to confirm the political and economic inferiority of blacks. The fabricated narrative of racial progress informed the black struggle for democratic equality throughout the twentieth century by veiling the institutionalized and structural barriers that perpetually existed between blacks and the American dream.

Of the images transferred from slavery to modernity through advertising, the subservient southern “Mammy” ideal, preeminently personified in the figure of Aunt Jemima, was amongst the most widely accepted and pervasive racist symbols in America. Although much less ubiquitous, the ‘Mammy’ found its male equivalent in the ‘Sambo’ trope: a lazy, good humored, and subservient black who appeared in a variety of popular culture mediums. In advertising, Aunt Jemima and black ‘Sambos,’ like Rastus and Uncle Remus, were depicted as subservient, docile caretakers, which served to reinforce pre-Emancipation social roles. African Americans

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https://scholar.google.ca/scholar_case?case=16038751515555215717&q=163+US+537&hl=en&as_sdt=2006
67 As a product symbol for Quaker Oats, Aunt Jemima was based off a popular minstrel song of the same name and first appeared during the late nineteenth century.
were “subservient objects that served the cornucopia of products hawked in advertisements,” but, symbolically, “rarely subjects who used them.”

These images were all the more significant situated amidst an era that witnessed a shift in the socio-economic status of African Americans and the violent white backlash that accompanied such a transition. In consuming these images, both whites and blacks accepted the social codes inherent in the product labels as fact and integrated them into the fabric of their personality structures. Aunt Jemima was accepted into American culture because she helped assuage white social anxieties by offering an “artificial sense of stability and comfort that had once been provided by the black mammy during slavery.”

In the early consumer society, product labels and trade cards at first glance seemed frivolous yet were often politically powerful and culturally transformative influences due their ubiquity and familiarity.

In appropriating these racial stereotypes for economic profit, advertising confirmed African Americans’ economic disenfranchisement in much the same way that Jim Crow laws and violence confirmed their political disenfranchisement. As Shane and Graham White have admirably demonstrated, newly freed blacks were expected to shun any sign of assertiveness and even demonstrate their contentment in subservience, “under the racial system that had crystallized by the turn of the century, African Americans were required to dress, walk, comport themselves, and direct their gaze in a manner that registered uncomplaining subservience.” In other words, blacks were expected to replicate the ‘Mammy’ stereotype in their everyday existence and to mediate their relationships and identity around racist white advertising symbols.

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70 White and White, “Stylin’,” 154.
In 1890, the African American political activist Charles Waddell Chestnutt lamented the press’ trenchant desire for Negroes whose “chief virtues have been their dog-like fidelity to their old masters.”

Chestnutt articulated an important intellectual concern for black Americans; character types like Aunt Jemima attained a certain ‘realness’ and, as such, operated with a cultural and political currency powerful enough to downsize the richly complex identities of African Americans to domestic discursive positions. Mass-mediated forms of communication helped transfer Aunt Jemima’s racialized identity on to black Americans, which, in turn, reinforced the impoverished material conditions of black peoples in an increasingly consumer-oriented society. Speaking to a gathering of black Congregational Ministers in 1903, the African American Professor and mathematician Kelly Miller suggested that white cultural producers with “more craftiness than conscience” deliberately endeavored to “fix upon the Negro an evil reputation.” Miller believed that these cultural producers invoked the “implacable spirit of race hatred,” in an effort to keep “ignorant white people obedient to their will.” After African Americans were freed from slavery, they were bound by what Kern-Foxworth describes as “invisible chains,” forged and legitimated through the distorted images that white cultural producers projected about them.

As a result of increased racial integration on the streets of Northern cities, in the workplace, and in neighborhoods, many within an anxious white majority began to fear that black culture could not be suppressed through the widespread dissemination of demeaning stereotypes. In response to America’s changing social climate, advertising executives developed

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72 Ibid, 5.
74 Ibid
new motifs that further denigrated the African American cultural community. The most powerful of these turn of the century motifs was the common theme that African Americans were so disgusted with their plight that they wished to be white. Advertisers, especially those tasked with the selling of soap, claimed that their product had the power to “cleanse the black skin of Negroes” and transform them into what they assumed all blacks aspired to be, regular white American citizens. Interestingly, this narrative was reversed during the late twentieth century as blackness became something exciting and exotic for white Americans and, as such, was shrewdly exploited in advertising. However, during the early twentieth century, blackness was presented as something to be despised and shunned whereas whiteness was presented as the chief aspiration of America’s national character.

In one application of this popular advertising motif, an advertisement for Pears’ Soap in an 1899 issue of *Harper’s Weekly* proclaimed, “The first step towards lightening the White Man’s burden is through teaching the virtues of cleanliness.”

(Figure 1.2) The Pears’ Soap advertisement suggested that blacks lacked modern modes of hygiene and sophistication associated with a rapidly modernizing American landscape. Using an imperialistic narrative like ‘White Man’s burden’ in an effort to sell soap speaks to the historical depth of racism in American advertising. In perhaps the most overtly racist application of this advertising style, the Fairy Soap Company ran an advertisement in 1910 featuring a young, well-

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dressed white girl asking a young, impoverished black girl, “Why Doesn’t Your Mamma Wash You With Fairy Soap?” The nefarious implication in the Fairy Soap advertisement was that black children, and by extension black families, were dirty and in need of “transformation.” By picturing two children obviously divided by race and socio-economic status, the advertisement implied that white children were destined to privilege based on the simple “virtue” of their white skin. The theme of the soap advertisements was popular because it reaffirmed white privilege for a predominantly white viewership. Significantly, the representation of blacks in popular culture appears to have informed broader American attitudes. In a letter to the editor of the New York Times in 1907, a reader who identified himself only as ‘American Negro’ explained: “Surely, no black father or mother in America, loving their offspring, can feel anything but constant sorrow that said offspring are black,” proposing interracial marriage as a means for ending the crisis of black inferiority. This citizen wanted blacks to gradually shed their racialized identity to promote more complete acceptance in American society.

In The Oxford History of Popular Print Culture, Cary Nelson and Mike Chasar argue that the transformation from white to black in the soap advertisements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was, “not only voluntary but actively sought after and presented as a solution to the various problems of a racially divided world.” Such advertisements participated in the construction of ‘whiteness’ as a “transformative engine and authorizing voice of modernity and progress.” This was part of a process through which advertisers attempted to furnish a social aristocracy, largely informed by race, against which Americans might measure their own gains in

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80 Ibid.
status.81 This social aristocracy never entirely disappeared; it evolved to meet the constraints of a rapidly modernizing society as consumers of the postwar era began embracing a more inclusive view of consumption that saw diversity and individuality as desirable traits of American abundance.

This was extremely significant for black Americans during the early twentieth century, an era that witnessed a powerful reinvigoration of racial tensions and violence: lynching reached its peak between 1890 and 1930, the Ku Klux Klan reemerged virulently in 1915, and in 1919, the streets of Chicago erupted in violent racial riots as part of what historians have termed the “Red Summer.”82 Much of the increased violence and tension was precipitated by the treatment and representation of black Americans in the white-controlled popular culture apparatus. Scholars investigating the roots of the reinvigoration of racial tensions have placed particular significance and blame on D.W. Griffith’s 1915 film, The Birth of a Nation, which presented a violent and threatening image of black males in which interracial social interaction inevitably lead to crimes against white womanhood.83 Set amidst violent racial unrest, the representation of blacks in popular culture became, quite literally, a matter of life and death. White Americans were responsible for the bulk of the creation of American culture and, through mediums like advertising and film, strongly influenced the collective thoughts and actions of the white community.

81 Marchand, “Advertising the American Dream,” 194.
83 The Birth of a Nation was based off Thomas Dixon’s 1905 literary fiction The Clansman, in which interracial relationships were confined to black rape attempts on white women: “The next step downward and you enter the shadows of the unspoken terror- the grip of a black beast’s claws on a white girl’s throat!” From, Thomas Dixon, The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan (1905).
During the “roaring twenties,” American advertisers continued appeasing white anxieties by visually presenting an image of success in America that conspicuously excluded ethnic minorities. At the same time, black cultural and intellectual leaders were seeking alternative sources of community awareness and outlets for overt yet innocuous expressions of black organization and creativity. Many African Americans hoped to precipitate change by establishing a platform for the dissemination of the black cultural identity and sources of awareness of blacks’ individual worth free from the interference of white society. Between 1865 and 1900, over 1,200 black-owned newspapers were established, however, without adequate advertising support, virtually all disappeared within a decade of their founding.84 Thanks to the growth of black businesses during the early 1900s, however, black editors were successful in establishing a number of politically influential newspapers: Robert S. Abbott, for example, founded the Chicago Defender in 1905 and, by 1920, had a circulation of over 200,000, and Pittsburgh lawyer Robert Lee Vann started the Pittsburgh Courier in 1910, which reached a peak circulation of over 300,000.85

At the same time, black intellectuals and a small group of white allies looked to form organizations that could advocate for political change on behalf of black Americans. In 1909, W.E.B. Du Bois and other influential blacks founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples (NAACP) as an institution for publicly exposing and dismantling racial discrimination both defacto and de jure.86 In 1918, Marcus Garvey, who, perhaps more than anyone else embodied the movement towards increased racial affinity and solidarity, founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) with the expressed

85 Ibid.
86 Chambers, “Madison Avenue,” 20
goal of giving “Negroes everywhere a reborn feeling of collective pride and a new awareness of individual worth.” Garvey promoted the proliferation of black media as an avenue for the presentation of an alternative vision of blackness during the height of the Great Migration in American society. Garvey understood the importance of controlling representation and supported the founding of various black media outlets including his own aptly titled periodical, *The Voice of the Negro*, which had a national circulation of over 100,000. In 1922, Carter G. Woodson, a man known affectionately as “the father of black history,” published *The Negro in Our History*, an insightful treatise on the continued exploitation of blacks in the Americas. Woodson believed that the history of the black race could act as a foundation for the inoculation of race pride and could promote a collective knowledge that would allow blacks to participate more substantially in their country’s political and economic affairs. The efforts of black intellectual leaders like Garvey and Woodson were of monumental importance during the era of *Birth of a Nation* because they provided a space for discussions of the African American identity that countered racist discourse in popular culture and politics. Garvey and the UNIA were representative of the social and political atmosphere at the end of the Great Migration: as blacks were settling into their new occupational and residential roles they forged communal organizations to serve the black community long ignored or exploited by white politics and culture.

It was also during the 1920s and 1930s that African American intellectuals began to consider capitalism as a source of structural racism in American society. The Depression disproportionately affected African Americans and the intellectual leaders of the black

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community identified capitalism and consumerism as powerful forces of repression. For W.E.B. Du Bois, capitalism and racism were inextricably linked because the accumulation of wealth amongst the upper classes was necessitated by the enslavement and exploitation of the lower classes. In America’s consumer society, the white ruling class maintained dominion over blacks and poor whites through a series of racist paradoxes: each advance in white freedom was purchased by black enslavement, white affluence coexisted with black poverty, white state and corporate power was the product of black powerlessness, and income mobility for the few was rooted in income stasis for the many.  

As part of the movement towards establishing a black media apparatus, African Americans came to view advertising as a potential mechanism for cultural change in both the white and black communities. In the years before they were recognized in America’s mainstream popular culture, African American advertisers used black newspapers and periodicals as a platform to present and promote positive images of black life and black culture by circumventing the white advertising community. During this period, African Americans were increasingly developing a class-consciousness and a recognition of the various means through which their culture had been appropriated for white profit and entertainment and many actively worked to present an alternative vision of what it meant to be a black American. This led to the emergence of various expressions of what historians have termed a “black cultural renaissance” in predominantly black communities like Harlem during the 1920s as educated African Americans turned to cultural production as the base for future racial inclusion. The varied expressions of African American cultural forms like literature, music, graphic arts, theatre, and film taught

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blacks to celebrate their distinctiveness while exposing racial difference as a product of historical development and white fantasy.\textsuperscript{93} This cultural renaissance presented blacks with a solution to their paradoxical struggle for a racial identity and American citizenship. Before the excitement of the cultural renaissance swept contagiously through the black community, many black intellectuals worried that African Americans were skeptical of race pride because the education they received completely ignored or belittled their race’s contributions to society. “Race pride cannot be pumped into them artificially,” argued James Weldon Johnson, in 1934, “it must spring naturally from their knowledge of all that is best in racial history, and must rest upon a resulting faith in the strength and capacities of the race.”\textsuperscript{94}

According to Harold H. Kassarjian, a widely referenced expert on American consumer behaviors, up until the late 1940s, “the Negro and his servant-laborer role posed little threat to middle class white society or to the general advertiser concerned about the need-value systems of his public.”\textsuperscript{95} Many African Americans recognized the need to develop a base from which they could pressure the white advertising community to make use of a more normative definition of blackness. World War II laid the groundwork for a relative postwar boom in the black economy, which, as we shall see, helped pressure the advertising community to represent blacks in non-pejorative ways. Although racism was still prevalent across the US, many Americans emerged from the conflict acknowledging that the future would, to some degree, be driven by a flight from the tyranny of racial imperialism as embodied by Nazi Germany.\textsuperscript{96} It was during the postwar era that American racism evolved to take a more “enlightened” form, wherein a new

\textsuperscript{94} Johnson, “Negro Americans,” 46.
\textsuperscript{96} Wynter, “American Skin,” 81.
“colorblind” consensus on race was forged through the proliferation of images of blacks that were comfortably integrated in modern American society.

Aren’t All Dollars Worth the Same?: Black Consumers, Middle Class America, and the Media in the Postwar United States

In November 1945, John H. Johnson founded Ebony, the influential black lifestyle magazine with an editorial course modeled on the popular white magazine Life. Johnson believed black newspapers and periodicals of the prewar era focused too heavily on the negative issues facing black Americans, and, by contrast, positioned Ebony to provide richly-illustrated, uplifting stories of successful black Americans and their accomplishments. 

Shortly thereafter, full-page advertisements for Kotex and Chesterfield cigarettes appeared in the magazine, the first full-page color advertisements featuring black models to appear in a black publication. Johnson understood that brand name goods held a symbolic importance for black Americans of the immediate postwar era, and fashioned consumerism as a central concern within the broader struggle for Civil Rights. Johnson hoped to take control of black representation in advertising in an effort to empower his African American readership through positive visual reinforcement.

As historian Lizabeth Cohen has admirably demonstrated in her expansive 2003 text, A Consumer’s Republic, a firm connection was established between citizenship and consumption during the postwar era, which presented African Americans a new space for fighting racial discrimination. As we have seen, prior to WWII, blacks were generally perceived to be rural, low-wage workers with limited disposable incomes, and as such, were all but ignored by white businesses. Because of their apparent political and economic powerlessness, many white businesses believed they could denigrate African American culture and identity with impunity.

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97 Chambers, “Madison Avenue,” 41.
98 Ibid, 42.
and thereby maintain racial differentiation and white superiority. However, a significant shift was noted during the early 1940s as African American economic authority continued to rise. In the aptly titled 1943 essay, *New World A-Coming*, American author and journalist Roi Ottley identified a newly emergent class of African Americans who were economically prepared to take their place in America’s consumer society.\(^{101}\) Prompted by the growing awareness of African American purchasing power, American corporations looked to successfully promote their products to this burgeoning demographic of consumers, and, in so doing, offered blacks visual proof of their slowly increasing acceptance within American society. While the stereotypical depictions of blacks during the earlier twentieth century pointed to and justified discrimination, positive or merely accurate representation, it was theorized, would openly argue for blacks’ role as equal consumers and, by extension, equal citizens.\(^{102}\)

It is important in this context to recognize the links drawn by blacks between their consumer activities and other social goals as an expression of African American agency. As one scholar observed, “By voting with their dollars, blacks advocated for more positive representation in advertisements and for recognition of their involvement in the consumer society, and, by relation, their citizenship.”\(^{103}\) Consumption, as envisioned by African Americans of the postwar era, not only offered an avenue to the realization of democratic citizenship but also represented blacks’ capacity to match a lifestyle and social influence that had long been reserved only for whites. In a special report for *Ebony* magazine in 1949 entitled “Why Negroes Buy Cadillacs,” the magazine’s editors explained the importance of purchasing and displaying luxury goods within the African American community: “To a Negro, indulgence in luxury is a

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\(^{102}\) Chambers, “Madison Avenue,” 5.

\(^{103}\) Weems, “Desegregating the Dollar,” 8.
vindication of his belief in his ability to match the best of white men."^{104} In much the same vein, a 1965 study in the *Journal of Marketing Research* found that black Americans were generally more prestige-brand conscious than whites because brands were status symbols that enabled African Americans to enact modes of consumption from which they had often been violently excluded.\(^{105}\)

In 1948, Pepsi became one of America’s first mainstream corporations to acknowledge the spending power of the “Negro” market when they mounted an advertising campaign in over fifty black newspapers.\(^{106}\) Nonetheless, the ad campaign had the unintended consequence of setting a precedent of pursuing African Americans’ rising spending power with a “one size fits all” approach to black consumers, ignoring the individuality and diversity of black America.\(^{107}\) Of course, the black market was no more uniform than the white market and the Pepsi campaign ignored the richly complex identity structures of African Americans by proposing an amalgam identity based solely on race. The theory of market segmentation, as understood during the 1940s and 1950s, was just an alternative means to communicate and convey a separateness between whites and blacks that granted blacks only a limited and closely monitored freedom.\(^{108}\) As D. Parke Gibson, the founder of America’s first black-owned public relations firm argued in 1974, “There are two types of advertising in the United States today: white-oriented and black-oriented. As the nation reflects a dual society, so too does advertising.”\(^{109}\)

Nonetheless, this period witnessed the first concerted attempt by advertising executives to present African Americans in realistic settings. As black admen began to slowly proliferate the advertising industry during the 1940s and 1950s, they created ads illustrating blacks’ membership in the “imagined communities of middle-class homeowners and automobile buyers,” as part of a strategy which encouraged blacks to “buy into” American consumerist ideals as a token of citizenship and a means for promoting racial progress.\textsuperscript{110} These more realistic representations, according to Jason Chambers, pointed towards blacks’ role as equal consumers and accomplished citizens: non-pejorative “images of African Americans could not only reflect the levels of their penetration into different areas of American life… they could also ease white acceptance of them in these once closed areas.”\textsuperscript{111} Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, African Americans made use of their increasing spending power to affect social change and to ask for more respectful representations of black life in popular culture, including advertising.

It is an academic truism that the 1960s were a turbulent decade for American social and political relations.\textsuperscript{112} Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the advertising industry both reflected and shaped the broader currents of the movement for social justice. Beginning in 1963, both the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the NAACP began pressing the advertising industry to enact change in their representation and treatment of African American consumers.\textsuperscript{113} In the years that followed, dozens of academics, activists, and political organizations published studies

\textsuperscript{110} Chambers, “Madison Avenue,” 14.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid, 5.
and articles that illustrated the advertising industry’s prolonged neglect and ostracization of African American consumers.

Initially, most in the advertising industry appeared reluctant to meet the demands of the African American community. This was largely the result of blacks’ relative invisibility within the upper ranks of the advertising industry. Chambers called this “the middle management barrier,” and suggested that black admen struggled to achieve positions of influence within the trade. Indeed, a 1968 survey of minority employment in thirty-five of New York’s top advertising agencies found that there were only four black executives or administrators amongst the some 415 positions examined. The lack of black influence within the advertising community meant that most major advertisers unfoundedly worried: “If I advertise to the Negro won’t I lose my white customers?” During the 1960s, however, this fear was gradually dispelled by advertising and marketing trade publications, which countered with statistics that showed whites, especially young consumers, displayed no adverse reactions to racially integrated advertising. The black community’s demand for greater visibility in advertising coincided with the realization that young whites were eager to accept and appropriate elements of black culture in the creation of their own consumer identities.

As the title of D. Parke Gibson’s 1969 text, The $30 Billion Negro, suggests, the black population’s demand for greater visibility was primarily sold to the advertising industry by the disclosure that African Americans represented a multi-billion dollar market. While it was certainly an important factor in advertising’s increased recognition of blacks during the 1960s, economic self-interest was only one incentive amidst a myriad of converging social pressures

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that precipitated change. Academics also began pressuring the advertising industry to acknowledge its long-neglected responsibility to black consumers. In a 1965 article for the trade publication *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, William H. Boyenton argued that advertisers had a responsibility, by virtue of their culturally transformative power, to represent black Americans more accurately and frequently in general advertising.\(^{118}\) In a widely cited article from the *Journal of Marketing Research*, psychologist Harold Kassarjian argued that social responsibility prompted advertisers to employ black actors, models, and celebrities for their advertising layout, “now however, not in the slave role but in a more realistic occupation.”\(^{119}\) John Wheatley echoed the theme of “social responsibility” and argued that many within the advertising industry acknowledged that their responsibility to African Americans superseded the economic opportunity they presented.\(^{120}\) In much the same vein, sociologist Dorothy Cohen argued: “If advertising is a strong persuader and a reflector of our culture, it has both the power and the responsibility to provide a means by which blacks can be accepted and acknowledged in the mainstream of life.”\(^{121}\) The 1968 Kerner Report, which was commissioned by President Lyndon B. Johnson to investigate the causes of the 1967 race riots and to propose recommendations for the future of race relations, similarly found that “a mass medium dominated by whites would be unable to communicate with an audience that also included blacks.”\(^{122}\) The cumulative effect of these converging social pressures was that advertisements of the late 1960s at last began to mirror the country’s social climate as agencies and advertisers made a conscious effort to include, as naturally as possible, blacks in their commercials.\(^{123}\)


\(^{120}\) Wheatley, “The Use of Black Models,” 391.

\(^{121}\) Cohen, “Advertising and the Black Community,” 11.


Meanwhile, black consumers of the post Civil Rights era increasingly acknowledged the fact that they had long been prevented from establishing a self-identity that was socially equal to that of the white majority. Many blacks rejected blackness as defined by inequality and instead searched out an alternative base from which a positive consumer identity could be formed. The Black Power movement of the late 1960s and 1970s was a product of this process, and many of the cultural symbols of the Black Power movement evolved, as we shall later see, into lasting symbols of black solidarity during times of racial unrest. Yet, they also came to symbolize a distinct and exotic “blackness” that was difficult for the white majority to digest because they were an expression of race pride that could not be appropriated by whites. This process is evident in the rapid popularization of the Afro within the African American community during the 1970s as a symbol of black pride and racial solidarity, and, a rejection of white beauty standards. The Afro was a symbol of black identity that white America found particularly difficult to accept because it seemed to communicate a distinct and proud understanding of black identity and culture as something from which whites were excluded.

At the same time, there was also an important shift in general advertising rhetoric wherein advertising spoke increasingly not to the physical qualities of the product, but to the emotional, psychological, and social benefits of consuming the advertised good. This advertising turn was especially significant for the African American community because goods became a means through which they could enact equal citizenship by experiencing and satisfying emotional and social needs as all Americans did. As Stuart Ewen noted in his nuanced monograph on advertising’s role in American society, “a given ad asked not that an individual

buy its product, but that he experience a self-conscious perspective that he had previously been socially and physical denied.”126 Anthropologist Grant McCracken agreed, suggesting that in contemporary society, consumer goods act as bridges to our hopes and ideals: “Goods help the individual contemplate the possession of an emotional condition, a social circumstance, even an entire style of life, by somehow concretizing these things in themselves. They become a bridge to displaced meaning and an idealized version of life as it should be lived.”127 For American consumers of the post civil rights era, goods functioned as a means through which they could fabricate and consume a narrative of racial integration and interracial cultural exchange while ignoring the much more problematic reality of persistent institutional racism. As we shall see, this occurred through an intentional process wherein “urban” and the “street” were commercialized to serve the promotional needs of a litany of products, which essentialized and pathologized the African American experience by suggesting to consumers that it was a cultural space in which other Americans had a choice to participate. From the standpoint of the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, observed bell hooks in 1992, “the hope is that desires for the primitive or fantasies about the Other can be continually exploited” in a manner that reinscribes or maintains the status quo.128

Conclusion: Middle Class Blacks, Consumption Communities, and Signs of Change

On September 20, 1984, a year that was particularly significant in the history of African American representation in popular culture, The Cosby Show aired for the first time on NBC. The Cosby Show was the first American network sitcom featuring an African American family in what Essence magazine called “an unprecedented tapestry: an affluent, college-educated couple

127 McCracken, “Culture and Consumption,” 110.
128 hooks, “Eating the Other,” 22.
with five emotionally stable kids.” In a symbolic sense, the Huxtable family represented an ideal of the modern consumer family that transcended the African American community and appealed to a much broader audience. *The Cosby Show* regularly achieved distinction as the most-widely viewed program of the week and was enjoyed by Americans of all colors. In popular culture of the 1980s, white Americans were increasingly finding black figures that they could do more than simply appropriate and enjoy in passing; they were seeing black figures with whom they could relate. Nonetheless, as we shall see, the normalization of African Americans as middle class consumers in the popular imagination had a profound impact on how racism and racial progress was understood in American society. The presentation of successful blacks allowed whites to contemplate a society defined by liberal democratic ideals while maintaining the structural subordination of the black majority. Indeed, exceptional instances of black success were the key to America’s collective self-image during the 1980s because they suggested that mobility was always possible and that racial integration had been a resounding success. This was especially significant during the Reagan-era 1980s in which the US government openly argued that they had delivered sufficient civil rights legislation and now it was up to black Americans to lift themselves the rest of the way to equality. In this narrative, those blacks who did not succeed had only themselves to blame.

Indeed, it is ironic, that “black involvement with advertising has escalated from the grotesque caricatures depicted as mammies, buffoons, and Uncle Toms around the turn of the century to an era in which Michael Jackson was paid $10,000,000 to advertise for Pepsi.”

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postwar United States was increasingly devoted to the freedom of the individual, and through consumption and personal style, black Americans were able to define themselves as a unique cultural community. In this sense, consumer goods served as lexicons of cultural meaning in black Americans’ processes of self-transformation, allowing them to experience a circumstance from which they had previously been systematically excluded. “In a mobile society,” suggested historian Daniel Boorstin, “commercial products with familiar names provide people with some sense of identity and continuity in their lives.” Marketed goods granted black Americans access to what Boorstin calls “consumption communities” from which they had previously been excluded. Within these consumption communities there was an integrated audience which forced advertisers to adjust their cultural symbols and to normalize the African American consumer experience. In a sense, marketed goods acted out Benedict Anderson’s theory of “imagined affinities” by constructing a social world in which black and white Americans could share equal access and form a collective national identity. The consumer society of the postwar United States brought into being “a distinctive way of life based on a notion that individuals can regard their affiliations with social groups as a fluid milieu of temporary associations that are based on styles of appearance and behavior as well as on choices of activities,” but, not necessarily on race.

In their long-neglected recognition of black consumers, mainstream advertisers were certainly responding to the social and political climate of the postwar United States. More importantly, however, they were responding to a consumer ethos that rejected the white suburban buying patterns of their parents’ generation. As the so-called “baby boom” generation was coming of age as consumers between the mid 1960s and 1980s, an emerging counterculture

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challenged “the establishment” and conventional hierarchies of authority. This was significant for black Americans because marketers discovered the nearly infinite willingness of “narcissistic boomers” to pay to be something more than their parents’ generation of “plain white Americans.”

It was no coincidence, then, that the era of integrated advertising corresponded to the historical era of the 1960s and 1970s, when social and cultural groups began asserting themselves through what came to be known as racial ‘identity politics,’ whereby “people’s affiliation with a particular community defined their cultural consciousness and motivated their collective political action.”

These were the consumers that Nike’s mantra of anti-authoritarianism and their credo of personal empowerment appealed most intimately to. Nike management always promoted the ideal that “sports shouldn’t have boundaries,” as one corporate press release put it, and viewed athletes as inherently progressive, multi-layered sites of cultural transcendence. In fact, Nike founder Phil Knight publicly expressed his belief that Kenyan runners, who dominated long distance running events at the Olympics and World Championships, represented the ideal “spirit of sports.” In the context of Nike marketing, then, athleticism and determination were promoted above all traditional social or economic markers of status and identity. Sports, as we shall soon discover, performed a democratizing function by crossing linguistic and cultural divides which enabled it to unite distant and seemingly disparate Americans. Nonetheless, there were limits to democratic racial equality that the intersection of sports and consumerism could do little to overcome. As we shall see, in perpetuating the mythological narrative that

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sports were the great equalizer in American society, corporations like Nike unintentionally prolonged the stigmatization of African Americans, especially males, by representing exceptional black athletes as evidence of the triumph of racial inclusion in American society. This helped many white Americans ignore the still-present barriers to racial equality for the broader black community by suggesting that success in American society was a product of determination rather than pigmentation. The subtle evolution of racism in sports prolonged the black struggle for equality and serves as alternative evidence of the ideas put forward by historian Michelle Alexander in 2010, “Since the nation’s founding, African Americans repeatedly have been controlled through institutions, which appear to die, but then are reborn in new form, tailored to the needs and constraints of the time.”

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Chapter 2: “Start Unknown, Finish Unforgettable”: African American Athletes in Advertising and the Nike Cultural Community

Glistening black bodies
on fields of dreams,
on battlefields, scoring,
between defense’s seams.
Tight muscles bulging,
ferocious bucks
who scratch and claw,
say, “Aw shucks, wasn’t much.”
Cream-colored spectators cheer and roar
for conquering heroes

Softening Joe Louis’ Punch: The Representation and Management of Black Athletes from Emancipation to World War Two

As we have seen, the media and popular culture serve as the vehicles that carry the collective fantasies and ideals of American society. As an element within America’s broader popular culture apparatus, sports were amongst the most transformative and immutable forces of the twentieth century. In the context of American cultural history, sports are a powerful institution that provides a context for critical examination because they shape dominant practices and inform ideologies that play a marked role in determining social interaction.¹⁴² Throughout much of the twentieth century, newspaper columnists and sports reporters, an overwhelmingly white fraternity, shouldered most of the responsibility for the representation of black athletes to the American public. This fraternity carefully monitored and selectively reported the behaviors of earlier twentieth century black athletes to communicate an idealized vision that sports were good for race relations and that racial integration in the broader society could be a success so long as blacks adhered to systems of white domination. However, during the media-saturated 1980s and 1990s, the responsibility of control and representation shifted to major corporations

¹⁴¹ Rhoden, “Forty Million Dollar Slaves.”
and advertisers who recognized an economic advantage in appropriating certain carefully selected expressions of blackness. Oddly, scholars interested in the cultural politics of advertising have tended to overlook sports and, conversely, scholars investigating the cultural politics of sports have tended to overlook advertising. The under-examined intersection of identity politics, sports, and advertising represents a critical site for the analysis of power relations, cultural politics, and cultural representation in the twentieth century US because it sheds light on the varied expressions of white political and economic sovereignty and the cultural forces that worked to both maintain and undermine it. This chapter analyzes the role sports and consumerism have played in determining and reflecting popular attitudes about race throughout the twentieth century.

Although black athletes were limited participants in American sports since Emancipation, the white media and popular culture worked tirelessly to ensure that there was little room for black athletes “to deviate from accepted white standards of performance and forge any notion of a racial consciousness.”\(^{143}\) Black athletes were expected to adhere to the dominant group’s understanding of blackness as defined by subservient docility, unrelenting compliance, and an overall void of white morality. Throughout much of the twentieth century, black athletes existed in a paradoxical cultural space: they experienced both pride in their race and pressures to adhere to the values upheld in the dominant society. The role of African American athletes during the pre civil rights era was to provide a symbolic exemplification of racial pride, but to do so in a relatively submissive way.\(^{144}\) While the white perception of black athletes as politically unthreatening made it possible to integrate American sports, it also preserved the black athlete’s

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\(^{143}\) Wiggins, “Glory Bound,” 201.

\(^{144}\) Henderson, “Sidelines,” 5.
subordinate racial status. This was problematic for black Americans because it yielded black cultural heroes who were pressured by economic interests to adhere to a system wherein their behavior and public persona were controlled by a racist white majority effectively rendering them voiceless when it came to advocating for progress for the broader black community. Moreover, black athletes received so much more popular attention than other African American professionals that sports overwhelmed all other expressions of black talent in the public mind and became a “utopia of equal opportunity where blacks could demonstrate their long neglected ‘manhood’ and ‘fitness’ for full citizenship.”

The intersection of sports and racial identities in the media began in earnest during the late nineteenth century when advertisements and articles concerning baseball games played by colored teams began appearing in mainstream periodicals. Racial segregation in baseball evolved alongside broader Jim Crow era policies to tangibly separate the races and perpetuate the myth of black inferiority. Although they were not allowed to individually compete in white leagues, during the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s, black baseball teams from America’s Negro Leagues routinely competed against professional white athletes in exhibitions and scrimmages. As segregation and racial unrest worsened in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, some white baseball players and their fans began to fear that if black athletes proved themselves equal to their white opponents on the fields of competition, African Americans would begin demanding equal opportunities within society more broadly. This anxiety was put on full display on September 11, 1887, when, for the first time in the history of baseball, an all-white team refused to take the field against their scheduled black opponents. In a letter to their manager, the St. Louis Browns baseball players wrote: “We… do not agree to play against Negroes tomorrow.”

146 Ibid, 12
We will cheerfully play against white people at any time, and think, by refusing to play, we are only doing what is right, taking everything into consideration and the shape the team is in at present." When put in direct competition with black athletes, whites often found themselves on the losing end of the scorecard, a reality that threatened their economic and social dominion. In many respects, this mirrored the social climate of the United States more broadly during the Reconstruction era as blacks were first able to compete with whites for housing and employment.

Yet, as we have seen, the most frivolous and innocuous forms of popular culture are often the most transformative. Racially integrated sporting spectacles represented a non-threatening form of entertainment for white audiences because two distinct social spheres remained: the white audience was segregated and kept at a distance from the fenced-in black performers. America’s Negro Leagues were actually very popular, especially in the American Midwest, where black and white fans sat in segregated bleachers and marveled at the athleticism and spontaneity of black baseball. The most popular of the late nineteenth century colored ball clubs was the Cuban Giants, who, oddly enough, were not Cuban at all, but were black Americans hoping to mask their racial identities by passing themselves off as Spanish. According to Sol White, a former Negro league infielder, manager, and black baseball’s first historian and hagiographer, “the Cuban Giants were heralded everywhere as marvels of the baseball world. They were not looked upon by the public as freaks, but they were classed as men of talent.”

These “men of talent” acted as a sort of cultural antidote to racial tensions by presenting a utopic vision of sports’ potential as a way to normalize separate but equal mythology. They also aided

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149 Will Pascoe, A Noble Game: A History of the Negro Baseball Leagues (Self-Published, University of Guelph Campus Author, 2006), 9.
black Americans in the formation of a communal identity and served as a source of race pride before jazz music and the cultural renaissance emerged as positive and widely accepted expressions of blackness.

Although the Negro Leagues were certainly a source of pride for the black community, they were also a reflection and reminder of a depressing reality: segregation in baseball, both on the field and in the stands, reinforced America’s broader racial caste-system by presenting tangible proof of racial difference and white superiority. Individual athletes from America’s Negro Leagues were often heroes to the black community, but they were completely minimized by whites who only appreciated what they saw as the uniform performance of the spectacle of “black baseball.” Segregated team sports could do little to precipitate meaningful racial progress because, to whites, they served only to transfer Jim Crow segregation from society to popular culture where it was frivolously consumed and legitimated.

The first individual black athlete to gain widespread admiration from both white and blacks Americans was the celebrated African American professional boxer and heavyweight champion of the 1930s and 1940s, Joe Louis. On June 22, 1938, Louis scored a knockout victory over the German Max Schmeling, which, according to many scholars, made him a champion to Americans regardless of race because heightened international tensions cast Louis in a nationalist narrative. Louis was certainly a significant source of pride for black Americans: he was a “conspicuous black achiever in a racist society that discouraged black achievement,” and to generations of African Americans he symbolized and demonstrated the hope of fulfillment in a world that otherwise offered little.\footnote{Caponi-Tabery, “Jump for Joy,” xvi.} Malcolm X remembered his hometown of Lansing, Michigan, erupting into “the greatest celebration of race pride our generation has ever known,”
on the night Louis was crowned champion.\textsuperscript{152} Louis’ victories throughout the 1930s and 1940s were also a reaffirmation of America’s national strength during a time of heightened international tensions. The renowned African American poet Maya Angelou fondly remembered the significance of Louis’ triumph over Schmelling in her autobiography, \textit{I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings}: “Joe Louis proved that we [African Americans] are the strongest people in the world.”\textsuperscript{153}

In a symbolic sense, Louis was among the first blacks seen and understood publicly as a representative figure of the “American” identity. Louis symbolized America’s national strength during an era in which the country was being drawn out from its isolationism. By competing and excelling for the United States on an international stage, Louis showed that black victories could simultaneously be American victories. Moreover, Joe Louis represented the toughness and resilience of the American people during a time when they were questioning their national strength and, as Gena Caponi-Tabery argues, took on a “patriotic status that conferred citizenship on all African Americans.”\textsuperscript{154}

Nonetheless, the story of Joe Louis’ popular acceptance is not one of decisive racial progress, but rather, one of continued white hegemony. Louis had a predominantly white management group who strongly advised the champ not to confront or challenge the racial status quo: “If he wanted support from white Americans, Louis needed to behave as a ‘good’ black.”\textsuperscript{155} In public, Louis adopted an “ingratiating and compliant manner with members of the dominant culture,” and regularly spoke about how much he loved his country and how much he owed America. White Americans accepted and even celebrated Louis the athlete while maintaining

\textsuperscript{152} Anthony O. Edmonds, “Joe Louis, Boxing, and American Culture,” in “Out of the Shadows,” Ed, Wiggins, 141.
\textsuperscript{155} Henderson, “Sidelined,” 8.
racial postulates towards Joe Louis the citizen: “The colored boy is clean, fine and superb, modest and unassuming as a chauffeur or as the man who cuts and rakes the lawn once a week,” reported a contemporary sports editor named Bruce Dudley. Anthony Edmonds admirably identified the ironic narrative that governed blackness in the era of Joe Louis: “Blacks perhaps could be more mobile if they also stayed in their place.” White Americans were able to decisively compartmentalize their feelings towards blacks through a process of selective appropriation of individual black achievers and black cultural expression. Much like jazz musicians and black dancers, black athletes of the pre WWII era acted as a means through which white Americans could reconcile their continued racism with their belief in the liberalism of American democracy. As the narrative went for Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Billie Holiday, so too it went for Joe Louis and black athletes: “Come play for us. Just use the back door.”

In the pre-1960s era of very limited racial liberalization, Louis offered advertisers an alternative vision of blackness because he was one of the first black athletes to gain widespread popularity amongst America’s white community. Nonetheless, Louis was really only used to advertise to black consumers: in 1947, a black-owned beverage company from Baltimore developed a signature sparkling grape drink called Joe Louis Punch and marketed it in black periodicals, and, similarly, a black-owned bakery in New York City named the Brown Bomber Baking Co., ran an advertisement with an illustrated black pugilist pummeling a white boxer. Louis’ celebrity was commodified by African American businesses as a token of the seemingly contradictory forces of race pride and white cultural acceptance.

157 Ibid.
159 Roberta Newman, “Pitching Behind,” 87.
World War II brought with it sweeping social and economic changes for the average American, and, as we have seen, the reorganization of society in its aftermath transformed consumption and advertising into avenues for both fighting and maintaining racial discrimination. Sports were also transformed by Cold War politics as America’s credibility as the democratic “leaders of the free world” was visibly challenged by the image of Jim Crow segregation, especially in the ubiquitous and widely consumed world of popular culture. In fact, the US ambassador to the United Nations Henry Cabot Lodge publicly described American race relations as the country’s “international Achilles heel.” Much like their integration within the world of consumerism, it was a practical realization of the benefits that granting and presenting token examples of black successes could have for white America that prompted a shattering of the color barrier in mainstream professional sports. Black athletes of the postwar era were invariably caught up in this postwar shift towards the ideals of racial liberalism.

**Gentle Jackie and Angry Ali: Race, Sports, and Advertising in Postwar America, 1944-1984**

White society has long been at a paradoxical ease accepting and even celebrating individual African American athletic accomplishments while denigrating the black identity in the abstract. America’s white majority was particularly at ease when, as was the case with Joe Louis and the distinguished American Olympian Jesse Owens, the athlete was cast in a nationalist narrative of American exceptionalism. Some black achievers were understood first as Americans and secondarily as blacks; they seemed to exist somewhere in the world of Du Bois’ “double consciousness,” or, as Malcolm X explained it, “betwixt and between” the black and white worlds, “traversing the borders between them yet never settled in either.”161 Sports offered a space in which white Americans could enjoy and celebrate individual African American

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161 From, West, “Race Matters,” 139.
successes while casting a veil over the political, economic, and social barriers that still stood in the way of meaningful integration for the majority.

In a recurrent theme in the history of American popular culture, professional sports were controlled and managed exclusively by whites, making it extremely difficult for black athletes and black Americans more broadly to affect progressive change. Racial integration, therefore, could only be achieved when sufficient economic, political, or social pressure compelled the ruling white executives to do so.\textsuperscript{162} During the postwar era, as part of the broader movement towards civil rights, a minority of influential whites, pressured by the talent and fortitude of black athletes, began using sports as an innocuous means through which blacks could be integrated into American society. Outside of perhaps Jackie Robinson himself, no single figure deserves more credit for the integration of professional sports in the postwar U.S. than the then President of the Brooklyn Dodgers, Branch Rickey. Rickey was a champion for the cause of black athletes and campaigned behind the scenes from a position of influence for the integration of Major League Baseball.\textsuperscript{163} Rickey understood and publicly acknowledged both the financial and moral impetus for racial integration in professional sports, and, more importantly, understood the social and political barriers that were standing between black athletes and their goals of equality.\textsuperscript{164}

It significant in this context to note that, Rickey selected Robinson from a myriad of equally talented black baseball prospects because he was both “right on the field, and right off...

\textsuperscript{162} This is not an attempt to devoid black athlete’s of a sense of agency in pressuring for the integration of professional sports, but rather, it is an effort to elucidate one of the many ways through which elite whites maintained a racial caste system through the careful control of black cultural expressions.


the field.”

Robinson was certainly an electrifying and talented ballplayer, but he also possessed a set of non-athletic attributes that made him palatable to white society. Robinson was composed, self-controlled, patient, unwaveringly confident, and, most importantly, offered only a mild criticism of US race relations. Rickey mirrored the approach of the whites who so carefully managed the career and public persona of Joe Louis during his rise to transracial popular acceptance. Cast in this light, Robinson was certainly a courageous hero in the history of American race relations, however, he also served as evidence of the adaptability of racism in popular culture. Jackie Robinson was, and continues to be, understood primarily through a sensationalist narrative that casts him as a crusader for, and a positive symbol of, progress in society that avoids the difficult questions about the unintended consequences of integrating American professional sports.

On April 9, 1947, Rickey announced the signing of Robinson to the American public and racial integration in professional baseball became a reality. The integration of professional baseball was widely celebrated as a monumental victory for the African American community. J.B. Martin, the longtime president of the Negro American Baseball League, publicly commended Rickey’s moral courage and suggested that Robinson’s signing represented a monumental moment for the African American community. An article in a 1962 edition of Sport magazine went so far as to suggest that Robinson’s shattering of the color barrier in professional sports was rivaled in significance only by the Supreme Court’s ruling on

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165 Thomas, “Globetrotting,” 18.
166 Ibid.
167 Mann, “Branch Rickey,” 259. Kenny Washington and Willie Strode actually broke the color barrier of American professional sports in 1946 when they competed for the Los Angeles Rams of the NFL. But Robinson has had a much more profound impact on the landscape of American sports because, at the time, baseball was immensely more popular with Americans, especially whites, than football.
educational integration in the oft-referenced Brown vs. Board of Education decision in 1954.\textsuperscript{169} The optimism expressed by Sport magazine regarding the potential for meaningful racial integration and progress through sport can be understood as part of the immediate postwar move towards civil equality during which time many expressions of American culture were recast as sites for fighting discrimination. Set amidst Cold War political anxieties and an increased recognition of the negative effect America’s race relations were having on its international reputation, some white Americans took comfort in visual examples of black success and integration in popular culture.\textsuperscript{170} Jackie Robinson helped present the world with a positive image of American democracy by publicly symbolizing the accessibility of the American dream for African Americans.

The nearly uniform acceptance of the narrative of racial progress through sport is evidenced in the mainstream press’ enthusiastic response to the news of Robinson’s signing. The predominantly white American sports media was excited by the possibility of meaningful racial progress and congratulated Rickey for being a man of great moral courage.\textsuperscript{171} Nevertheless, the position taken by the mainstream press suggests that America’s general populace was relatively at ease with racial integration in sports because it offered an avenue for black achievement that did not seem to directly influence their economic or social position. Granting and celebrating the successes of a select few black athletes gave white Americans relief from social responsibility and denied the structural barriers that still stood between the broader black American public and meaningful racial integration. They served as vindication of the efficaciousness and resilience of

\textsuperscript{170} Thomas, “Globetrotting,” 4.
\textsuperscript{171} “J. Robinson, Ballplayer,” New York Times (April 12, 1947): 16; Artur Daley, “Play Ball,” New York Times (April 15, 1947): 37. This is not to suggest that Rickey and Robinson were completely free from persecution; many angry white Americans attempted to boycott games in which Robinson was a participant and even sent him death threats. From Arnold Rampersad, Jackie Robinson: A Biography (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997). Rampersad suggests that for long stretches of his career, Robinson was unable to eat or sleep as the result of the physical and psychological toll of white abuses, 155.
the American dream, which was increasingly valued by liberal whites during the postwar US. This is a fundamental paradox if we are to understand the complex relationship between black athletes, sports marketing, and African American identity formation in the twentieth century United States.

David Roediger, who grew up in a small, predominantly white town of the 1950s and 1960s, remembered that he and his friends denigrated blacks in the abstract, yet, Muhammad Ali and the black baseball players of the 1960s were beloved as their generation’s greatest athletes. White Americans, recalled William Van Deburg in 1997, “could toast the black culture hero one day and tell ‘coon’ jokes the next.” Indeed, blackness was feared and denigrated as an abstract identity, which made it possible for white Americans to celebrate individual achievement by blacks as somehow less racialized and thus avoid conceding their privileged status in society. Public blackness was largely constructed as an abstract identity through which white Americans could reconcile their overtly racist feelings towards African Americans with their admiration for celebrities of color.

The 1960s Civil Rights movement provided black athletes with the necessary cultural space to take a more critical and vocal stance on race relations. Unlike black athletes from the earlier twentieth century, African Americans of the post-1960s struggle for civil rights no longer felt the intense pressure to conform to white ideals and were increasingly free to use sports and their celebrity as a platform for the cause of the broader black community. This transition in black celebrity is most accurately reflected in the behavior and public reception of another black heavyweight champion, Muhammad Ali. From 1960 to 1964, Ali was known by his birth name, Cassius Clay, and, in accordance with the broader understanding of black celebrities’ place in

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American society, shunned political engagements much like Louis and Robinson of decades previous. However, in 1964, he changed his name to Muhammad Ali, converted to the Nation of Islam, and began taking a much more political stance in the public, including criticism of the war in Vietnam. He dedicated his celebrity to exposing an “America that was unwilling to honor its own precepts.” During the turbulent 1960s, Ali was particularly troubling to white Americans because he refused to sacrifice his cultural distinctiveness and was openly political: “Ali’s celebration of black culture challenged the existing social order because it helped eliminate the negative self-image prevalent among some blacks and encouraged a black consciousness, a necessary foundation for the promotion of black political and economic power.” Ali helped inspire the black athletic revolution of the late 1960s by using sports and his celebrity as a platform for exposing racial injustices and linking black celebrity with progressive race politics.

This new freedom was powerfully and symbolically appropriated by two American track and field athletes at the 1968 Olympic games in Mexico through a silent statement of racial solidarity. Standing on the podium, sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos bowed their heads, and raised a single, defiantly closed fist high above their heads. (Figure 2.1) The scene has been immortalized through the varied uses of Smith and Carlos’ “Black Power Salute” as a symbol of racial solidarity and a political stance against blacks’ continued

Figure 2.1 John Carlos and Tommie Smith’s Black Power Salute
Mexico City, Mexico (1968)

175 Ibid, 215.
176 Ibid.
oppression in American society. For black Americans coming of age during the turbulent 1960s, the scene offered a vision of unity through defiance and reflected an emerging narrative of black pride.

During the 1970s, black celebrities, especially black athletes, began appearing more frequently in advertisements targeting a national audience. Nevertheless, there remained a tendency to overemphasize one feature of a black celebrity’s temperament while ignoring or diluting the traits that would see them presented as complete personalities worthy of emulation. In a special report for Black Enterprise, Alleyne Sonia begrudgingly admitted that the majority of black Americans could “still easily recall the image of our biggest—and arguably sexiest—’70s star, Billy Dee Williams, touting the social advantages of drinking Colt 45 Malt Liquor, or Muhammad Ali, our greatest sports hero, attesting to the strength of a particular pesticide.”

As we have seen, Ali was part of the movement towards black pride and unity through defiance and a vocal critic of American political ideologies. As such, some whites perceived Ali as a threatening symbol of blackness and his popular acceptance was comparatively limited within the white community; Ali suggested that blacks should reject Cold War politics in favor of the political movement known as “black power” and was therefore used sparingly in general advertising. This

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stands in marked contrast to the press’ treatment of one of Ali’s white contemporaries, NFL quarterback Joe Namath, who, during the 1970s, took the concept of sports celebrity to new heights and was presented by advertisers as an icon of hip American consumerism. Joe Namath was so intimately accepted in the American mainstream that he even endorsed Beauty Mist brand pantyhose for American women by wearing them on screen in 1973. Joe Namath was a domestically safe media construct and was even used to advertise to white women while Ali was considered too threatening because he was political and proud of his black identity. In advertising, the difference between black and white athletes of the 1970s was as vast as that of roach spray and pantyhose.

Despite the progress made by African American athletes throughout the twentieth century, they entered the 1980s decidedly underrepresented in America’s mass media and popular cultural apparatus. As Harry Edwards once argued: “There’s a dirty little secret among marketers using athletes as endorsers. Skin pigmentation still matters.” In the world of mainstream advertising, blackness was still devalued by marketers and some consumers, which perpetuated a subtle and often-overlooked form of racism. By the mid-1980s, Nike had become a leading voice on American sports and through the promotion and creation of their brand in advertising, unintentionally perpetuated a repressive system of social control. Nike evolved alongside broader social ideals and helped to perpetuate the idealized vision of sports as a utopic space for interracial exchange by welcoming black athletes into their community of consumers yet carefully monitoring and controlling the use of a ritualized blackness in promoting their brand. The story of Nike’s founding and expansion as Americans came to terms with post 1960s

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American society offers one example of how the ideals of racial liberalism were publicly argued and visibly upheld.

All Athletes Welcome: Nike and the Creation of an Egalitarian Corporate Cultural Community, 1964-1984

As a result of their limited acceptance throughout the twentieth century, black athletes needed a vehicle to project visions of their identity that could foster and promote interracial cultural sharing. During the 1970s and 1980s, this task increasingly fell to advertisers, whose use and understanding of blackness was effortlessly consumed by Americans of all backgrounds. Just as black athletes were entering the fold of American advertising during the postwar era, this time not as caricatures but as celebrities, there was a small Oregon shoe company built on the democratic principles of sport that was rapidly coming of age as a vehicle of self-actualization for its customers. Nike used brand creation and brand promotion to establish a community of consumers and athletes supposedly united by common ideals, not by traditional racial or socioeconomic factors. Indeed, Nike’s meteoric rise in the world of sports and apparel marketing was predicated on their ability to brand themselves as authentically anti-authoritarian to a generation of consumers obsessed with overthrowing tradition, and in this setting, black athletes performed an important yet often disingenuous function. Sport, as understood and sold to millions of Americans by Nike, represented a democratic space for interracial cultural exchange, which perpetuated the longstanding “integrationist romance with sport.” In the cultural community created by Nike, black culture was often presented as a token appropriation of a cool otherness and a symbol of racial acceptance that legitimated America’s racial caste system by ignoring the institutional barriers standing between black Americans and their goals of equality.

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In an effort to better understand how apparel marketing and black celebrity intersected during the later twentieth century as part of the movement known as racial liberalism, we must first turn to an examination of how Nike created a democratic cultural community based on the principle of sports. Through their marketing initiatives, brand promotion, and the very spirit of their corporate identity, Nike emphasized athleticism, discipline, and a passion for sport over traditional cultural fault lines like race or socioeconomic status and, in so doing, both shaped and reflected the contours of post-1960s America. In a sense, Nike continued a historical trope in which sport was presented as a racial utopia, paradoxically persuading an age of consumers that racial integration had been a success while preserving the subordinate racial status of black athletes. Nike’s corporate history situates it amongst America’s most culturally transformative corporations and illustrates the varied ways through which sports, consumption, and popular culture have altered America’s socio-political landscape. Indeed, Nike has transcended its corporate world to “swallow cultural space in enormous gulps,” shedding light on the nuanced processes through which racial liberalism was legitimated and accepted in popular culture.\textsuperscript{181}

The idea for what would one day be the largest manufacturer of athletic footwear and apparel came to Phil Knight as an MBA student at Stanford University. The premise was simple: utilize cheap Japanese manufacturing processes to undercut the German behemoths that had long dominated the track and field industry in the US. With this in mind, Knight travelled to Japan in January 1964 to pursue a manufacturing contract with the country’s largest shoe manufacturer, The Onitsuka Shoe Company. As coincidence would have it, Onitsuka was actively seeking an American distributor to help them expand into new markets. Before his first meeting with the executives at Onitsuka, Knight had not even paused to reflect on a name for his soon-to-be established company, and, when he was asked which company he represented, Knight blurted...

\textsuperscript{181} Klein, “No Logo,” 51.
out the first name that popped into his head, and Blue Ribbon Sports, a name the company used until 1972, was born in the corporate offices of Onitsuka. Following the meeting, Knight proudly scribbled in his notebook, “Faked out Tiger (Onitsuka) Shoe Co.” This was the culture of Knight’s corporate vision; from the very beginning, it was ‘authenticity’ through a certain unprofessionalism. Knight truly was a product of his generation and never much cared for the formal regulations and elitist attitude of the established sporting authorities. In the context of sports marketing and sports apparel, “professionalism” was represented by an aristocratic white sporting body, or what one scholar calls “the sports business cognoscenti.” It was in challenging these sports cognoscenti that Nike earned a reputation as a company particularly in touch with popular American attitudes and a patron of emergent counter cultural ideals.

The next step for Knight was to find an American partner with an established reputation in the athletic community. With this in mind, Knight mailed Bill Bowerman, his former track and field coach at the University of Oregon and a the legend in the world of running, an Onitsuka prototype and a note offering: “If you feel the shoes are of reasonable quality, you could probably save a little money since I wouldn’t make a profit on shoes sold to you.” Bowerman was receptive to Knight’s idea, suggesting that if Knight could establish a contractual agreement with the people at Onitsuka, “for goodness sakes,” he should do it. Neither Knight nor Bowerman had much cash, so they agreed to contribute $500 each to start the company, “They shook hands, and Blue Ribbon Sports became a partnership. No contracts, no business plan. Just

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185 “Bill Bowerman Letter to Phillip Knight, January 22, 1964,” Bill Bowerman Papers, UA 003 (Eugene, OR).
a handshake.’”186 With this informal agreement, Knight went ahead with an order for 300 pairs of shoes at a total cost of $1,107. Such were the humble beginnings of a corporation that would profoundly transform the landscape of American culture through sports marketing.

As a measure of scale, in late-April, 1964, Knight sent a letter to Bowerman informing him of his recent successes: “Even though we haven’t sold many shoes, we’ve got at least one pair in nine different schools.”187 As Knight travelled around Oregon selling shoes from the back of his van, Adidas, the industry leader, had 700 employees in four factories making shoes to export to fifty-eight countries.188 At the Tokyo Olympics of 1964, Puma and Adidas slipped $100 bills into the sneakers of track and field athletes unofficially initiating the era in which athletes were paid just to wear a particular product.189 By contrast, Nike’s founders were personally mailing reminders to athletes who had forgotten to send them the $10 dollars they charged for a pair of shoes.190

Moreover, the ideological gap between the young American start up and the German behemoths could not have been much greater. As a disciplined coach of collegiate athletics, Bill Bowerman helped personify Oregon and the burgeoning track and field movement. Phil Knight, for his part, was a former collegiate athlete and a product of the baby boom generation’s countercultural movement and rejection of traditional authority. By contrast, Adi Dasler, the founder of Adidas, entered the business after manufacturing marching boots for Hitler, and his company was seen as an elitist German concern that was “deeply hooked into corrupt aristocratic international sports authorities.”191 The guys at Nike, meanwhile, were youthful, west coast

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186 Strasser and Becklund, “Swoosh,” 34.
188 Strasser and Becklund, “Swoosh,” 43.
190 “Bill Bowerman Letter to Local Athlete,” Bill Bowerman Papers, UA 003, (Eugene, Oregon).
191 Katz, “Triumph.”
athletes deeply entrenched in the burgeoning physical fitness revolution. One of Nike’s earliest employees, Geoff Hollister, fondly remembered an incident that occurred outside of an early Blue Ribbon Sports storefront:

I noticed one guy in line pretending to be an athlete. He was a fat kid from Philadelphia, and I knew that he worked for one of our competitors, Puma. I challenged him in front of the athletes, “You’re no athlete—now get the hell out of here,” and escorted him out. I don’t think I understood it at the time, but I was making a statement: BRS was a company run by athletes, for athletes.192

This ‘authenticity’ understandably appealed to Americans during a time in which there was a growing awareness of the many established institutions that had long exercised social control. Authenticity in the consumer marketplace was an antidote to the social control perpetuated by mainstream corporations.

Despite their ubiquity today, there were virtually no recreational joggers during the 1950s and the early 1960s. Knight recalled this period with just a touch of reverence, “You’d go out and run in the streets, and women coming home from shopping would scream and run into the house.”193 This necessarily required Knight and Bowerman to initiate a cultural movement around a product designed for a recreational habit that had not previously existed. In 1967, Bowerman provided the blossoming company with the corporate space it needed to succeed when he wrote Jogging: A Physical Fitness Program for all Ages. Bowerman’s book presented the idea that all Americans were capable of achieving a stronger and healthier body, and that all it required was a good pair of shoes.194 Bowerman echoed this sentiment in his personal correspondences; when asked by Robert W. Straub, the Treasurer for the state of Oregon, for advice on getting in shape for a one-day, forty-eight mile hike, Bowerman responded, “you

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192 Geoff Hollister, Out of Nowhere,” 78.
would be better off to do nothing, except be sure that you have a proper pair of shoes.”\textsuperscript{195} Thanks to his efforts in promoting the physical and psychological benefits of recreational running, Bowerman became affectionately known across the US as “the father of jogging.” In what Strasser and Becklund admirably described as, “a rare example of an entrepreneur building a vast and enduring market for his own product,” Bowerman helped inspire the cultural phenomenon that produced millions of customers for Knight’s company.\textsuperscript{196} Significantly, this newly emergent jogging community was open to all Americans regardless of age, gender, or race. In Bowerman’s own words, “if you have a body, you are an athlete.”\textsuperscript{197} Nike’s first full-time employee, Jeff Johnson, was a former collegiate runner who saw this community as, “something special and private but shared all at the same time.”\textsuperscript{198}

Nonetheless, this shared cultural community fit neatly within the ideal of racial liberalism because it presented sports as a utopic space for meaningful racial integration while evading or obscuring the institutional barriers that kept most blacks from experiencing intimate acceptance within American society. Moreover, Nike was proud to promote its brand as the embodiment of an athletic meritocracy, yet, the company’s management group was an all-white fraternity and the Board of Directors remained an exclusively white group until the early 1990s.\textsuperscript{199} This demonstrates the limits to racial liberalism in the promotional context; by presenting their consumption community as an egalitarian cultural space Nike commodified an anti-establishment rhetoric yet the company’s exclusively white core of executives visibly

\textsuperscript{196} Strasser and Becklund, “Swoosh,” 72.
\textsuperscript{197} This quote has now become an integral part of Nike’s mission statement. http://help-en-us.nike.com/app/answers/detail/article/nikeinc-mission/a_id/113/country/us
\textsuperscript{198} Strasser and Becklund, “Swoosh,” 60.
\textsuperscript{199} Katz, “Triumph.”
demonstrated that this promotional strategy, and consumption more broadly, could do little to precipitate meaningful racial progress.

Progress was slow for Knight and the guys at Nike; according to the renowned sports journalist E.M. Swift, as the 1960s bled into the 1970s, industry experts referred to the top eight sneaker companies as, “Adidas and the Seven Dwarfs.” At the summer Olympics of 1972, Adidas athletes dominated the podium, claiming more medals than all the other major shoe manufacturers combined. This suggested to consumers that athletic merit and success was at least partially predicated on patterns of consumption. Further complicating matters, Onitsuka wrote Phil Knight on May 1, 1972, to inform him that they were rescinding their contractual agreement with Blue Ribbon Sports. Knight, keenly sensing that something had soured between his company and his Japanese supplier, worked behind the scenes to secure manufacturing contracts from other factories throughout East Asia. Shortly after Onitsuka and Blue Ribbon Sports parted ways, Nike prototypes were being churned out of factories across Asia and American consumers barely noted a change. According to author David Benjamin, Onitsuka “tried to kill the goose that laid the golden eggs, but only succeeded in making the goose self-sufficient.”

The early 1970s also witnessed the introduction of the swoosh logo to Nike sneakers. Knight hired a local art student named Carolyne Davidson to design what he called a “stripe” or logo for the side of the shoe, and, in a now famous anecdote, Knight and Davidson agreed upon a commission of just thirty-five dollars. Davidson ultimately came up with a large rounded check-mark design or “swoosh” which, despite its familiarity and symbolic value in today’s

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marketplace, did not immediately appeal to Knight; “I don’t love it,” Knight is said to have remarked, “but I think it will grow on me.”\(^{203}\) For around the retail price of one of his Nike sneakers, Knight secured what was to become one of the most recognizable cultural symbols in the world of consumer identities.

Shortly after settling on the new Swoosh logo, Knight asked his employees to come up with a name for their brand. The difficulty, according to Bob Woodell, an early sales executive at Nike, was that Knight asked them to have a name prepared for nine-o’clock the following morning. If they could not settle on a name by then, Knight was prepared to go with his first choice, “Dimension Six.”\(^ {204}\) According to several insiders, Jeff Johnson quite literally came up with the name Nike in his sleep.\(^ {205}\) According to Strasser and Becklund:

> Johnson went to bed, thought about it for 5 minutes, decided it wasn’t his problem, and fell asleep. At 7 the next morning, he sat bolt upright in bed and said, right out loud, “Nike.” My God, he thought, what a perfect name for a running shoe! Nike, the winged goddess of victory from Greek mythology.\(^ {206}\)

Knight was, once again, underwhelmed by the options being presented to him; reviewing all of the alternative name proposals, Knight bemoaned, “I guess we’ll go with that Nike thing for now. I really don’t like any of them, but I guess that’s the best of the bunch.”\(^ {207}\)

By 1972, jogging had evolved from a simple form of exercise to a broad cultural movement. Around the same time, Knight and his staff at Nike began aggressively pursuing athlete endorsements for their footwear. For their first athlete, Nike targeted a local running hero named Steve Prefontaine. “Pre,” as he was affectionately known, was catapulted to national attention when he graced the cover of *Sports Illustrated* as a nineteen-year-old freshman running

\(^{203}\) Strasser and Becklund, “Swoosh,” 125-126  
\(^{204}\) Ibid, 128.  
\(^{205}\) This story was relayed by various Nike insiders including: Strasser and Becklund, Donald Katz, and Geoff Hollister.  
\(^{206}\) Strasser and Becklund, “Swoosh,” 128.  
\(^{207}\) Ibid.
for Bowerman at the University of Oregon. Over the course of his brief career, Pre achieved a mythical status as an American success story, a personification of the American dream that helped Nike define its corporate identity. Prefontaine was, according to Phil Knight, “a rebel from a working class background, a guy full of cockiness and pride and guts.” One of Nike’s first advertising executives, J.B Strasser, recalled an instance when Prefontaine was forced to get twelve stitches in his big toe just three days before the national collegiate championship, and was ordered by doctors to rest for a minimum of two weeks. Unfazed, Prefontaine ran anyways, winning the three-mile collegiate championship as a freshman, and setting a new meet record in the process. Shortly thereafter, Prefontaine officially joined the Nike team as its first sponsored athlete in 1972.

Pre’s attitude was, nevertheless, not without its critics. In a 1972 special to the New York Times, Neil Amdur suggested that conservative cynics were put off by Prefontaine’s confident demeanor and felt that “Pre” actually stood for precocious. In a theme that would be recurrent throughout the company’s evolution, this publicly positioned Nike against the established conservatism of the American sporting authority. Prefontaine and Nike constituted a perfect pair because, according to sociologist Theresa Walton, “Prefontaine filled the company’s void of a charismatic young runner to represent their products, and Nike provided Prefontaine with a product that suited his tough, non-conformist attitude towards sports.” Tragically, Prefontaine’s partnership with Nike ended prematurely when, on May 30, 1975, just hours after an event at the University of Oregon, Prefontaine was killed in a car accident at the age of just

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208 Sports Illustrated (June 15, 1970).  
209 Quoted in: Katz, “Just Do It,” 64.  
210 Strasser and Becklund, “Swoosh,” 145.  
211 Neil Amdur, “Prefontaine: ‘Pre’ for Pre-Eminent or Precocious,” New York Times (June 1, 1972): 58. This narrative has resurfaced, this time with a racial tint, in the modern press’ treatment of the Carolina Panthers demonstrative quarterback Cam Newton.  
twenty-four.\footnote{213} In the wake of Prefontaine’s death, Nike nourished a “rogue culture” predicated on Pre’s working class anti-authoritarian impulses, bravado, and determination. In the words of Phil Knight, “Pre’s spirit is the cornerstone of this company.”\footnote{214}

Pre was also the mold for a generation of Nike athletes and Nike consumers. According to David Benjamin:

> The country was in the midst of a phenomenon that has been described as the ‘Me Decade,’ an era in which a rising generation of young Americans, wealthier and better educated than any generation in history, became obsessed with an almost religious self absorption… an era in which conformity and rebellion seem insolubly confused.\footnote{215}

During this era, an emerging counterculture challenged the traditional white establishment and various conventional hierarchies of authority. As part of the broader counterculture movement, displays of economic wealth were being replaced by cultural displays, and Nike’s symbolic value increased as an emblem of hip anti-authoritarianism. To the generation of consumers coming of age during the 1970s, Nike shoes could be more than a pair of sneakers; they could be symbols of identity and an indication of category membership within the ever-shifting intricacies of ‘cool.’ In a sense, Nike sneakers offered the consumer a sense of agency in the creation and navigation of their identities.

Part of the product of Nike’s efforts to create a culture around athletic shoes was an increase in brand consciousness amongst consumers. The ubiquity and recognizability of the Swoosh today obscures the very processes through which it came to dominate the landscape of athletic consumption. The 1970s marked a period in which elementary school students became footwear-brand conscious and refused mothers’ pleas to buy certain brands. “Rejects—they make your feet feel fine,” children chanted in jest at students whose consumption patterns didn’t

\footnote{214}{Katz, “Just Do It,” 64.}
match their definition of cool, “Rejects—they cost a dollar ninety-nine.” This was a generation of consumers that marked its milestones not by books read or movies seen, but by ads consumed, and it created a society that was more brand-conscious but less fixated on traditional markers of social or cultural differentiation. This is an important point of diversion if we are to understand the complexities of American personality structures and race relations over the last twenty-five years. This served to both flatten and deepen Americans’ searches for self-actualization by eliminating traditional social barriers and replacing them with newly defined and ever shifting communities of consumption that veiled persistent institutional racism.

Throughout the 1970s, Nike looked for ways to expand its brand while maintaining its anti-authoritarian, and anti-elitist corporate identity. Nike executives identified tennis as a sport that was rapidly gaining popularity in America’s mainstream and, in keeping with their anti-establishment corporate identity, mounted an assault against the sport’s “gentlemanly” conduct and perceived elitism. To achieve this end, Nike partnered with white “bad boy” athletes who seemed to embody the company’s corporate spirit of anti-authoritarianism. This began in 1972 with the signing of Ilie Nastase, a Romanian tennis superstar commonly referred to simply as “Nasty” because he was known to swear and even spit at crowds and to engage in gamesmanship tactics, often in an effort to disconcert an opponent and win a match he was in danger of losing. By signing Nastase, Nike took its “first step in a highly successful marketing campaign

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218 Robert J. Lake, “The ‘Bad Boys’ of Tennis: Shifting Gender and Social Class Relations in the Era of Nastase, Connors, and McEnroe,” Journal of Sport History Vol. 42 (2) (Summer, 2015): 184. Richard Evans, offered the following, more romanticized description of Nastase: “He is a veritable maestro of the art of instituting bedlam.” in Open Tennis: 25 Years of Seriously Defiant Success on and off the Court (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), 179.
that turned white “bad boy” athletes into counterculture heroes who sold shoes.”\footnote{Strasser and Becklund, “Swoosh,” 134.}

Significantly, black athletes who mirrored this “bad boy” identity were still not palatable to whites and so were not used by Nike in general advertising because black deviance was often perceived as a threat to white morality whereas white deviance was understood as anti-authoritarian and progressive. This can be observed in the vast chasm between the press’ careful treatment of “deviant” blacks like Muhammad Ali and their celebration and commodification of what they saw as deviant white anti-elitism.

The next in Nike’s lineage of “bad boy” athletes was a nineteen-year-old American tennis phenomenon by the name of John McEnroe. McEnroe signed with Nike in 1978 for a reported $100,000, and almost immediately earned a reputation as tennis’ “Super Brat” for his deviance from the established tennis order.\footnote{Cec Jennings, “Players’ Emotions and Earnings Run High in Big Money Tennis Racket,” The Globe and Mail (Toronto, February 6, 1992): C12} “Mac,” as he was affectionately known around Nike, repeatedly cursed out officials and demonstrated a strong distaste for authority bringing a brash style to tennis that both outraged and inspired spectators. The John McEnroe many fans perceived as spoiled and immature was seen by Nike as “an anti-elitist thorn in the side of an aristocratic tennis establishment.”\footnote{Katz, “Just Do It,” 37.} Ian Hamilton, the first director of marketing for Nike’s tennis division, had this to say about Nike’s partnership with Mac: “He epitomized the type of player Nike wanted in its shoes—talented, dedicated, and loud. He broke racquets, drew fines, and, most of all, won matches. His success and behavior drew attention on and off the court and put a lot of people in Nikes.”\footnote{Chris Gratton, “The Economic Importance of Modern Sport,” Culture, Sport, Society Vol. 1 (1) (1998): 103.} McEnroe’s popularity would have been entirely unachievable for a black athlete who carried himself in the same manner. Nike’s “bad boy” tennis identity...
reflected the vast spectrum of acceptable white behavior in contrast to the very limited boundaries of public expressions of blackness.

Interestingly, if it were up to Nike’s research department, Knight’s strategy of pursuing elite athletes to endorse his products would have been a short-lived experiment. In Nike’s 1976 annual report from research, Knight had been warned that it was a mistake “to seek [the] services of athletes and pay them for merely wearing shoes or other equipment.”223 Yet, Knight recognized that athletes provided an opportunity to penetrate deeper into the psyche of American consumers and leverage a powerful emotional connection between the aspirations of the consumer and the product. According to Naomi Klein, an expert in brand creation and promotion, once Nike was inside of the game through its athletes, “it could have fanatical sports fans instead of customers.”224 The thrill of seeing real athletes compete in Nike shoes, and knowing that thousands of other potential customers saw them too, convinced Knight that athlete endorsements would be far more persuasive to consumers than advertisements. This strategy evolved alongside a broader civil rights movement in which token representations of blackness were increasingly attractive to white consumers as symbols of ‘cool.’

Conclusion: A “Revolution” in Nike Marketing and the Birth of Athletic Consumption Communities

Nike’s advertising focus noticeably shifted during the mid 1970s as their consumer base began reaching from elite athletes to the American mainstream. In July 1975, Nike ran an advertisement in Runner’s World magazine that proclaimed, “This shoe is not for everybody, it’s only for those who want the best.”225 This kind of advertising marked a break for Nike because, for the first time, it focused on defining what it meant to be a Nike consumer rather than extoling

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224 Klein, “No Logo,” 54.
the physical qualities of Nike shoes.\textsuperscript{226} It was, in effect, the first advertisement that attempted to define the cultural space of the Nike consumer. In an interview with the \textit{Harvard Business Review}, Knight reflected positively on the importance of transitioning from the product to the consumer in marketing the Nike brand:

\begin{quote}
We came to see that focusing solely on the products was a great way for a brand to start, but it just wasn’t enough. We had to fill in the blanks. We had to learn to do well all the things involved in getting to the consumer, starting with understanding who the consumer is and what the brand represents.\textsuperscript{227}
\end{quote}

The result of Nike’s shift in marketing focus was the creation of what historian Daniel Boorstin calls a “consumption community,” wherein members form relationships through the insignia of mass consumption.\textsuperscript{228} These consumption communities, according to Boorstin, were non-ideological and democratic and served as a site for what Benedict Anderson famously termed “imagined affinities,” through which Americans who never had any physical contact with one another were held together by their common use and display of consumed goods.\textsuperscript{229} More recently, Albert Muniz and Thomas O’Guinn have termed these cultural spaces as “brand communities,” which they define as specialized, non-geographically bound communities, based around a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand.\textsuperscript{230} These affinities blurred traditional class distinctions and were the site of tangible shared aspirations and values, and, as such, provided a democratic space for the navigation of displayable consumer identities. Nike shoes were a material, externalized symbol system that connected people to a social world and

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{226} Nike’s shift in advertising focus had discernible economic impacts. In 1972, Nike sales were around $3 million; in 1976, they were over $14 million; in 1977, they were up to $28 million, and by 1978, Nike was generating over $71 million in sales. From Cynthia Jabs, “Nike: The Shoes That Go ‘Swoosh,’” \textit{New York Times} (August 19, 1979): F5.


\textsuperscript{228} Schudson, Advertising,” 159.

\textsuperscript{229} Boorstin, “The Americans,” 89.

\end{flushleft}
then individualized them within that world. These social worlds were much more democratic than the traditional social classes in society, yet, as we shall soon discover, racial difference persisted through the very notion of representational racial progress.

Nike products and advertisements gained a special cultural influence as baby boomers became the dominant voice in America’s corporate landscape because they crystalized the corporation as the patron of much of the generation’s shared ideals and collective fantasies. As well-intentioned baby boomers took control of production and representation in America’s consumer society during the post-1960s era, they presented young consumers from generation X with visual confirmation of the success of racial integration. The narrative of racial progress through sport offers an acute example of what the social critic Benjamin DeMott described as the media’s relentless promotion of “feel-good images” of black-white sameness that systematically avoids all tangible racial conflict.\textsuperscript{231} DeMott continues to suggest that these media images, which are severely divorced from urban realities, “have been teaching mass audiences everywhere that race differences belong to the past, that inequalities of power and status and means have disappeared, that at work blacks are as likely as whites to be found at the top as at the bottom.”\textsuperscript{232}

This “orthodoxy of sameness” gave white Americans a false sense of progress, which during the 1980s, intersected with a Reagan-era ideal of “colorblind” masculinity to demonstrate the limits of racial liberalism.

In 1987, Nike released its “Revolution” advertising campaign, a “fabulously successful” marketing blitz that showed popular Nike athletes alongside assorted everyday Americans cavorting in Nike’s to the 1968 Beatles song of the same name.\textsuperscript{233} Nike was intentionally leveraging symbols of the 1960s counterculture movement to sell shoes to a much younger

\textsuperscript{231} Benjamin DeMott, “Sure, We’re All Just One Big Happy Family,” \textit{New York Times} (January 7, 1996), H1.
\textsuperscript{232} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{233} Swift, “Farewell, My Lovely.”
generation of consumers. In 1988, Nike introduced the “Just do it” slogan as a rallying cry to get off the couch and participate in sport. The slogan itself stemmed from an attitude that has been consistent within the Nike creed since the company’s inception: during an advertising meeting in 1988, one of Knight’s employees interjected, “what we need to convey, is just go ahead, just fuck it.” For any ‘it’ an American could think to pursue, Nike had the right pair of shoes, allowing consumers to express their rejection of barriers to sport through an expression of irreverence for self-imposed limitations. In this Nike narrative, there were no barriers to transcendence, only self-imposed limitations. This was particularly problematic for black Americans during the 1980s because the Reaganite narrative of colorblind masculinity presented success as a product of personal dedication and commitment rather than an institutional racial caste system. Nike’s mantra of “Just Do It” resonated with millions of Americans because it spoke to the, “restraint and inhibition in everyday life that keep people from the experience of transcendence. Nike provides a language of self-empowerment- no matter who you are, no matter what your physical, economic, or social limitations. The Nike philosophy challenges us to confront, and hopefully, to overcome barriers.” Yet, it provided little in terms of meaningful racial integration because it reduced existent social and institutional barriers into inconsequential hurdles, easily conquerable for black Americans who possessed sufficient resolve and the Nike know-how.

Nike helped millions of Americans create new definitions of themselves and revise the cultural categories to which they belonged. By the time Nike created a cultural community around personal improvement and individual empowerment through sport, black athletes had laid the groundwork for a boom in the use of black celebrity in national marketing campaigns.

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Through sport they had proven themselves worthy of the opportunities offered to whites and their admiration across the racial spectrum hinted at a more general acceptance of “blackness” in American popular culture. As Donald Green, the senior Vice President of marketing for McDonalds noted about consumers of the 1970s and 1980s, “They look at these guys as great athletes who do superhuman things. They don’t look at color at all.” Nike marketing and their creation of a cultural community presented a public space in which black celebrities could be presented and accepted as icons of American ideals. Nonetheless, as the African American legal scholar Michelle Alexander so astutely noted in her treatise on the maintenance of a racial caste system in the post-1964 United States, “Racism is highly adaptable,” continually reborn in new form, “tailored to the needs and constraints of the time.”

This process is evidenced in Nike’s exploitation of certain expressions of blackness and the broader press’ reluctance to publicly represent any black athlete who deviated from the boundaries of their expected compliant docility.

Yale University professor Reva Siegel termed this process: “preservation through transformation,” in which race stratification in American society is maintained through systems of racial differentiation even though the rules and rhetoric governing race and equality change. Although Siegel primarily discusses this “preservation through transformation” in the context of legal guarantees of racial equality, the process is easily discernable elsewhere in American cultural history. In the context of sport, the representation of African American athletes during the post civil rights era offers a primary example of how this process unfolded despite the

236 Swift, “Reach Out.”
seemingly well-intentioned cultural proponents of racial liberalism. We will now turn our attention to an in-depth look at how Nike marketing picked up and expanded on this trend during the 1980s through its partnership with the black basketball and marketing superstar Michael Jordan.

For the Black people of the world there is no bright tomorrow... For the white people, still masters of the world, do not have to yield. They have never changed their real attitude toward Black people during all the passing centuries, and there is absolutely nothing upon which to base the belief that they will change in the centuries to come. -- Chancellor Williams, *The Destruction of Black Civilization* (1971)

Not a Layup but a Slam Dunk: Michael Jordan, Nike, and the Revolution in Celebrity Branding

On January 20, 1980, Los Angeles Rams running back Wendell Tyler took the field for Super Bowl XIV wearing two brands of shoe. On his left foot, Tyler donned the famous 3-stripes of Adidas while on his right, he sported a lesser-known Pony. (Figure 3.1) Rather amazingly, few amongst the some 130,000 fans and media personnel in attendance and the estimated 76,000,000 television viewers noticed the peculiar stunt. The fact that Tyler, a starting running back for a Superbowl bound team, was willing to forgo his stylistic and athletic equilibrium in pursuit of extra endorsement dollars sheds light on the vastly different landscape of sports branding at the dawn of the 1980s. Within five years, new modes of advertising made consumers so brand-conscious that a stunt of this nature would certainly have been noticed and discussed by millions. More significantly, by accepting money from competing shoe companies Tyler inadvertantly presupposed a wellspring of endorsement opportunities that rapidly became available to black professional athletes during the 1980s as part of a broader shift in America’s

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240 Keteyian, “Foot Soldiers.”
social and political climate. For a brief historical moment, Wendell Tyler had one foot in the past and one foot in the future.

The most significant influence in this transition was Nike’s marketing of African American athletes during the 1980s and 1990s which drastically altered perceptions and discourse about the social impact of black sports stars. This transition is best understood through what academics have termed the “colorblind” revolution in the public consciousness wherein there developed a widespread believe that race no longer mattered in American society and that racism was a problem of the past. Successful black athletes represented a revivification of the American dream in modern consumer society by suggesting to privileged white Americans that the 1960s struggle for civil rights had been a resounding success. This transition is of fundamental importance in understanding American social and cultural relations in an intensely media-saturated age because, in the era of “colorblindness,” it was no longer permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, or social contempt.\footnote{Alexander, “The New Jim Crow,” Kindle e-book.}

Nevertheless, racism still existed. In fact, the very colorblind public consciousness that many hoped marked an end of racial difference in America, only served to blind the majority of Americans to the realities of race in their society, facilitating the emergence of a new racial caste system.\footnote{Ibid.}

By the middle of the 1980s, consumer culture, which presented individuality and identity formation as products of conspicuous consumption, was interacting with race and sports in fascinating and complex ways. Nike was perfectly situated to capitalize on this nuanced interaction, and, in 1984, they took their first step in what would be the company’s most successful and culturally significant advertising campaign: they signed a relatively unknown
African American basketball player named Michael Jordan to an unprecedented $2,500,000 endorsement contract. At the time, shoe companies were competing to sign as many professional basketball players to endorsement deals as they could possibly afford. Volume of representation, then, was favored over the individual personalities of athletes or products. By 1984, Nike had some 120 professional basketball players under contract, many of whom were no longer active and had virtually no impact on consumers.243

Nike executives wanted to consolidate their corporate image through a single figure, a superstar behind whom they could build a marketing push. It had to be an athlete who was fresh, talented, healthy, charismatic and fit the Nike ideal of sport. Moreover, Nike executives understood that by the 1980s many white Americans were eager to embrace token or exceptional individual African Americans, and so, looked to present a black athlete as an embodiment of their corporate ideals. Nike’s head of basketball scouting, Sonny Vaccaro, knew that Jordan was just the man for the job: “Jordan was brilliant. He was charismatic. He was the best player Vaccaro had ever seen. He could fly through the air,” recalled Nike’s top advertising executive Rob Strasser.244 “Would you bet your job on Jordan?” Strasser asked Vaccaro, “Yes, no question,” he replied, “I’d pay him whatever it takes.”245 However, unlike Prefontaine, Nastase, and McEnroe, Jordan was expected to behave in a manner that communicated compliance and an appreciation for American sport. Unlike the white “bad boys” who had come before him, Jordan’s deviance and anti-establishment behavior were carefully controlled and even commodified by Nike executives in an effort to make his celebrity more palatable and exciting to whites. Public figures like Michael Jordan who “are truly exceptional by any standards, along with others who have been granted exceptional opportunities, legitimate a system that remains

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243 Strasser and Becklund, “Swoosh,” 534.
244 Ibid, 535.
245 Ibid, 536.
fraught with racial bias—especially when they fail to challenge, or even acknowledge, the prevailing racial order.”

Reviewing a list of potential names for their new signature line, both Jordan’s agent and Nike’s top advertising executives were drawn to “Air Jordan” because it seemed to embody the athleticism and style of play that made Jordan such a spectacular basketball player. Jordan’s identity as an athlete was defined by his seemingly superhuman ability to leap and glide through the air; an ability to, as Nike marketing would put it, “take flight.” Air Jordan was a name that reflected, to some degree, Jordan’s identity as a black basketball player; a practitioner of the unique “black style of play,” as defined by the highflying acrobatics of the “airborne brothers” of the ABA. This, as we shall soon discover, represented a token appropriation of ‘blackness’ that preserved ideologies of racial difference in the post civil rights United States. Jordan’s athleticism was never questioned, however, his overall acumen as a basketball player was; experts felt that Jordan was a raw, unpolished talent, lacking the traditional shooting and passing abilities of an NBA guard and too small to play forward. Heading into the 1984 NBA draft, basketball experts believed that Hakeem Olajuwon would be the best NBA talent and many questioned if Jordan’s non-traditional style of play would translate to success at the next level. Even the guys at Nike were underwhelmed by the signing of Jordan: “There was not a whole lot of commotion over the signing of a new Nike athlete,” reminisced Geoff Hollister, one of Nike’s earliest employees. On draft day, Jordan was passed over by both the Houston Rockets and the Portland Trailblazers, falling instead to the Chicago Bulls at number three.

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247 The ABA was the acronym for the American Basketball Association—a professional league coexisting with the NBA from 1967 until the two leagues merged in 1976 to form the modern day NBA. For an in depth look at the “black style of play” see Nelson George, *Elevating the Game: Black Men and Basketball*, (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 181.
248 Geoff Hollister, *Out of Nowhere*, 250.
Although it may be difficult to envision today, Michael Jordan actually grew up wearing Adidas sneakers. In fact, he was so inclined towards Adidas that he reportedly almost accepted a scholarship offer to the University of Virginia because their uniforms included Adidas sneakers whereas the North Carolina Tarheels wore Converse. Ultimately, Jordan decided to go to North Carolina but continued to wear Adidas shoes in practice because he preferred their feel and performance to that of the competition.\(^{249}\) Jordan, it would appear, had never even tried Nike shoes when the company’s courtship began in 1984. There were no guarantees that Jordan would even play well in the shoes, let alone like them enough to allow them to become such an intricate part of his identity. The financial risk involved in this partnership was also substantial for Nike because their highest paid basketball player before Jordan earned around $100,000, and the largest endorsement deal ever offered to an athlete, black or white, had been around $500,000.\(^{250}\) General advertising rhetoric strongly suggested that no athlete could sell shoes because consumers weren’t interested in individual athlete’s personalities and sneakers but instead noticed the volume of a particular shoe company in the professional setting.\(^{251}\) When Magic Johnson, the point guard who played for the Los Angeles Lakers, approached his shoe company during the early 1980s with a proposal for a sneaker marketed with his very famous name, he was told, rather assuredly, that no basketball player, even one of the best and most charismatic playing in the media and popular culture capital of the world, could sell a pair of shoes. If the Jordan experiment failed, it is quite likely that Nike, too, would have abandoned the tactic and the landscape of sports and sports marketing would have taken a vastly different shape.\(^{252}\)

\(^{249}\) Strasser and Becklund, “Swoosh,” 536.  
\(^{250}\) Keteyian, “Foot Soldiers.”  
\(^{252}\) Of course, the partnership worked even better than anyone predicted: when the line was released, Nike executives hoped it might generate $10,000,000 in sales, however, the company sold $130,000,000 worth of Air Jordan
Nike launched its first advertising campaign featuring Michael Jordan in April of 1985. The campaign was called “Jordan Flight” and it centered on a thirty second television spot of Michael Jordan soaring through the air to the sound of jet engines revving for takeoff.\footnote{NIKE, Inc., “Jordan Flight,” directed by Jim Riswold (California: Chiat Day, 1985).} For the final ten seconds of the advertisement, Jordan floated through the air with his legs splayed in the now ubiquitous “Air Jordan” pose. (Figure 3.2) Donald Katz described the commercial as a slow-motion tableau so magically drawn out that it enchanted spectators and surrounded Jordan with a superhero’s mythos.\footnote{Donald Katz, “Triumph.”} The commercial was wildly successful and cemented Jordan’s image in consumer’s minds as: ‘the Nike Guy who could fly.’

The illusion evoked by Nike was that Jordan’s “wings” were somehow laced securely to his feet, symbolized by the soaring Nike swoosh. In working with Nike, Jordan transformed himself into “Air Jordan,” a brand larger than just a basketball player. The American author, James Twitchell, admirably captured people’s innate reverence for Jordan’s athleticism:

> In art-historical terms, Mr. Jordan is hanging there in the sub-lime—just below (sub-) the edge (-limen) of the next world. This is the literal Air Jordan. If you look at Renaissance church paintings, or Impressionistic landscape painting, you realize that whatever is in this ethereal band of air is graced with transcendental meaning. The golden halo of a hovering Giotto angel, or the bursting sunlight at the horizon of a Turner vortex, is a signifier of a man’s ancient yearning for life above the limen, at the edge of transcendence. We want up and out of the dreary world of earth, and

sneakers in its first year, and, many believe, entered the fold of America’s most culturally transformative corporations. See David Halberstam, “A Hero for the Wired World: In a Satellite Age, Michael Jordan has Become the Fast-Rising Global Star of Basketball’s Fast-Growing Global Show,” \textit{Sports Illustrated} (December 23, 1991).
never tire of picturing it. We dream of soaring like a bird, not burrowing like a mole.\textsuperscript{255}

In a stroke of bizarre fortune, the NBA banned Nike’s first Air Jordan sneaker because it was colorful and so violated the league’s on-court dress code.\textsuperscript{256} Many consumers during the 1980s responded to Air Jordan shoes because, being opposed to tradition and the establishment, they were incensed when the hidebound NBA cognoscenti banned the shoe. Never the ones to miss an opportunity for free publicity, Nike jumped at the chance to pit itself against the NBA establishment and released an advertising campaign named “Banned by the NBA,” which drew attention to the controversy over players’ right to choose their own shoes. The Jordan and Nike brands became fused in Americans’ minds as symbols of consumer agency. As Knight remembered in an interview with the \textit{Harvard Business Review}: “We actually welcome the kind of publicity that pits us against the establishment, as long as we know we’re on the right side of the issue. Michael Jordan wore the shoes despite being threatened with fines, and, of course, he played like no one has ever played before. It was everything you could ask for, and sales just took off.”\textsuperscript{257} In Michael Jordan and the Air Jordan sneaker, Nike had won the sports celebrity branding lottery; they had found a sports celebrity and publicity controversy that young shoe buyers felt personally invested in because it endorsed consumers’ right to emulate a superior athlete through spending and self-fashioning. It also helped that the athlete at the heart of the controversy was a black male because it allowed Nike to position itself as the patron of democratic ideals in the consumer marketplace; Nike could be seen as a racially progressive corporation despite the fact that the men steering the ship were invariably white.


\textsuperscript{256} The shoe was banned because it didn’t have any white in it. As David Letterman once cheekily remarked in an interview with Michael Jordan, this was ironic because, neither did the NBA.

\textsuperscript{257} Willigan, \textit{“High Performance},” 96.
Nike encouraged Jordan to wear the shoes despite, or, more accurately, *in-spite of* NBA regulations, in an effort to harness public consciousness to sell shoes. This marketing strategy was a product of Nike’s roots in the baby boom generation’s anti-authoritarian impulses; Nike had long endeavored to be the corporate embodiment of the generation’s counter cultural rhetoric and Phil Knight and Nike’s earliest executives were baby boomers who sincerely represented the generation’s ideals in the corporate landscape. Nonetheless, by encouraging a black celebrity like Jordan to engage in commodifiable acts of defiance, Nike perpetuated a subtle form of racism that governed ways of thinking about African American youth during the second half of the 1980s and into the 1990s. During the 1980s, defiance and criminality became, in the public consciousness, particularly and peculiarly associated with young African American males. Defiance was part of what sociologists Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson call the “cool pose” in their discussion of contemporary African American masculinity. The “cool pose” served as a “ritualized form of masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength, and control.”\(^258\) This was particularly significant for black Americans living in a society that carefully monitored and limited their public expressions of blackness. Somewhat paradoxically, the “cool pose” also presented significant challenges for young black Americans by encouraging behaviors that reinforced the stereotype of the deviant young black male. For a generation of consumers eager to appropriate token expressions of African American culture and identity as evidence of racial progress, Jordan’s defiance of NBA regulations was a “cool” appropriation of an understanding of blackness that served to deepen superficial racial difference in American society.

“*Be Like Mike*: Exploring the Meaning of Jordan in the Black and White Communities

\(^258\) Majors and Mancini Billson, “Cool Pose,” 4.
As a black superstar, Jordan represented the decades old “integrationist romance” that saw sports as a cultural utopia wherein anyone could make it in the society of competition and status and overcome the limitations of race.\textsuperscript{259} Yet, this very narrative of individual African American success has been shown to be more of an obstacle than an advantage when it comes to meaningful racial equality in the US. The assumption that mobility is always possible, regardless of race, has been fundamental to America’s development of a positive collective self-image since WWII. Representations of individual black successes like Michael Jordan served as a vindication of this democratic ideal by lending credence “to the notion that anyone, no matter how poor or how black you may be, can make it to the top, if only you try hard enough,” observed Michelle Alexander.\textsuperscript{260} In a sense, Jordan’s popular signification legitimates a system that remains plagued by racial bias. During the later twentieth century, America’s system of social control depended on black exceptionalism; it was not disproved or undermined by it.\textsuperscript{261}

According to sports sociologist David L. Andrews, a racist narrative continued to inform popular attitudes about black athletes during the era of Jordan, namely, that they were supremely athletic bodies void of the intellect and intelligence of the white mind.\textsuperscript{262} Just as Jordan was rising to prominence, Caroline Jones, the president of the black-owned advertising agency bearing her name, remarked, “People will think ‘black’ no matter how well a black person can dribble, shoot or swim.”\textsuperscript{263} Yet, it wasn’t simply his athleticism and talent as a basketball player that set Jordan apart from other black celebrities: through his role as a corporate spokesperson for Nike, Jordan transcended the traditional barriers imposed on African American athletes by

\textsuperscript{259} Kellner, “Sports, Media,” 462.
\textsuperscript{261} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{263} Hiestand, “Do Black Athletes,” 73
white consumers because he was accepted more intimately within American culture as a model of ‘hip’ masculinity in a society that was, at least outwardly, open to the ideals of racial liberalism.

Michael Jordan was what marketers call a racial “crossover” sensation because he achieved a widespread appeal across the racial spectrum and was adored equally by black and white Americans. Jordan’s agent once described him as, “the first modern crossover in team sports,” and a man who, “transcends race, transcends basketball.” As author and sports journalist Jim Naughton argued in 1992, “Jordan is the figure who has transcended the black identity of professional basketball, and thus garnered a widespread and inclusive simulated appeal that resulted in him becoming America’s favorite athlete, a status no black man before him had achieved.” Indeed, Phil Knight once described himself as the Branch Rickey of advertising and whole-heartedly believed that he could promote positive racial progress by looking for great personalities who transcended race.

There had certainly been popular crossover athletes before Jordan: Joe Louis, Jesse Owens, Jackie Robinson, Arthur Ashe, O.J. Simpson, and Julius Erving, amongst many others, all appealed to white fans. Nevertheless, their identities remained tethered to a distinct blackness that prevented them from achieving widespread appeal, not as supreme sportsmen, but as representative figures in America’s consumer society. Erving, for example, sported a “bushy Afro,” which signified and cemented his blackness and limited many white consumers’ desire to emulate him. However, this negative racialization was largely reversed in the era of Jordan; as Peter de Jonge pointed out in 1993, through the representation of figures like Jordan, the NBA

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264 Quoted in Curry Kirkpatrick, “In an Orbit All His Own,” *Sports Illustrated* (November 9, 1987).
266 Ibid.
267 George, “Elevating the Game,” 185.
“prospered by giving middle-class whites, desperate for some semblance of connection to black America,” non-threatening expressions of blackness that could be consumed and appropriated in whites’ processes of self-identification.\(^{268}\) This crossover marketing strategy encouraged affluent young whites to adopt ‘hip’ cultural symbols of blackness—styles of clothing, rap and hip-hop, and styles of speech, while learning nothing else about black life and black culture.\(^{269}\) This was problematic for black Americans because, “within current debates about race and difference,” observed the author and African American social activist bell hooks in 1992, “mass culture is the contemporary location that both publicly declares and perpetuates the idea that there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgement and enjoyment of racial difference.”\(^{270}\)

Liz Dolan, Nike’s Director of Public Relations, insists that the company never thought of Jordan in racial terms: “We don’t think of our athletes as Black and White. We think of Mike Jordan as the best basketball player in the world.”\(^{271}\) Phil Knight echoed this rhetoric in an interview for *Sports Illustrated*: “I guarantee you that Michael Jordan is a better spokesperson than Larry Bird,” he said in reference to a popular white contemporary of Jordan, flatly denying the decades-old advertising fear of white backlash to black models.\(^{272}\) Nike suggested to consumers that they could wear Jordan’s shoes and participate in a cultural community united by a shared ideal of sport and a transcendental symbol of ‘cool.’ Nike invited and encouraged an age of white consumers, especially affluent young males, eager to adopt symbols of black culture as evidence of racial equality, to buy Air Jordan sneakers and to be “Like Mike.” According to hooks, affluent whites were lured to certain symbols of black culture by “the combination of

\(^{269}\) Hoberman, “Darwin’s Athletes,” 34.
\(^{270}\) hooks, “Eating the Other,” 21.
\(^{272}\) E.M. Swift, “Reach Out.”
pleasure and danger.” In the setting of commodity culture, Jordan’s racial identity meant different things to white and black consumers.

Nonetheless, Jordan was black, and his style of play, as presented to American consumers, reflected a historical understanding of black athletic superiority that was, in and of itself, a peculiarly racialized narrative. In a 1992 special edition of Ebony magazine detailing the importance of sport within the black cultural community, the magazine’s editors suggested that Jordan was a culmination of a process through which black athletes in the postwar era saved the game of basketball by bringing new levels of excitement. The “black” style of play, as envisioned by Ebony, was defined by “fast-breaking, slam-dunking, in-your-face” basketball, and Jordan was the most popular and successful practitioner of this style in the history of the game. What’s more, as Michael Eric Dyson explained in 1993, Jordan’s style of play, much like Jazz music, reflected the fluid spontaneity of black culture, “the way acts of apparently random occurrence are spontaneously and imaginatively employed by Africans and African-Americans in a variety of forms of cultural expression.” When examining Jordan's game,” explains Dyson, “this feature of African-American culture clearly functions in his unpredictable eruptions of basketball creativity.” Even the “Jumpman” logo (Figure 3.3), the now omnipresent silhouette of Jordan floating through the air en-route to another gravity-defying dunk, as explained by Cassandra Jackson, functions as a reminder of Jordan’s blackness by fetishizing the “sinewy turns” of Jordan’s black male body.

276 Ibid.
It is important to note that despite the negative consequences of the Jordan phenomenon: the overemphasis on sports in the black community, the perpetuation of racial difference, and the commodification of token successes in the defense of American democracy, Nike legitimately trod new ground in their approach to and treatment of diversity in advertising. Charles Grantham, the longtime executive director of the National Basketball Players Association was amongst the first to explain how Nike and other shoe companies altered discussions about race relations in America: “Wilt Chamberlain, Oscar Robertson, Gale Sayers and Willie Stargell were all personable guys,” however, white Americans were not prepared to embrace a black athlete as an ideal of modern masculinity, he recalled, “It took companies that were willing to step up and be associated with black athletes and the shoe companies deserve credit for that.”

There certainly is a challenging paradox at play in a society that invites and welcomes black achievement precisely as it endeavors to take the ‘blackness’ out of said achievement. David L. Andrews tackled this challenging dichotomy in his 1996 article “The Fact(s) of Michael Jordan’s Blackness,” in which he suggests “The fact of Michael Jordan’s blackness, to paraphrase Frantz Fanon (1967), is without doubt one of the most pivotal, yet strangely overlooked questions posed by contemporary American culture.” Jordan’s popular signification, “reveals a complex narrative incorporating man of the historically grounded racial

278 Swift, “Reach Out”.
279 Andrews, “The Fact(s),“ 125.
codes that continue to structure the racial formation of the United States.”

Jordan’s carefully engineered humble yet charismatic brand and celebrity was part of a shrewd strategy to distance his identity from its “blackness” in order to successfully harness rather than alienate popular opinion. This strategy directly mirrors the one employed by the management group of Joe Louis during an era of violent Jim Crow segregation and Branch Rickey’s selection of Robinson as a confident yet compliant and appreciative black athlete in an era of introspective anxiety about the contradictions of American democracy. Nearly forty years had passed since Robinson “broke down” the color barrier in professional sports yet the media’s treatment of black celebrity remained much the same. In this narrative, Michael Jordan was not an example of racial transcendence, but rather, “an agent of racial displacement.”

In a 1968 exposé for *Sports Illustrated*, journalist Jack Olsen warned Americans that sports were helping to perpetuate a racially oppressive system by consuming the attention of young African American males who might otherwise strive to be intellectual or community leaders. Olsen alerted Americans to the myth of the social utility of integrated sport by exposing the paradoxical challenges it presented for the black community. Olsen’s warning went largely unnoticed during the late 1960s but resurfaced in the era of Michael Jordan as it became increasingly evident that the deeply engrained institutional hurdles to racial equality had yet to be overcome. In fact, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, black athleticism as a source of pride in the African American community was so deeply entrenched that black Americans found it particularly hard to acknowledge the limits of sport. Consider, for example, the perplexing opinion expressed by the renowned Reverend Jesse Jackson in 1993, that “sports can help change the despair in our communities into hope, replace low self esteem with confidence and

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280 Ibid.
281 Ibid, 140.
rebuild a true sense of community that transcends neighborhood or racial boundaries.\textsuperscript{283} Jackson was not alone in maintaining a positive assessment of sports within the black community; in a penetrating criticism of America’s postwar civil rights movement, the African American sociologist Robert Staples treated sports as a bright spot in an otherwise bleak picture of American race relations.\textsuperscript{284} Over two decades after Olsen warned Americans that the integrationist romance with sport was a false narrative serving only to further oppress black Americans, intellectual leaders of the black community were still identifying sport as a site for meaningful racial progress.

Michael Jordan’s immense popularity only intensified this discourse because, as David Andrews explained in, \textit{Michael Jordan Inc.}, “as we bask in the glow of Michael Jordan’s preeminence, it is easy to overlook that not only is he one of the most celebrated individuals in America, Jordan is also a member of the nation’s most historically oppressed and reviled populations.”\textsuperscript{285} Black celebrity, as embodied by male professional athletes, actually represented a token of white acceptance of black successes with no meaningful political implications. In an expansive text on the reification of racism and Jim Crow segregation in modern America, African American legal scholar Michelle Alexander has shown that “highly visible examples of black successes are critical to the maintenance of a racial caste system in the era of colorblindness.”\textsuperscript{286} In the current era, suggests Alexander, white Americans are often eager to embrace token or exceptional African Americans because they seem to “prove” that race is no

\textsuperscript{283} Quoted in Hoberman, “Darwin’s Athletes.”
longer relevant while blinding Americans to an institutional framework that is still fraught with racial bias.

This apparent contradiction had profound impacts within both the black and white communities, giving many black youths “an inflated sense of the very limited career prospects of collegiate and professional sport,” while simultaneously indoctrinating white youth with a compartmentalized appreciation or acceptance of “blackness.”287 The outspoken African American film director Spike Lee tackled this theme in his 1989 film- *Do the Right Thing*. In the film, Mookie, a young Black American, asks Pino, a white, Italian American, to reconcile his obvious bigotry with his love for African American athletes, actors and musicians:

Mookie: “Pino, all you ever talk about is Nigger this and Nigger that, and all your favourite people are so-called Niggers.”

Pino: “It’s different, Magic, Eddie, Prince, are not Niggers. I mean they’re not black, I mean… Let me explain myself. They’re not really black. I mean, *they’re black but they’re not really black, they’re more than black*. It’s different.”288

The idea of compartmentalization is extremely significant in the context of American racial identity formation and race relations. Black celebrities were welcome to join in the spoils of America’s racial caste system so long as they appeased white ideals and comported themselves in a manner that communicated an image of limited yet achievable black successes. As the always socially cognizant comedian Chris Rock once remarked: “I love being famous. It’s almost like being white, y’know.” Jordan was “a prominent, if underscored, signifier of racial otherness, a seemingly material vindication of what popular racist discourse had extolled all

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along…. a black version of a white cultural model who, by his very simulated existence, would ensure the submergence and subversion of racial otherness.”

Jordan’s racial identity has long been the site of a meaningful sociological debate regarding race and its function in the world of sports marketing. As we have seen, black advertising executives and academics like David Andrews and Michael Eric Dyson argued that Jordan’s blackness was merely a token for interracial harmony with no progressive political implications in the broader social economy. Moreover, these scholars argued that the circulation of high profile individual black success stories like Jordan further condemned the struggling black masses for lacking the “personal resolve” that was required to achieve in American society. The carefully engineered appearance of racial progress during the second half of the twentieth century acted as a veneer that covered the structural barriers faced by the majority of black Americans. Alternatively put, Jordan’s self-evident wholesome humility, inner-drive, and personal responsibility allowed white Americans to believe that the American dream was still working, dependent on personal traits not structural arrangements. Other scholars have term this process “enlightened racism,” through which white cultural producers presented white audiences with individual stories of black successes that provided “relief not only from fear but also from responsibility.” According to this narrative, any African American who was not successful in this society simply lacked the personal resolve or discipline that was apparently all that was required to “make it” in American society. It represented a reification of the Sambo trope in the late twentieth century by condemning individual African Americans still denigrated

289 Andrews, “The Fact(s),” 137.
by institutional racism, for lacking the personal or moral resolve needed to “make it” in American consumer society.

On the other side of this debate stood white advertising executives and the team at Nike who said they did not see race and argued that Jordan was, quite simply, the best athlete in the world. According to this narrative, the intersection of sports and popular culture during the Jordan era signified an end to the historical stigmatization and pathologization of African American males, at least in the realm of the popular. Douglas Kellner argues that the Michael Jordan “spectacle,” which includes his performance as an athlete and his representation as a spokesperson, “serves as an icon of positive representations of African Americans,” thus, “undercutting racist stereotypes and denigration.”

As the prolific author and historian David Halberstam explained in 1991, Jordan’s “beauty” was a surprise to older white Americans who grew up seeing “handsome” as a uniquely white phenomenon: “Jordan has given us, then, among other things, a new definition of American male beauty,” he explained. As sociologist C.L. Cole has argued, it was during the midst of America’s panic about the Los Angeles riots and worsening race relations that Michael Jordan came of age as “American Jordan,” a representative character of potential black citizenship defined by success, not by politics and poverty. At a time when America needed it the most, Jordan was the country’s most prominent embodiment of agency and transformative possibility, and a symbol of unity and utopic possibilities. Jordan’s popularity was a product of what historians have termed the “color-blind Reagan Revolution,” wherein American society was presented as a meritocracy in which anyone with discipline and

295 Ibid, 372.
determination could succeed. According to novelist John Edgar Wideman, Jordan “escapes gravity” and forces us to “rise above our obsession with race” by bridging the gap between white and black popular culture through his representation as a down-to-earth, middle-class, apolitical hero.\footnote{John Edgar Wideman, “Michael Jordan Leaps the Great Divide,” \textit{Esquire} (November, 1990): 140. (138-)}

The ideal of racial transcendence in popular culture nonetheless problematizes the narrative of racial equality in the United States. Just as Jordan’s “blackness” was being crystallized through Nike marketing and monikers like Air Jordan, it was also being erased in the public imagination through an intentional process whereby his public personality was not associated with any overt expressions of race. Indeed, Jordan once remarked that he wished to live beyond color, to be “neither black nor white.”\footnote{Michael Eric Dyson, “Michael Jordan,” \textit{Spin} Vol. 11 (1) (April, 1995): 75. (75)} Jordan took on what one scholar has described as a “cultural racelessness” in an effort to further promote his identity as an all-American spokesman.\footnote{Jackson, “Violence,” 70.} This problematizes the ideal of “colorblind” racial equality in the post civil rights US because it suggests that certain expressions of blackness were valued by the American mainstream while the black identity as a whole was still devalued. In 1992, the African American social activist bell hooks astutely observed: “One of the tragic ironies of contemporary black life is that individuals succeed in acquiring material privilege often by sacrificing their positive connection to black culture and black experience.”\footnote{hooks, “Black Looks,” 19.}

As a longtime reporter for \textit{Sports Illustrated} explained in 1987, “Jordan lives in the suburb of Northbrook, Illinois, which has a large Jewish population, and is at ease bantering with doctors and lawyers on the 18th green. At the same, denizens of the inner city appreciate his dazzling essence as a “street player,” and his black scrimmage mates in the gyms around Chapel Hill kid him about the
In a sense, Michael Jordan served as a reversal of the double-consciousness experienced and articulated by Du Bois and other black intellectuals of the early twentieth century by transcending the historically grounded identity of black Americans to become the very ideal of American masculinity. Jordan seems to have occupied a space in which his blackness was appropriated for an integrated audience, yet, meant different things to black and white consumers: black Americans understood Nike and Jordan as symbols of status and masculinity while white Americans embraced Jordan as an aspect of black culture that was ‘cool’ but did not influence their privileged status. Jordan lived, like so many black Americans before him, “betwixt and between” the white and black cultural worlds.

The Urban Zoo: The Commodification of the “Ghetto” for White Americans

The symbolic status achieved by both Jordan and Nike within the black community proved particularly problematic for young black males. Much like the transcendental cultural power of owning a Cadillac for black consumers during the 1950s and 1960s, the purchase and display of sneakers associated with particular black celebrities represented a vindication of the belief that black Americans could succeed in a cultural economy still controlled by whites. Through Nike marketing and a brilliant alchemy that has since made them such a powerful cultural force, the shoes on Jordan’s feet “became as magic carpets,” with the power to transport the wearer, both literally and figuratively, anywhere they could dream.\(^{301}\) Black inner city youths believed Spike Lee when he weighed in on the key to Jordan’s transcendental successes in a 1989 commercial for Nike’s annual Air Jordan sneaker: “It’s gotta be the shoes!” One of the earliest scholars to note Jordan’s racial significance in the context of sneakers was the renowned

\(^{300}\) Kirkpatrick, “In an Orbit,” 82-98.

\(^{301}\) Donald Katz, “Triumph.”
author and African American cultural specialist Michael Eric Dyson. In a pioneering work on Jordan’s cultural currency, Dyson identified the sneaker as a symbolic site of particular cultural relevance where, “a host of cultural, political and economic forces and meanings meet, collide, shatter and are reassembled to symbolize the situation of contemporary black culture.”  

Dyson continues to suggest that “the sneaker symbolizes the ingenious manner in which black cultural nuances of cool, hip, and chic have influenced the broader American cultural landscape.” In the era of Michael Jordan, “sneaker culture” was increasingly associated with black youth culture. Much like jazz music during the 1920s and 1930s, the sneaker was a cultural site of the black identity in which white Americans wanted to participate and belong.

This rhetoric emerged as a source of major criticism for Nike during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Social commentators feared that Nike marketing was disproportionately influencing the habits of poor urban blacks who flocked to buy Nikes as a status symbol: “They buy these shoes just like other kinds of Americans buy fancy cars and new suits,” observed one store-owner from Newark N.J., “It’s all about trying to find some status in the world.” Nike was scorned for targeting a segment of America’s population for whom the price of their sneakers (around $130 a pair depending on the year and model) was a significant sum. Although Nike executives claimed minority sales were responsible for only 13% of its total market share, many believed Nike’s cultural power necessitated a particular corporate social responsibility.

Concerns about Nike’s social responsibility were dramatically compounded during the late 1980s and early 1990s as a wave of highly publicized urban violence swept across America’s playgrounds. In the twelve months between May of 1989 and May 1990, Raheem

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302 Michael Eric Dyson, “Be Like Mike,” 70.
303 Ibid.
304 Quoted in Katz, “Triumph.”
305 Minority sales were responsible for 13.8% of Nike’s sales in 1990, Swift, “Crossovers.”
Wells, Chris Denby, Johnny Bates, and Michael Eugene Thomas were all murdered, allegedly by thieves who were only after their Nike sneakers. Robberies and muggings involving sneakers were also occurring much more frequently. The Atlanta police, for instance, estimated that they handled some fifty such cases in the first four months of 1990. These assailants weren’t simply taking clothes from their victims; they were taking status. Dozens of newspaper articles detailing specific cases of violence set the stage for a powerful expose in the May 14, 1990 edition of *Sports Illustrated* in which journalist Rick Telander condemned the sneaker companies as the pinnacle of American consumer exploitation:

> Something is very wrong with a society that has created an underclass that is slipping into economic and moral oblivion, an underclass in which pieces of rubber and plastic held together by shoelaces are sometimes worth more than a human life. The shoe companies have played a direct role in this. With their million-dollar advertising campaigns, superstar spokesmen and over-designed, high-priced products aimed at impressionable young people, they are creating status from thin air to feed those who are starving for self-esteem.

Public outrage focused on advertising, particularly that of Nike, for creating a surplus of unrequited desire that provoked people, especially urban blacks, to commit murder over something as meaningless as a pair of shoes. Although it seems that much of the blame was unduly directed at Nike and Michael Jordan, in a sense, these concerns were rooted in the historical exploitation of blacks in advertising. Many critics worried that Nike was exploiting black consumers who saw their sneakers as transcendental status symbols through the selective appropriation and distortion of black culture. Because Nike marketing used a repertory of cultural symbols that largely appealed to black, urban youths, their sneakers came to represent

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307 Ibid.
308 Ibid.
309 Katz, “Triumph.”
the pinnacle of aspirations and acted as a symbol of status for a community whose self-esteem had, historically, been suffocated.

During the resurgence of racial tensions in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Nike executives attempted to redefine the parameters of ‘hip’ to include, as naturally as possible, urban or “street” culture within their advertising. Nike executives relied heavily on black cultural symbols in an effort to furnish a corporate image along the leading edge of social issues. Urban basketball courts, for example, actually became the site of meaningful cultural exchange between black and white Americans and, through Nike’s innovative use of urban settings, became the symbolic birthplace of hip consumers. The figure that most vividly embodied this strategy for Nike was Spike Lee, an outspoken black film director and a crusader for African American interests in the media. Lee was hired by Nike in 1988 to direct and star in advertisements to promote their growing line of basketball products.

As we have seen, Lee’s films perceptively exposed the social climate of the United States as the country transitioned through worsening race tensions during the late 1980s and early 1990s. When Nike began its partnership with Lee, few Americans had ever taken the time to reflect on the politics of his movies. According to Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson, Nike imagined its consumption community as the knowing few who might share an appreciation of Lee’s then-novel angle on urban culture.\footnote{Goldman and Papson “Nike Culture,” 29.} In 1992, amidst the mounting racial tensions of the Los Angeles riots, Nike aired a series of commercials starring Lee in an effort to promote the Nike Air Raid sneaker. (Figure 3.4) In one advertisement, entitled

Figure 3.4 NIKE Inc., Air Raid Sneaker, c. 1992. The sneaker featured a peace logo and was accompanied by an advertising blitz that used Spike Lee to promote Nike as a socially conscious corporation during an era of increased racial unrest.
“Play Together,” Nike addresses the subject of black and white stereotypes in an effort to promote a discussion about racial tensions and to fashion Nike as a socially conscious corporation. After a string of racial slurs, Spike Lee, a trusted voice in race politics, steps forward and says: “Hold Up. If we are gonna live together, we have to play together. The more colors, the more better.”

Nike was using contemporary racial unrest to promote dialogue and furnish a reputation as a socially conscious brand.

Before the 1980s, ads featuring black athletes focused on their supreme athletic ability, however, rarely presented them as being relatable to white American values. According to David Andrews, before Jordan, black athletes were perceived as a uniquely black spectacle that inhibited their popular acceptance, not as supreme sportsmen, but as national icons. Even Jordan’s highly publicized personal demons: a hyper competitiveness that often manifested in violence, a penchant for gambling abhorrent sums of money, and a tendency to talk down to those who were not in his inner circle, did little to tarnish his all-American image. Because he ate Wheaties, drove a Chevrolet, wore Hanes, drank Coca-Cola, ate McDonalds, and wore Nikes, Jordan was relatable to middle class America in a way no professional athlete, white or black, had ever been before. Nonetheless, Jordan’s commodified success paradoxically “proved” that social mobility was possible and racism had been overcome in American society while actually serving to reinforce and legitimate a system fraught with racial bias by asking that Jordan temper his blackness in an effort to be more marketable to white consumers. Much like Joe Louis and Jackie Robinson before him, Jordan’s image, was controlled by whites who wanted to celebrate

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Jordan as a token of black success while ignoring the myriad of challenges faced by black Americans

Nike continuously symbolically engineered Jordan as a brand and as an individual in ways that aligned him with the modern ideals of progress and prosperity. Jordan united white and black Americans through his dazzling basketball talent and through his patterns of consumption. Moreover, he served as an affective sign of racial unity and a bastion of utopic possibilities; Jordan suggests that the American dream might indeed be inclusive of racial difference. Unlike popular black celebrities that came before him, Jordan himself was presented as a brand, a supreme sportsman, and an icon of modern American ideals. Nevertheless, Jordan’s ubiquitous imaged identity displayed a complex relationship with his own blackness and represented the prevailing racial ideologies that drove the “New Right’s ideological hegemony of the 1980s and 1990s.”314 Jordan’s exceptionalism served as evidence that mobility was always possible in American society, so, failure to move up was understood as a negative reflection of one’s character. By extension, the failure of an entire race or ethnic group to move up reflected more on their racialized shortcomings than it did on the failings of a society that supposedly guaranteed their freedom.315 This condemned African Americans of the 1980s and 1990s as part of a process known as “enlightened racism” wherein black exceptionalism legitimated and perpetuated a system of white social control. Moreover, Jordan’s nuanced identity as a successful athlete and spokesperson was often racialized and commodified by national corporations, especially Nike, in an effort to sell a certain carefully restricted “cool” blackness to eager white consumers. This “meaningless commodification,” observed bell hooks, strips signs of black

culture of “political integrity and meaning, denying the possibility that they can serve as a catalyst for concrete political action. As signs, their power to ignite critical consciousness is diffused when they are commodified. Communities of resistance are replaced by communities of consumption.”

Race Reconstructed: Positive and Negative Representations of Race in Popular Culture During the Post-Jordan Era

Because they traditionally came from a lower socio-economic position, black athletes were susceptible to a public demonization not possible for white athletes. As Douglas Kellner observed, media culture is “happy to use Black figures to represent transgressive behavior and to project society’s sins onto Black figures.” Consider, for example, the peculiar case of one of America’s most successful crossover marketing sensations, boxer Mike Tyson, who, throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s endorsed Pepsi, Kodak film, and even served in an anti-drug public service announcement. In February 1992, Tyson was convicted of rape and sentenced to six-years in a federal prison. Rather suddenly, the media focused on Tyson’s “primitive” character traits, and claimed the incident was little more than a remanifestation of his true identity before sports. Tyson was cast in a highly racialized narrative that positioned him as an arrogant, hostile, violent, and threatening symbol of blackness. Where Jordan was a positive media construction, or what one scholar has called a “good black,” Mike Tyson was constructed as a “bad black” by the media apparatus. When a black athlete succeeds it is presented as a story of possibility for African Americans yet when black public figures, especially males, step

316 hooks, “Eating the Other,” 33.
out of line with social norms and threaten America’s moral fabric, they are recast as a uniquely black spectacle. On the fields of competition, black athletes were treated as supreme sportsmen, however, as Tommie Smith once remarked, “off it you are just another nigger.” American culture, observed David Andrews rather bluntly in 1996, “simply does not tolerate individuals who are too black.” This dichotomy represents the peculiar paradox of black celebrity in American popular culture.

Nike, meanwhile, remained committed to constructing a narrative of race in America that centered on “good blacks” and employed sports as a vehicle for positive racial progress. During the mid-1990s, Nike executives looked to expand their corporate influence by breaking down the traditionally elitist, and predominantly white world of professional golf. In many respects, Nike hoped to combine their tennis marketing strategy of an anti-establishment attitude with their Jordan era strategy of branding a minority athlete as a model of hip masculinity to a racially diverse audience. On August 27, 1996, just two days after winning an unprecedented third consecutive US Amateur championship, Tiger Woods, a golfer of mixed-ethnicity, forfeited his amateur status and turned professional. The executives at Nike believed Woods could change the culture of golf and, in the process, revive their fledging golf division, so, they signed him to a whopping five-year, $40 million endorsement deal the day after he turned pro. This was a calculated risk based on past successes; Nike replicated their Jordan-era branding strategy in the golf community by developing a signature brand around an individual athlete that was presented as ‘hip’ or ‘edgy’ within the consumer marketplace. However, where Jordan seemed to transcend

321 This quote from Tommie Smith has been referenced in a variety of scholarly works, however, the original quote appeared in, “Boston Gets into the Act Again,” The Modesto Bee and News-Herald (September 26, 1967): A15
322 Andrews, “The Fact(s),” 139.
race within the context of the Air Jordan brand, Nike made racial discrimination in sport a
defining point in their presentation of the Tiger Woods brand.

On August 29, 1996, Nike introduced the world to their newest athlete in a three-page
advertisement in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled “Hello World.”\(^{325}\) The “Hello World” campaign
placed race at the forefront of Nike’s advertising strategy: “There are still courses in the United
States that I am not allowed to play because of the color of my skin,” ran the final verse of the
advertisement.\(^{326}\) In so doing, Nike made race and golf’s reputation as a monochromatic sport the
focus of its first significant golf-specific advertising campaign. Nike was actively engaging in a
process through which social injustices were commodified for corporate economic and cultural
gain. This marketing strategy reduced meaningful racial disunity and prejudice into a symbol that
seemed to reinvigorate America’s belief that sports were indeed a utopic site of racial progress.

Nike’s “Hello World” campaign more accurately reflects a marketing strategy that saw
Nike exploit the social injustices of racism in an effort to sell a product than it does a genuine
attempt at promoting social justice through sport. Bob Garfield, a widely read columnist for
*Advertising Age*, fumed that Nike was, “phony because Tiger Woods was not a victim of
racism,” and that there were no courses in the US that would turn away Woods.\(^{327}\) In response to
widespread criticism from the golf community, Nike conceded that a literal interpretation of the
advertisement might be misleading. Instead, Nike suggested that the advertisement was meant to
serve as a metaphor with Woods representing other, less-privileged minority golfers who were
still prohibited from playing certain courses.\(^{328}\) Nike’s “Hello World” campaign had the desired
effect of exposing this reality, immediately scandalizing the golf community and giving the

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\(^{326}\) ibid.
\(^{327}\) Quoted in Goldman and Papson “Nike Culture,” 113.
\(^{328}\) Barry Smart, *The Sport Star: Modern Sport and the Cultural Economy of Sporting Celebrity* (Thousand Oaks,
impression that Woods and Nike were outspoken crusaders for social change. It was at this familiar intersection of sports, race, and marketing that Nike felt most comfortable.

As Gary Smith noted in a special report for *Sports Illustrated*, Tiger was very aware of his position as a minority in a white-controlled society and sport. Tiger understood the physical and psychological tolls of racism in American society; on his first day of school in a predominantly white California suburb, Tiger was tied to a tree by his white classmates and bombarded with rocks and racial epithets.\(^\text{329}\) Woods later remembered the incident as one that forever shaped the way he saw race relations and his place in American society. Steve Helling, a journalist who has interviewed Woods on a number of occasions, suggests that from a young age Tiger seemed preoccupied with the reality that his race kept him from really fitting in with the golf community.\(^\text{330}\) Because of his celebrity, Tiger was never actually barred from playing courses but rather was followed everywhere on the links by an oddity’s embrace and a general feeling of unwelcome.\(^\text{331}\) Tiger’s father, Earl Woods, believed his son was preordained to change the course of American race relations and viewed golf as an avenue through which Tiger could provoke meaningful racial progress. In fact, at an awards dinner in December of 1996, Earl boldly predicted: “Tiger will do more than any other man in history to change the course of humanity.”\(^\text{332}\) Tiger’s status as a minority in a predominantly white sport was not only a powerful marketing motif for executives at Nike, it was a tangible reality that challenged white society to confront the fact that racism still existed throughout much of American society. Nonetheless, when this reality was commodified in popular Nike advertisements, it became

\(^{329}\) Gary Smith, “The Chosen: Tiger Woods Was Raised to Believe That His Destiny Is Not Only To Be the Greatest Golfer Ever But Also to Change the World. Will the Pressure of Celebrity Grind Him Down First?,” *Sports Illustrated* (December 23, 1996).


\(^{331}\) Ibid.

\(^{332}\) Smith, “The Chosen.”
easier for American consumers to ignore the persistent racism in the United States by “buying” into the myth that sports were a utopic space and helped root an unspoken but felt understanding in white America: “Race problems belong to the passing moment... [and] are being smoothed into nothingness, gradually, inexorably, by good will, affection, points of light.”

In many respects, the transition in Nike’s representation of athletes that occurred between Jordan as a symbol of “racial transcendence,” and Tiger as a victim of “racial discrimination” mirrored America’s understanding of racism and racial progress. The myth of racial equality in the post civil rights era was sold to Americans through individual black successes, which, during the 1980s Reaganite era of “colorblindness,” surfaced as a commodifiable token of racial equality through figures like Michael Jordan. Jordan was presented as a vindication of the belief in the triumph of racial equality in the US. However, reinvigorated racial tensions during the early 1990s visibly demonstrated that institutional racism had not been overcome, but had been continually revised through seemingly innocuous forms of social control. Nike appropriated this awareness during the mid 1990s by presenting a racialized narrative of Tiger Woods’ experience as a minority athlete in a predominately white sport.

Much like Jordan, Woods’ racial identity was greeted by an academic debate regarding the function of race within the promotional context. In an article entitled “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Blackness,” sociologist Davis W. Houck argues that over the course of his career, Woods whitened his image in an effort to be more marketable to the American public. Much like the popular black athletes who came before him, Tiger was expected to veil his frustration with white society and to remain relatively quiet in regards to his personal experiences with racism. It appears that this did indeed have the desired effect of making Tiger acceptable to the white

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333 DeMott, “One Big Happy Family.”
majority and the white elitist traditions of golf. Nonetheless, Nike exploited Tiger’s carefully managed racial identity in an effort to appeal to golf’s new age of anti-establishment consumers and in so doing perpetuated a system of racial control that carefully controlled and regulated the behavior of popular black public figures. Tiger’s popularity reflected continued systemic and institutional racism in American society more than it reflected meaningful racial progress.

Conclusion: The “Good Black/Bad Black” Dyad

Like Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods was a positive media construct; a “good black” in a consumer society that was outwardly open to the ideals of racial liberalization. Situated within Nike’s democratic consumption community, in which black and white consumers shared equally, both Woods and Jordan became figures worthy of emulation and icons of the Nike ideal of sport. Nike marketing united disparate consumers through their abiding fantasies of sport; through their desire to “Be Like Mike.” Jordan, more than any other figure in American popular culture, represented a new era of consumption in which American identities were formed and negotiated through the conspicuous purchase and display of goods. As a representative figure in the processes through which Americans came to define themselves in the consumer society, Jordan was a symbol of racial transcendence. Michael Jordan and the Jordan brand were important cultural symbols that united black and white youths through the complex process of self-actualization in the consumer society. Yet, the very idea of racial transcendence seems to undermine racial progress by suggesting that black superstars should abdicate their racial identity to achieve a broader appeal in American consumer society; in this narrative, the Air Jordan brand serves as a form of “racial displacement.” This perplexing paradox sheds light on the limits to racial liberalism in the context of consumerism by demonstrating that advertising could do little to confront persistent institutional and structural racism in the postwar US. As Martin Luther
King Jr. warned nearly fifty years ago, racial caste systems do not require racial hostility or overt bigotry to survive, “they need only racial indifference.” Like any ideology that persists across centuries, racism is highly adaptable.

Today, if you visit the Nike store in Portland, Oregon, you are greeted by all the newest and sleekest Nike creations packaged alongside a veritable corporate history lesson and visual tributes to the culture Nike has created. Jordan’s immense influence within that corporate culture is never far from sight; the entire third floor of the store is dedicated to the Air Jordan line and its tremendous successes both post and present. A statue of Jordan in his now immortalized Air Jordan pose hangs over the center of the shopping complex. Written on a wall, in a back stairwell, is the following passage: “Sport laughs in the face of racism, it flicks a towel on sexism’s ass and kicks sand in the face of discrimination… like sport, we don’t discriminate.” Nike is proud to promote itself as the patron of a democratic ideal of sport despite the reality that consumerism and sport can do little to confront practical or political discrimination in American society. Consumerism offered up individual black success stories and invited a mass of disenfranchised African American youths to buy into a symbolic site of transcendence, while also denying the institutional barriers that kept the vast majority of young blacks from ever being “like Mike,” socially, economically, or in terms of cultural acceptance. The many nuanced contradictions that emerge when analyzing the triangular relationship between race, sports, and advertising, paint a complex picture of American society as the nation continues to struggle with race and representation in the twenty first century. The “pigmentation paradox” persists through advertising, an often-overlooked system of social control.

Epilogue: Understanding “Enlightened Racism” in the Twenty First Century

But the one thing the American dream fails to mention,  
Is I was many steps ahead to begin with.  
My skin matches the hero, likeness, the image,  
America feels safe with my music in their system...  
And if I’m the hero, you know who gets cast as the villain,  
White supremacy isn’t just a white dude in Idaho,  

This conclusion must first begin with an admission; for many years, even as I began this study, I, like so many sports fans in America, was blinded by the myth that sports were the great leveler in society. I viewed sports as a progressive force for racial integration, always slightly ahead of broader political struggles, working to undermine racial anxieties and pave the way for meaningful political intervention. Indeed, I set out on this project with the intention of proving that Nike and Michael Jordan used sport as a platform to combat lingering institutional racism by offering a positive representation of black culture and black identity during an era of reinvigorated racial unrest. What I discovered was a much more complex and problematic picture of lingering institutional racism in America’s sports media and popular culture: black celebrities, especially male athletes, are continually stigmatized yet also presented as vindication of the utopic possibilities of sport and, by extension, American society. Somewhat ironically, black exceptionalism, like that of Michael Jordan, helped whites to contemplate a truly democratic America and to believe that institutional racism no longer existed in the US. This is what I call the “pigmentation paradox” of black celebrity.

This thesis has charted the complex triangular relationship between consumerism, sports and race relations as part of the broader struggle for civil rights during the turbulent twentieth century. First, we examined the role advertising and popular culture played in constructing and

perpetuating a racist and demeaning understanding of “blackness” defined by docility, compliance, laziness, good-humored buffoonery, intellectual inferiority, and eternal servitude. The false and demeaning representation of blacks in popular culture intimately influenced Americans’ understanding of race as the country transitioned through decades of often violent racial unrest. The struggle for control of black representation in popular culture was an element within the broader movement towards empowering black consumers and, as we have seen, largely determined the contours of American postwar society.

Next, we turned our attention to sports, a ubiquitous and transformative influence in America’s popular culture apparatus. We have seen that, throughout the twentieth century, black athletes were carefully monitored and their public personas carefully managed by white Americans concerned with promoting a utopic vision of sport as a progressive force in American race relations. This mythologized vision of sport was widely consumed by both black and white Americans and played a marked role in forming a positive national collective self-image. This was especially important during the Cold War when America’s credibility as leader of the free world, indeed, its very national security, depended on presenting a positive image of American race relations. Nike was born into this political climate and successfully used sport to market itself as the corporate embodiment of the baby boom generation’s counter cultural ideals. Nike created a community of consumers in which black and white Americans shared cultural symbols and a common ideal of sport. Nonetheless, there were limits to this ideal of democratic racial equality that symbolic category membership through consumption could do little to overcome.

Although consumerism offered a space for fighting discrimination and promoting interracial cultural sharing, it also offered a ubiquitous site for the dissemination of racial liberalism, an ideology wherein exceptional examples of black success are employed as evidence
of the success of racial integration and the accessibility of the American dream. During the second half of the 1980s, Nike commodified the ideal of racial liberalism through their promotion of Michael Jordan and the “Air Jordan” brand. Nike’s commodification of an exceptional individual black achiever “taught” Americans to believe in an illusory meritocracy based on the democratic ideals of sport and supported by the reality of Michael Jordan’s popular acceptance. In perpetuating the mythological narrative that sports were the great equalizer in American society, corporations like Nike unintentionally prolonged the stigmatization of African Americans, especially males, in the media and popular culture.

It’s now been almost eighty years since Joe Louis became the first black athlete to gain widespread appeal amongst America’s white community; nearly seventy years since Jackie Robinson officially broke down the color barrier in professional sports; nearly fifty years since Smith and Carlos’ immortalized black power salute on the Olympic podium of Mexico City, and over thirty since Nike signed Jordan to an unprecedented $2.5 million contract. Economically, a great deal of progress has been made for African American athletes who now routinely rank amongst America’s sport’s endorsement elites.337 Overt racism, at least in the world of sports celebrity branding, seems to have been resoundingly defeated. Nevertheless, if we want to overcome the inherent limits of racial liberalism, we must also ask ourselves a much more difficult question: how much has the discourse surrounding black athletes really changed?

Before the start of the 2003 NFL season, ESPN signed controversial conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh to provide televised commentary as part of their weekly NFL Countdown

337 Tiger Woods, Kobe Bryant, Serena Williams, and LeBron James have all made a fortune off endorsements. Recently, Lebron James signed a lifetime endorsement deal with Nike rumored to be worth a conservative $500 million but some liberal estimates place the figure as high as $1 billion.
program.\textsuperscript{338} In one segment, Limbaugh suggested that the sports media had a unique “hope invested” in Donovan McNabb, the black quarterback of the Philadelphia Eagles, and credited him for successes that he was not due, because, according to Limbaugh: “the media has been very desirous that a black quarterback do well.”\textsuperscript{339} What Limbaugh was referencing, in a sort of round about way, was the ideal of racial liberalism or black exceptionalism that has been discussed throughout much of this thesis. Limbaugh felt that the white media desperately wanted a black quarterback to succeed so that they could once again present sport as a utopic space for meaningful racial integration.

In 2011, Pittsburgh Steelers running back Rashard Mendenhall stirred controversy when he posted the following to his Twitter page: “Anyone with knowledge of the slave trade and NFL could say these two parallel each other.”\textsuperscript{340} Mendenhall felt that due to the void of black ownership in professional football, an industry which relies quite heavily on black labor and genius, slavery had taken a new form in which black athletes worked collectively for the economic advancement of white elites. While Mendenhall was certainly being hyperbolic in his choice of comparison for professional sport, this disconcerting narrative is probably nearer to reality than the integrationist romance with sport ever was. Racism has not left American sports; it has shifted from the field of competition to the owner’s box and the press box where a ruling fraternity of predominantly white elites continue to exploit and denigrate African Americans.

Superbowl 50 was held in San Francisco, California, in February 2016. Always a spectacle of extreme media attention, much of the hype leading up to Superbowl 50 surrounded the competition between its two starting quarterbacks, Peyton Manning and Cam Newton.

\textsuperscript{339} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{340} Henderson, “Sidelined,” 179.
Manning, a veteran white athlete earned a reputation as an intelligent, thoughtful, and respectable “statesman” of the game over the course of an illustrious seventeen-year career. Manning, much accomplished but ever humble, was affectionately known by the media as the “Sheriff” and has been the focus of positive media attention since his earliest years in the league. Cam Newton, by contrast, was an expressive young African American whose confident demeanor both frightened and troubledsome within the primarily white sports media. Newton’s complex on field personality was racialized by a media who saw his “in-your-face” celebrations as a feature of his racial rather than his athletic personality. The hype leading up to Superbowl 50 positioned it as a battle between the careful intellectual preparation of Manning and the natural physical ability of Newton; the game was subtly presented as a competition of white intellect and black physicality. This white-black divide perpetuated a system of racial differentiation that was eerily similar to white America’s treatment of black celebrities throughout the twentieth century and publicly demonstrated that Jim Crow was still lurking in the shadows of American society.

While performing as part of the halftime show at Superbowl 50, the popular black pop singer Beyonce Knowles raised her fist in a deviant “black power” salute in an attempt to draw attention to the continued racism in American society and the reinvigorated debate about American race relations in the era of “black lives matter.” The following weekend, the weekly comedy show Saturday Night Live presented a short skit in which white Americans watching the Superbowl came to the sudden realization that Beyonce, one of their favorite artists, was in fact black. According to Saturday Night Live’s version of events, white Americans were deeply

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341 This problematic narrative which results in the stigmatization of black athletes is amplified in today’s social media obsessed world because it provides a space where people with no legitimate connection to sports culture are free to weave their own story about individual black athletes and their “racialized” behavior. As we have seen, institutions that maintain racial discrimination are constantly dismantled and re-constructed to meet the needs and constraints of the time. See Jason Whitlock, “Cam, Peyton Victims of Social Media Race War,” J.School, Fox Sports, http://j.school/post/139247969165/cam-peyton-victims-of-social-media-race-war
troubled by this realization and were forced to come to terms with a difficult reality; race still matters in American celebrity. Superbowl 50 revealed an America that was still uncomfortable with certain expressions of what they perceived to be a deviant, “bad black” identity. If black celebrities step too far into the world of expressive blackness, indeed, if they are perceived to be “too black,” they are rejected by an anxious white majority. Popular acceptance for black celebrities is a constant tightrope act between white and black consumers who understand them differently.

A recent online article in *Vice Sport* entitled “Sports Media is Still Racist Against Black Athletes,” perceptively reported that “the very power of TV exposure is in its long-term subtlety,” and, “considering the society-wide ritual that sports consumption has become,” we can safely assume it has resulted in “decades of having stereotypes quietly drilled into the American subconscious.”342 These stereotypes, often subtle but ever-evident, emerge in the way the media discusses black and white professional athletes and they represent one of the many remaining obstacles to racial equality. Perhaps, if we can better understand Jordan’s ‘blackness’ in the context of American consumption, we can also identify the subtle ways through which our discourse about sports and sporting celebrities influences our broader social relations. In an era of reinvigorated racial unrest and heightened discussion about the role played by race in American athletics, the nuances of Michael Jordan’s “blackness” tells us a great deal about American social relations and identity-politics in a media-saturated age.

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