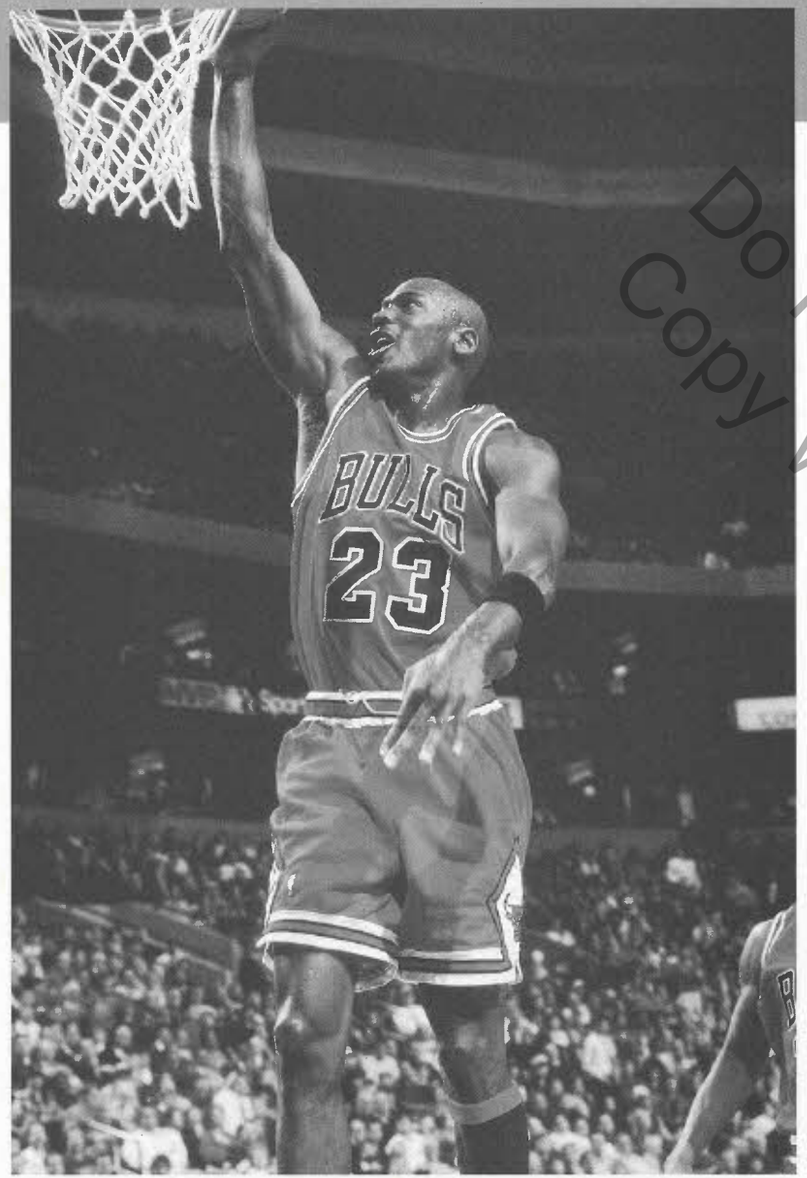

Michael Jordan going up for a dunk in a 1995 game at the Fleet Center in Boston. *(Lipofsky.com)*

17 Bound by Blackness or Above It?

Michael Jordan and the Paradoxes of Post–Civil Rights American Race Relations

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If there is one thing the modern sports world does exceptionally well, it is produce cultural icons: individuals whose personalities and performances are larger-than-life and, as such, take on meaning and significance far beyond the bounds of their athletic excellence.[1] And in the final decade of the twentieth century no sports star was more of an icon in the United States (if not the world)—no athlete more representative of collective hopes and dreams and ambivalences, more reflective of cultural trends and social transformations—than Michael Jordan. Scholars and journalists have generated myriad facts and figures to demonstrate Jordan's iconic status but sport sociologists Mary MacDonald and David Andrews provide one of the most provocative: just prior to the turn of the millennium, a California-based market research company claimed that a photograph of the back of Jordan's head was more identifiable among American shoppers than the faces of Bill Clinton, Newt Gingrich, or Jesus Christ.[2]

As an icon, Jordan represented—or, perhaps more frequently and precisely, was made to represent—many different things to many different people. For many, Jordan stood as an All-American original, one of those rare, extraordinary figures whose creativity, resilience, competitiveness, and unparalleled success embodied all the best of American individualism. Others focused less on his nationality and saw instead, as Kenneth Dutton has put it, a "Greek hero figure," whose virtues and accomplishments represented "the highest realization of human potential." For his part, the award-winning journalist David Halberstam portrayed Jordan as a "one-man corporate conglomerate" who helped transform the National Basketball Association from a niche-market, subcultural curiosity into a full-fledged popular cultural force, thus ushering in a new era of global

sport, the Americanization of world culture, and the continued worldwide expansion of capitalism, commodification, and marketing. Indeed, most recent scholarly writings on Jordan have been about his celebrity, his advertising clout, his role in global commerce and licensing—all of which continue to resonate today, well after Jordan's third retirement from the game he dominated and in many ways transcended.[3]

There can be no doubt that Jordan's racial identity, his skin color, his African American heritage, have been at the center of all this. As one of the most prominent and successful African American figures in a society still obsessed with race and marked by both persistent racial inequalities and resilient antiblack attitudes, it could hardly have been otherwise. But while the "fact of Michael Jordan's blackness" (in David Andrews's memorable phrase) is impossible to deny, just exactly what the iconic Jordan signals about late-twentieth-century American race relations is not easy to pinpoint.

Part of the problem is that Jordan himself almost never talked publicly about race (or, for that matter, about any other political or publicly contentious topics). In addition, the racial meanings swirling around and often foisted upon Jordan were, as we will see, multifaceted, complex, and contradictory—some positive and optimistic, others far more skeptical.[4] But the biggest challenge in specifying Michael Jordan's racial meaning and symbolism in late-twentieth-century American culture is that most of the meanings imputed to him and his career were rarely explicit; rather, Jordan's racial significance was conveyed in subtle, coded ways, by inference and implicit comparison, by what was not said more than what was said.

This ostensible silence can be interpreted in two basic but very different ways. On the one hand, the fact that Jordan's skin color is only rarely mentioned can be seen as a positive development, evidence that he overcame the stigma of being black and the constraints of racism. Many proponents of this optimistic interpretation—which dominates public thought and talk—go much further to suggest that Jordan's ability to overcome race is indicative of racial progress in sport and even the whole of society at the end of the twentieth century. Jordan, in this view, is an illustration of the progress and accomplishments of the post–civil rights era, a member of the first generation of African Americans not bound by extreme segregation, stereotyping, and exploitation. On the

other hand, most sport scholars and race experts have been very critical. To the extent that Jordan can be said to have overcome his skin color, these critics tend to think of him as an exceptional case, one whose extraordinary individual accomplishments have tended to deflect attention away from persistent racial hierarchies and stereotypes, or even worse have served as an excuse for others to relax prematurely in the push for racial equality and integration. Many of these critics take Jordan himself to task for not having done more to advocate for racial change. Others go so far as to suggest that Jordan's phenomenal popularity and prominence were achieved not *in spite of* his race but largely *because of* it—that far from overcoming racism Jordan and his career have been bound by his blackness and thus reproductive dominant racial images and attitudes albeit in subtler, more covert forms than ever before.

Powerful though it might be, the temptation to choose between these two alternative visions must be avoided if Michael Jordan's racial meaning and significance is to be comprehended. Both are necessary. Freed of the most onerous personal and material constraints of racism in many respects, Jordan—particularly the public Jordan—was still bound by race in other, more subtle and insidious ways. Indeed, it is precisely this bipolar experience and these dueling social visions that make Jordan such an exemplary and revealing icon of the accomplishments, possibilities, and contradictions of post–civil rights American race relations.[5]

The popular perception—fueled by a 1990s Nike marketing campaign that played off the fact that Jordan was cut from the varsity basketball team in his sophomore year of high school—is that Michael Jordan burst out of nowhere in the middle of the 1980s with a triumvirate of spectacular performances on each of basketball's biggest stages: his buzzer-beating shot to win the NCAA national championship for the North Carolina Tar Heels in 1982, his standout play on the gold-medal winning 1984 U.S. Olympic team, and finally his spectacular 1985 rookie season on the lowly Chicago Bulls. Jordan's flair for the dramatic notwithstanding, this characterization is not entirely accurate. Even before he had entered college, as David Halberstam has chronicled, Jordan had already established an extremely large reputation and high set of expectations within basketball circles by his senior year in high school—hence, his recruitment by one of the top college basketball

programs in the country.[6] However, it is true that these feats propelled Jordan from the sports pages into the broader public culture and consciousness. What is also (and more importantly) beyond dispute is that the various contradictory elements of Jordan's racial imagery and implication began to take shape here in the national spotlight.

Reading through the accounts of Jordan's breakout performances today, one is struck by two main characteristics. First and by now most familiar is how infrequently Jordan's race was talked about or even directly referenced. The bulk of the coverage and commentary is about his remarkable performances and his individual athletic brilliance—qualities we now know as legendary. Race is almost never mentioned, not even as an adjective. The simple fact of *not* being automatically labeled and identified in racial terms is an obvious indicator of historic racial change; yet it is dangerous to assume that this development was entirely positive without evaluating how this color-blind, race-neutral framing was interpreted by American audiences. The self-satisfied, celebratory nature of commentaries and profiles of this young superstar certainly gave the impression that Jordan's success on the court had much larger and more progressive meaning. And on those rare instances when race was mentioned, it was typically to insist that Jordan had overcome its constraints or that his success served to validate and dignify his people. Such positive if often implicit interpretations—the second striking feature of the initial coverage—have clearly become the norm in the years since. They are at the core of Halberstam's widely acclaimed *Playing for Keeps: Michael Jordan and the World He Made.*

Halberstam doesn't go to great lengths to discuss Jordan's racial significance in this book; quite the contrary, he pays almost no attention to it. You can count on two hands the number of times race is mentioned or discussed explicitly—either for Jordan or anyone else or any other theme in the book—in the 430 pages of the text. In the epilogue Halberstam explains that he downplayed Jordan's racial significance deliberately, on the grounds that Jordan was "not one of those men like Jack Johnson, Paul Robeson, Jackie Robinson, Muhammad Ali, or Arthur Ashe whose own complicated lives and painful struggles against long-established prejudices and racial barriers revealed a great deal not merely about sports but about the history of race in America." Jordan was not, in short, a racial pioneer, nor did he make a powerful challenge to the

white establishment. In an early discussion of Jordan's parents, James and Delores, Halberstam describes Michael as among that first generation of African American children, post–civil rights babies, who were "neither blinded nor burdened by race." Indeed, in Halberstam's view, "precious little had been denied [Jordan] because of race."[7]

There is a good deal of truth to this depiction. Born in Brooklyn on February 17, 1963, Michael Jeffrey Jordan led an almost idyllic childhood growing up in Wilmington, North Carolina. His parents, James and Delores, were reputable career folks who held stable, integrated jobs—his mother as a bank teller, his father at a General Electric factory where he started as a mechanic and eventually moved into management. His father's air force pension provided the family of seven (Michael was the fourth of five children) the luxury of a third income and a solidly middle- if not upper-middle-class lifestyle. Like his four siblings, Michael attended integrated schools and had white friends as well as black ones. His childhood was marked by normal rivalries with his brothers (especially his older brother Larry), high parental expectations (of mobility and success from his mother, dedication and self-discipline from his father), and lots of athletics. He played and excelled at all sports all seasons, pitching two no-hitters for his little league regional tournament team in 1975 and playing quarterback on his junior high football team. Like other young African Americans of his generation, Michael Jordan obviously had more opportunities, higher expectations, and faced fewer social barriers and stresses than ever before in American history.

At the same time, this color-blind, race-neutral narrative—especially when coupled with unqualified references to racial progress in America—makes it easy to ignore or discount the barriers of residential segregation, economic and educational inequities, and persistent antiblack stereotypes that African Americans continued to face in the post–civil rights period.[8] Even in the athletic realm, exploitation persisted and discrimination and prejudice remained problematic, especially in terms of coaching, management, and ownership.[9] Surely Jordan witnessed and even experienced these ongoing challenges, even if his parents insisted he "treat everyone the same" and that "the less [the family] paid attention to race the less it would be factored in against them."[10] But the real issue here is not whether (or to what extent) Jordan himself faced racial constraints, or even how aware he was of such larger sociological realities. Rather, the

most important issue is the conclusions about race relations that mainstream, majority-white audiences would have drawn when one of the few African American men they felt some connection to was portrayed in glowing, race-less terms. Too often this formula has served either to deflect attention away from the more general, persistent problems of race in America or, even worse, to legitimate the racial status quo by making it seem as if there are no barriers standing in the way of African American opportunity, assimilation, and mobility.

A more basic problem with uncritical color-blind accounts is that they simply don't square with the ways in which race figured in the earliest public portrayals of the young superstar. Reading more closely, these initial treatments pay inordinate attention to Jordan's body, his natural ability, the pure physicality of his game. Consider, for example, this description of his play on the gold-medal–winning 1984 Olympic team from a national correspondent: "The flashiest men's player was Jordan, the 6 ft. 6 in. University of North Carolina senior who has won six awards designating him America's best collegian. Born to dunk, he penetrated the zone defenses of opponents to slam at least one goal in each of the eight games."[11] The key phrases in this very typical depiction are "flashiest" and "born to dunk." Jordan, to be certain, was blessed with an exceptional physical talent, and his tenacious, slashing style of play fit his corporeal skills perfectly. But there were other aspects of his game that were truly exceptional as well: his extraordinary work ethic, his psychological toughness and mental acuity, his unrelenting defensive play, his absolute and unquenchable will to win, and his ability to adapt and change his game depending upon his health (and later, age). Eventually these qualities and characteristics would come to the fore of public understandings of Jordan's game (aided by Halberstam's wonderful portrayal), but they were not the focus in the beginning. Rather, the initial emphasis played off of old stereotypes about the natural athleticism and inherent physicality of black men—stereotypes which not only stripped African American athletes like Jordan of their humanity but that also (because of persistent mind-body dualisms in the West) reinforced racial differences as essential and implied mental inferiority or even moral deficiency.[12]

The Nike company, which rode Jordan's popularity to unprecedented profit and market domination, also made Jordan's physical aura the focal

point of its original "Air Jordan" marketing campaign. Their first advertising spot, aired in 1985, featured Jordan executing a dunk in slow motion on an urban playground with the screams of jet engines accelerating for takeoff in the background, with the words "Who said a man wasn't meant to fly?" printed on the screen. In addition to focusing on his body, the otherwise incongruous juxtaposition of Jordan soaring (with the planes) above an outdoor, inner-city playground court highlights another way in which Jordan's blackness was initially marked and conveyed—by situating him and his style of play in inner-city America, a space culturally imagined as African American. And in stark contrast to its usual sociological functions, Jordan's blackness was fascinating and exciting, an object of mainstream, white middle-class desire and consumption.[13]

The connections between basketball and blackness in American culture are deep and multifaceted, as the cultural critic Nelson George discussed in his classic book *Elevating the Game,* which depicts basketball as having a distinctive African American male aesthetic. In fact, according to David Andrews, the history of basketball is almost always imagined as an evolutionary chain whose modern lineage begins with the emergence of African American players like Elgin Baylor, Connie Hawkins, and Julius Erving and ultimately culminating with "the supreme basketball being, Michael Jordan."[14] Indeed, when Jordan was compared with his contemporaries, they were invariably African American. The cultural and historical dynamics of this lineage are far more complicated than can possibly be covered in this particular essay.[15] Context, for example, is crucial. The blackness that Baylor and Hawkins represented in the 1950s and 1960s was far different, in both form and function, from that embodied by players in Jordan's era in the aftermath of the civil rights movement. In fact, the single most defining feature of the post–civil rights basketball landscape may be that by the 1980s African American players were so dominant in the sport that their struggle was not integration but dealing with the unique opportunities and tensions presented by what a taxi-cab driver once described to me as overintegration. But no matter what was or wasn't said about race, simply playing a sport so thoroughly associated with blackness in the United States ensured that Jordan as athlete, icon, and commodity form would be marked as African American (though even this wasn't left to chance by early advertising campaigns).

Of course, it wasn't long before the public Jordan began to shed these more traditional racial markers and take on the more individualized and apparently race-less public personae he inhabits today. In their recent fiftieth anniversary edition, *Sports Illustrated* recalled an event that encapsulates the image, a September 1985 press conference to announce Jordan's endorsement deal with Coca-Cola. At some point, Jordan was asked whether he preferred Coke Classic or the new formula the company was then promoting as a replacement. Because the company was experiencing a public backlash against the proposed change (it was eventually abandoned in one of the most notorious flops in American business history), the question put Jordan in perilous territory. His now-legendary response was simple and, according to *SI*, pure "genius": "Coke is coke," he said matter-of-factly. "Both taste great." "Bland but not boring, evasive without being a lie, almost charming," this answer (which the magazine ranks as the fourth most important "tipping point" in the last half century of sports) made Michael Jordan into "Mr. Middle America despite his dark skin color." Jordan emerged as "the nonthreatening black man whites would accept as one of their own" and in the process "helped white America discover other black men they could trust: Bill Cosby, Denzel Washington, Colin Powell." "Do you ever hear anybody talking about Tiger Woods and race?" the magazine rhetorically asks. "You may credit Coke, Jordan, and his deft answer to a personal question for that."[16]

Here we see all the elements that corporations ranging from McDonalds and Wheaties to Chevrolet and Hanes wanted to represent them and their products: Jordan's easy smile and off-court presence, his winning personality, his sense of style and obvious personal charisma, as well as the grandiose implications of leaving race completely behind. And it is not incidental that *Sports Illustrated* chose to commemorate a corporate venue rather than an athletic one. Jordan continued to show dramatic progress as an NBA player throughout the 1980s, winning a series of scoring titles and then being named the MVP of the league for the first time in 1988 and defensive player of the year that same season. (And this isn't even to mention how his playing style revolutionized the game on the court and in the public mind—not only in terms of bringing an emphasis on high-flying dunks but also in terms of the kind of defense opposing teams employed in an effort to slow Jordan down. Recall, here, Detroit Piston's coach Charles Daly's infamous "Jordan Rules" defense.) But the lack of success of his team, the Bulls, raised questions about how much of a team player Jordan was, how much he improved those around him, and about the mark he would ultimately leave on basketball history. In athletic terms, the late 1980s marked a period of frustration and disappointment for Jordan, a fierce competitor who was never satisfied with losing no matter what the game or how low the stakes. As a corporate pitchman and media celebrity, however, Jordan's success was unparalleled and unqualified. According to Jordan's agent David Falk, his client embodied "Norman Rockwell values but with a contemporary flair." Much as Jordan the basketball superstar seemed to defy the laws of physics, Jordan-the-name-brand appeared to transcend all the usual social labels and stereotypes with the unique force of his personality and athletic brilliance. As Falk put it, "He's the first modern crossover in team sports. We think he transcends race, transcends basketball."[17]

Though he wasn't actually the first to lay claim to being a crossover, colorless cultural icon (that distinction would fall to O. J. Simpson[18]), the role was still relatively novel and reflective of African American advances of the post–civil rights era, and Jordan took it to unprecedented heights. The rhetoric of what David Andrews called the "All-American, transcendental Jordan" became a recurring theme among astute social observers and cultural critics. The novelist John Edgar Wideman has said that Jordan "escapes gravity" and "makes us rise above our obsession with race" because he leaps the great divide between races and classes by being a down-to-earth, middle-class, and apolitical hero." Even Harry Edwards, the sociologist who built his career and national reputation on pointing out racial injustice in the sports world, used that language. He talked to David Halberstam about Jordan "representing the highest level of human achievement, on the order of Ghandi, Einstein, or Michelangelo," maintaining that if he were in charge of introducing an alien being "to the epitome of human potential, creativity, perseverance and spirit, I would introduce that alien life to Michael Jordan." The idea of the transcendental Jordan may have received its most elaborate and erudite expression in the work of the famed Harvard social scientist Orlando Patterson. In the third and final volume of his massive trilogy on American race relations, Patterson used Jordan, whom he described as "America's only living man-god," as

the centerpiece of his argument that in the post–civil rights era African American sports figures and entertainers have become America's primary "Dionysian figures"—individuals who not only cross boundaries but dissolve them, pointing the way to fuller, more complex understandings of self, citizenship, culture, and civilization.[19]

Not everyone saw it this way. The cultural sociologist David Andrews argued that Jordan's "carefully engineered" public image was not an example of racial transcendence—that is, of overcoming race and racism—but rather of racial displacement and disavowal.[20] On the one hand, Andrews lamented how Jordan's "prototypical, simulated Reaganite hard body" was "lauded by the popular media for being living proof of the existence of an open class structure, racial tolerance, economic mobility, the sanctity of individualism, and the availability of the American dream for black Americans."[21] On the other, he also insisted that the idealized and ostensibly race-less Jordan—especially the Jordan who appeared with Mars Blackmon in the memorable Nike ads done by director Spike Lee—was actually situated in opposition to other, presumably problematic African Americans: namely, the masses of black folks who were believed to be failing and thereby threatening to American social stability. Thus, in Andrews's view, Jordan's All-American identity didn't transcend his race but was predicated precisely on it, on the idealized, assimilated type of blackness he represented, presented, and embodied. It is what race scholars have talked about as "enlightened racism," where stereotypes about the deep cultural differences and deficiencies of the African American masses ("bad blacks" as one recent critic says) are reinforced and reproduced precisely in celebrating individual African Americans ("good" blacks) believed to have repudiated and overcome these traits and characteristics. There is no better, more appropriate illustration of this dyad of blackness that Michael Jordan was bound up than C. L. Cole's brilliant analysis of the Nike Corporation's "PLAY" movement and its use of Jordan in the marketing campaign that accompanied it.[22]

The Nike campaign was the product of a splashy, well-publicized "Youth Fitness Summit" held in Washington, D.C., in 1993, which, in response to the decline of public facilities for recreation and sport in urban areas, was an attempt to create a movement and network of organizations and agencies that would secure every child's "right to play." Nike's "public-service style advertisements" were obviously intended to serve as "expressions of Nike's conscience and its overlapping commitment to and investment in America" (p. 380). And they did so with a broad, universalist defense of children and of sport as a means of appropriate socialization that set up the company (and by extension Jordan) as an alternative to the conservative "policing and punishment scenarios" being played out elsewhere in the United States PLAY offered, in other words, a kinder, gentler, more inclusive America—one that realized the rights of all American children regardless of cultural differences such as race, class, gender, or religion.

But there was, according to Cole, an implicit racial component to PLAY's public appeal. When it came to how African American young people were represented in the campaign, the narrative shifted slightly but significantly. "Whereas sport and physical activity are used to shore up America's bourgeois fantasy of childhood fun and play for White middle-class youth, sport and physical activity function to regulate, discipline, and police already deviant [black] bodies in urban areas." This is revealed *not* in what the advertising campaign says, Cole claims, but in what it doesn't say, in its absences and its silences—and this is where Jordan, as narrator/host of the spot, played the crucial role.

"What if there were no sports?" Jordan's disembodied voice famously intones in the first ad. "What if there were no teams? What if there were no dreams?" Cole insists there is a subtle racial subtext—a threat of general disorder and social deterioration—underlying these questions. What is implied, in Cole's view, is that without sports African American youth are "at risk" for crime, disposed to disorder, and inclined to risky behavior. This subtext is made manifest in the advertisement's closing sequence where Jordan is, finally, pictured on the screen. In Cole's view, the image of Michael Jordan, an athlete who despite all of his crossover appeal is still unmistakably a black man, signals the racial logic and threat underlying and justifying the PLAY movement. It reminds us, more specifically, that without sports we would not only lose the chance for future Michael Jordans, we would likely be left with all of the problems associated with blackness and risk itself: gangs, crime, drugs, violence, and so forth. "If we did not imagine Jordan in the space of sport, where would we imagine him?" Cole asks, mimicking the ad. Who, in other words, do we imagine him turning out to be?

Thus, Cole concludes, the Jordan-featured PLAY movement "appears to break from popular discourses on crime . . . in actuality, however, it only makes sense in relation to and in fact depends upon these racialized discourses, this imagined sense of "what/who we understand to be America's urban problems and how race is made to matter and not matter in the national imagination."

So where did Michael-Jordan-the-person, the human being with a family and a private life and views all his own, fit into this? This is not an easy question to answer—not just because Jordan did not talk often about his personal politics or his views on race but because everything he thought about and talked about and did was so carefully packaged and performed. The Michael Jordan that the public knew (and that we know today) was very literally not an individual but an icon, a product of media representations, public relations, and marketing campaigns. The public was afforded a few glimpses of Michael Jordan the person early in his career (for example, Bob Greene's two-part biography) but these were few and far between, and one has to wonder to what extent these, too, were part of a public relations campaign. Even Halberstam, despite initial assurances from Jordan's agent David Falk, was unable to interview Jordan personally for his mammoth treatment.[23] It is for good reason that Ellis Cashmore has called Jordan "the most controlled athlete in history";[24] indeed, this is why this essay so far has been more of a cultural history than a biography proper (and thus rather unlike many of the other contributions to this volume).

Public relations and media packaging is obviously a well-accepted aspect of life for popular athletes, movie stars, political leaders, and all manner of public figures in our celebrity-infatuated society. And the most famous black athletes of the twentieth century—Joe Louis, Jesse Owens, and especially Jackie Robinson, for examples—have been among the most carefully marketed and tightly controlled figures in American history. What is unique about Jordan's case, however, is the degree to which Michael Jordan himself was actively and self-consciously involved in the making of his image, his career, and his public personae. Observers and reporters who spent time around Jordan—even those who were critical of him—almost universally marveled at his maturity, his poise and self-confidence, his control. Jordan always seemed to be comfortable and in control. Even more remarkable was the extent to which Jordan shaped

and reshaped and transformed those individuals and institutions he was around—whether it was the game of basketball, the NBA, corporate marketing strategies, or Hollywood movies. In this respect David Halberstam's subtitle could not be more appropriate: that the world Michael Jordan inhabited was very much a world of his own making. Jordan was not your typical athlete but rather one of those rare individuals—not just in sport history—who shaped the world around him even as it shaped him.

Jordan's active and self-conscious engagement is important for two reasons. In the first place, because no black athlete in history, perhaps no athlete in history, exercised a comparable degree of control in shaping his or her image and in profiting from that image. Jordan is a truly historic figure in this respect. The second reason Jordan's exceptional involvement and understanding is significant brings us back to the question of race and his ostensibly color-blind, race-neutral image. The point is this: given how much input and awareness Jordan had in shaping his public image, there is no reason to think that things would have been any different when it came to issues of race. He had to be aware of himself as a black man and have some sense of all the irony and contradiction that his success involved, his apparent color blindness no less than anything else. The fact that Jordan did not talk about race publicly should not be taken as evidence of a lack of understanding but rather a deliberate choice on the part of a very successful, self-conscious African American man.

This is necessarily somewhat of a conjecture, but it is not completely without foundation. When he signed his first professional sports contracts and endorsement deals, Jordan and his associates very deliberately rejected appeals that would have typecast him or niche-marketed him for African American audiences. Jordan's understanding of his personal identity and its relationship to broader racial stereotypes took further shape in an incident that took place in his first NBA All-Star game in 1985. Jordan showed up for the event decked out in a full-length fur coat and lots of fancy jewelry. It was, he told Bob Greene several years after the fact, how he thought NBA stars were supposed to dress and act. Jordan quickly realized he felt neither comfortable nor accepted in the get-up and began to adopt the more toned-down, mainstream style that would become his trademark.[25]

This was obviously not the racial role, identity, or vision his critics would have liked. Accommodating and even apologetic, Jordan's centrist sensibilities were, as we have seen, expressed in abstract, universalistic terms full of class-inflected racial undertone and implication. And his complicity with the unfettered market, commodification, consumption, and the pursuit of personal wealth was beyond question. Still, it is important not to push these criticisms too far. For one thing, there is no reason that athletes should be held up to scrutiny and standards of political involvement that apply to no one else in society (though admittedly Jordan did bring this on himself at times as, for example, when he intimated support for certain liberal causes but then declined to publicly support an African American candidate trying to unseat conservative North Carolina senator Jesse Helms).

Connected with this, the opportunities for meaningful racial resistance and change through professional sports in the United States were (and remain) far more limited than critics often imagine. The economic and institutional demands of big-business, globalized sport are almost overwhelming, as Helen Page's study of the experience of Jordan's one-time Bulls teammate Craig Hodges illustrates. Despite being one of the top three point shooters in the league, Hodges found himself quickly (if quietly) bounced out of the league after making some modest public comments on racial issues. Even the most personal, stylized aspects of player dress and on-court celebratory behaviors are policed through racialized codes of conduct and sportsmanship.[26] Just as important (if often overlooked) are the cultural conceptions of sport that define its role and the appropriate role of athletes in social life—the notion that sports needs to be protected from the perceived corruption of politics; the fact that most Americans experience sports as being deeply meaningful but ultimately trivial; worn dumb-jock stereotypes. These cultural structures make it difficult for athletes to be open and upfront about their social views, and almost impossible for mainstream audiences to accept them when they do. Indeed, taken together these social and cultural forces dictate that most of the social meaning and significance conveyed through athletes in the sports media is constituted via image, body language, and style.[27]

This context and these limitations should make us mindful of the racial significance and self-consciousness of Jordan's dress and demeanor

and discourse, both on the court and off it. Indeed, my guess is that Jordan saw himself as one of those figures who pushed for racial change by working within the system, creating opportunities for others, constructing new alternative images of blackness, and breaking down traditional prejudices and stereotypes. It is what the historian Kevin Gaines has called "racial uplift" or "self-help ideology," a tradition that traces its roots back to Booker T. Washington through E. Franklin Frazier and the NAACP up to Bill Cosby. "Believing that the improvement of African American's material and moral condition through self-help would diminish white racism," Gaines has written, advocates have "sought to rehabilitate the race's image by embodying respectability enacted through an ethos of service to the masses," thereby incorporating African Americans into the ostensibly universal narrative of Western progress, civilization, and citizenship.[28] "African American uplift" is not a radical approach but neither is it entirely apolitical; in certain circles, in fact, there is no more reasonable point of view and program to champion.

However informed and aware Jordan may have been about this vision, nowhere does he more clearly reflect the paradoxical, conflicted state of post–civil rights American race relations than in this color-blind, race-neutral discourse, and nowhere does he play a more prominent role in setting in relief its tensions, contradictions, and possibilities.

One of Jordan's greatest gifts, as both an ad-man and an athlete (and perhaps even as a racial icon), was impeccable timing. Even if he might have wanted it to come sooner, Jordan's first NBA championship with the Chicago Bulls in 1991 probably couldn't have been better scripted by a Hollywood screenwriter. After a half decade of mounting expectations and bitter disappointments, the title not only provided dramatic confirmation of Jordan's basketball greatness, it propelled him to even greater, unforeseen heights of popularity and stardom. Indeed, if it is possible to pinpoint the moment in which Jordan's crossover status was consolidated and he emerged as a truly larger-than-life cultural icon—not just Air Jordan but "His Airness," not Michael Jordan but "MJ" or just plain "Michael"—this first NBA championship would have to be it. Reporters covering the Jordan phenomenon grasped for metaphors and parallels to capture and convey his popularity: Elvis Presley, the Beatles, movie stars, war heroes. But in many ways Jordan was in a league all his own.

Predictably, however, this popularity came with a price. The more

fame and fortune Jordan experienced, the less he was able to enjoy the regular, ordinary aspects of daily life that the rest of us take for granted. He couldn't do his own shopping, go out for dinner, go to a movie, or even leave his hotel room without getting mobbed. Fans would do virtually anything to get his autograph, or even just his attention. Signs saying "Michael Jordan for President" began popping up at arenas across the league. Jordan was quickly becoming a prisoner of his own popularity, and the more the team won, the worse it got. Jordan continued to cultivate his public image but increasingly his trademark smile was reserved for television appearances and commercials. Forget (for the moment) the question of whether Jordan was bound by race, Michael Jordan was bound by being "Michael Jordan." It got so bad in the early 1990s that Jordan confided to Chicago writer Bob Greene that the basketball court was the only place he really felt free, where he could be his uncontained, fully realized self.

> The basketball court for me, during a game, is the most peaceful place I can imagine. I truly feel less pressure there than anyplace I go. On the basketball court I worry about nothing. When I'm out there, no one can bother me. Being out there is one of the most private parts of my life. Being on the court is very much like meditation for me. If something is on my mind, I can think about it on the court. If my wife and I had a disagreement at home, I know that if we have a game that night, I'll be out there on the court by myself for a few hours and by the time I get home again at the end of the evening, all of that will have passed.[29]

These sentiments are remarkable not only because they show how captive to and controlled by his public personae Jordan was. They also reflect that rare and remarkable synthesis of discipline, focus, and creativity we associate with real genius. Set in the context of African American sports history, one also can't help but contrast the freedom Jordan felt in the athletic arena with the tremendous racial burden previous generations of African American athletes carried with them into the athletic arena. Every bout Joe Louis fought, for example, was for the credit of his race. The proud and otherwise defiant Jackie Robinson was under orders not to argue or protest and was thus unable to respond to

the racial taunts and slurs of opposing fans and players.[30] While Jordan had plenty of other responsibilities and obligations, his experience of sport as a site of release and achievement, a genuine "field of play," signals at least one more respect in which race relations had progressed, at least within the world of sport.

This uncompromising focus and freedom also help to account for one of the many memorable emotional moments of Jordan's career: his post-game celebration after the Bulls' first championship. Upon realizing what he and his teammates had finally accomplished (he had also been named MVP of the finals), Jordan fell to his knees in the locker room, in tears, cradling the championship trophy all to himself. It was a rare, unguarded moment of personal fulfillment for the very public Jordan (and may even have helped to usher in a new era of emotionality and masculinity in American sporting culture).

But the championship only intensified the pressures and public scrutiny on Jordan. Even as he and his Bulls remained at the top of the league the following season, substantial public criticism of Jordan arose for the first time during the 1991–92 campaign. It came from many angles: Jordan was rebuked for failing to attend a White House ceremony where President Bush honored the Bulls' championship; he was taken to task (by Chicago sportswriter Stan Smith in *The Jordan Rules*) for his hyper-competitive, win-at-all-costs nature, and castigated for gambling large sums of money in golf. His public image also took a hit when he declined to immediately accept the invitation to play for the 1992 U.S. Olympic team, and then for wrangling with the NBA and Olympic authorities over the commercial rights to his likeness and his obligation to wear athletic apparel that bore the label of Nike's chief competitor Reebok during the games.[31] Air Jordan, in short, was being brought back down to earth.

Popular backlash against erstwhile athletic heroes and celebrities is a regular and predictable feature of the modern mass media and its tabloid industry, especially in democratic societies where the best and the brightest typically provoke deep anxieties about our idealized visions of equality, universality, and shared humanity.[32] But what was unique and largely unexpected in Jordan's case (especially in light of his erstwhile colorlessness) was the appearance of racial undercurrents and

overtones in the coverage and commentary. Increasingly, as David Andrews has documented, Jordan was described as being either defiant and ungrateful, or prone to selfish, irresponsible, and self-destructive behavior—tropes that have been used to marginalize and contain successful black men throughout American history.

Aided by another NBA championship in 1992 and his starring role on the "Dream Team" that won gold in Barcelona that summer, Jordan and his handlers weathered the initial storm of criticism pretty well and the racial aspects remained fairly isolated and under the radar. But that would not last. A new, more intensive round of attacks on Jordan's character and credibility took shape less than one year later when reporters broke the story that Jordan had been gambling in Atlantic City in the wee hours of the morning on the eve of Game 2 of the Bulls' 1993 Eastern Conference Final series against the New York Knicks. These reports were followed by intensive media scrutiny and speculation where Jordan was clearly and often deliberately linked with all of the racially inscribed deviance and pathology believed to be associated with the NBA: not just gambling, but drinking and drug use, gang associations, sexual promiscuity. All of a sudden, Jordan's race-less-ness was disappearing and he was being transformed from the "good" black athlete to one of the bad ones. If there is ever any doubt about Jordan's public image being bound with blackness, one need only look back to these commentaries (documented by David Andrews and others) to confirm.

The re-appearance of race in the context of Jordan's supposed transgressions was not, in fact, unprecedented. When Magic Johnson divulged that he had contracted the HIV virus from illicit sexual encounters, for example, he was quickly and unceremoniously transformed into being "just another black guy" in the national media. And the re-racialization process kicked into full gear when the original crossover icon O. J. Simpson was accused of the double murders of Nicole Brown and Ronald Goldman.[33] In many ways, these reactions reflect the ambivalence that black male success, in all arenas but especially athletic ones, provokes in white America: that, on the one hand, it generates deep fascination, admiration, and desire, but on the other, also produces a simultaneous fear and resentment. Predictable though it was, Jordan had done nothing wrong and certainly committed no crimes. Even more troubling,

the racialized public reaction actually intensified when a heinous crime was committed against him and his family later in August. It was perhaps the most troubling event in Jordan's personal life: the disappearance and, as it turned out, murder of his father, James.

Connie Chung framed the story for the nation on the *CBS Evening News:* "Triumph. Turmoil. And now, tragedy. Michael Jordan has seen it all this year. Today police in North Carolina confirmed the worst fears about the basketball star's missing father. James Jordan shot to death. Killer and motive unknown." The subsequent film segment reported on Michael's devastation and went on to comment, "Authorities have not said whether they will consider the possibility the killing might be connected to the family's gambling activities." "In one fell swoop," as Andrews put it, "[these] less-than-subtle inferences provided the viewing public with a seemingly compelling rationale for the murder; one which clearly implicated Michael Jordan, without any direct reference to him." With a picture of the elder Jordan in the backdrop, Chung's concluding reference to his son's career made the racial subtext of the story uncomfortably clear: "Jordan's murder adds another bitter twist to the darker side of an American success story."[34]

Jordan's fall from grace as an American icon was mercifully short-lived. The negative, racialized images began to abate with the arrest and conviction of his father's murderers, one of them an African American male who was made to bear the brunt of what Andrews described as "the accusatory and racist vectors of the popular media" that had initially landed on Michael. Jordan's surprise retirement from the game that had made him and that he had helped to remake—prompted, according to reports, by his father's death and his frustration over media treatment—further accelerated the rehabilitation process. It was viewed as an occasion of national mourning and loss, and prompted the celebration (and vindication) of an All-American life. The syndicated columnist Ira Berkow's comments illustrate: "His wholesome image, his broad smile and his basketball achievements made him the embodiment of the American dream." Even President Clinton got into the act: "We may never see another like him again. We will miss him—here and all around America, in every small-town backyard and paved city lot where kids play one-on-one and dream of being like Mike."[35] And then there was

Jordan's foray into professional baseball, his decision to join a minor league baseball team in an attempt to play the game that was his first athletic love at the highest possible level. Baseball's historic reputation as the national pastime; Jordan's unlikely dream and the lengths he was willing to chase it; the fact that he was obviously not in it for the money (unlike major leaguers, then in the middle of the most contentious labor dispute in the history of American sports); that despite all of his best efforts he wasn't even particularly good at the game—these were all factors that once again endeared Jordan to the America public, and promoters were quick to capitalize on them, spinning out entire marketing campaigns on Jordan's "baseball odyssey" as well as a series of coffee table and self-help books on Jordan's personal philosophy about life.[36] With their emphasis on the abstract, universal virtues and values Jordan was said to represent, these texts were almost gloriously free of even the subtlest references to race and racism.

Yet even in these moments of apparent transcendence, race was never far from the surface. During Jordan's self-imposed hiatus from basketball, journalists wrote numerous stories and commentaries about the perceived decline of the NBA and basketball in general, focusing especially on the deviance and delinquency and disobedience associated with the new generation of African American stars. Players like Dennis Rodman, Chris Webber, Derrick Coleman, Isaiah Rider, and eventually Allen Iverson were lumped together as "slammin', jammin', no jump-shooting, fundamentally unsound kids who have bought into NBA's and Madison Avenue's shallow MTV-generated marketing of the game. People with no soul for the essence of the game turned the poetry into gangster rap." The thrust of many of these commentaries was that the league's discipline problem mirrored the problems of society, and that Jordan represented the "good" black athlete against which these young black stars were imagined. As a December 1994 *Inside Sports* cover story asked: "Why Can't Shaq Be Like Mike?"[37]

Never does Jordan's awareness and acceptance of his paradoxical racial identity and role emerge more clearly than upon his dramatic return to the NBA in 1995. Employing color-blind language that appealed implicitly to uplift notions of racial respectability, he told CNN: "I really felt that I wanted to instill some positive things back to the

game. You know, there's a lot of negative things that have been happening to the game, and I guess in terms of me coming back, I come back with the notion of, you know, Magic Johnson and the Larry Birds and the Dr. Js—all those guys who paved the road for a lot of the young guys. And the young guys are not taking care of their responsibilities in terms of maintaining that love for the game, you know, and not let it waste to where it's so business-oriented that the integrity of the game's going to be at stake."[38]

This perspective would take him to three more NBA championships, another celebrated retirement, his own corporate division at Nike, partial ownership and a management role in an NBA franchise, an unlikely (and surprisingly successful) third comeback with the Washington Wizards, and continuing commercial popularity and endorsement success. In recent years—in the wake of his less-than-Jordanesque play for the Wizards, his eventual dis-association with the Washington franchise, the uneven fortunes of the Nike corporation with which he is so closely associated—Jordan has been less visible and iconic than in the decade of his glory. Much of that was probably inevitable and predictable. My guess—if I am allowed to play prognosticator for a moment—is that this decline will be temporary, that with his (imminent) enshrinement in the Basketball Hall of Fame Jordan will once again come back into the public consciousness and have his athletic reputation returned to his iconic status. History, in other words, will be kind to Jordan.

What is less certain are the racial implications of all this, the racial meaning and significance Michael Jordan will hold in his post-athletic years. Part of the uncertainty here has to do with the unpredictable future of race relations in America. It also has to do with Jordan himself—what he chooses to do with his time and popularity in the years to come. Will he retreat from public life? Will he continue in his ostensibly apolitical, color-blind ways? Or will he develop the courage and audacity to try to use his fame and fortune to broader social and political ends, if not with the politics of a Bill Russell or Muhammad Ali, then perhaps with the intelligence and passion and grace of a Jackie Robinson or Arthur Ashe. If the verdict is still out on these questions that is because the story of Michael Jordan, his life history, is still far from over. But there is no doubt that his future will be tied up with the fate of the

paradoxical, color-blind idealism that Jordan represented so proudly and so consistently through his basketball career.

Recent studies of racial images and representations in sport have been very critical of sport's dominant color-blind discourse and the ways in which it can displace, marginalize, and even legitimate the deeply problematic racial status quo.[39] This is appropriate. It is crucial to establish that racism and racial inequalities persist (both in sport and in society) and to consider how this discourse is complicit with insidious racial stereotypes and injustices. Jordan's career provides us a rare opportunity to analyze this discourse, understand its depths, and evaluate its relationship to broader structural and institutional realities. At the same time, we should not forget that while color blindness and race neutrality offer deeply flawed depictions of contemporary racial realities, they present for many Americans—white and black alike—very real and meaningful ideals to strive for, standards to try to live up to. And this, too, Jordan represented. In this respect, John Wideman is onto something when he calls Jordan "the truest prophet of what might be possible" for the future of race in America.[40]

David Wiggins has written of the "double consciousness" of African American athletes, their awareness of being both black and American.[41] The very notion of a double (or split) consciousness almost invariably signals the problems and pathology of race in America. But, borrowed as it is from W. E. B. Du Bois, this bifocal vision should also suggest a sense of critical possibility and promise, a lens onto alternative visions of race and the larger, mainstream society. I would like to think that Jordan cultivated some measure of this double-ness during his athletic career, and even to imagine that he will find a time and a place and a vehicle to act on that in coming years. But whether or not that turns out to be the case, let us be clear that Michael Jordan inhabited and embodied a complex, paradoxical racial space—a space that, if we can understand it properly, can not only help us grasp the challenges (and significance) of being an African American athlete but also and perhaps more importantly begin to cultivate a double consciousness of our own—a consciousness that is at once attentive to both racial progress and stasis, to new possibilities and long-standing limitations, and especially to the ways in which we might aspire to color blindness even as

we must nevertheless remain deeply and diligently conscious of color. In an essentially conservative, consensual culture, such a bifocal vision is difficult to cultivate, but nothing, in my view, could be more essential for understanding and acting to confront the complexities of race in contemporary America, especially those propagated in and through sports.