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THE CREATION OF AN AMERICAN SUPER RACE:
AMERICAN SPORTING MEDIA'S CATEGORIZATION OF BARACK OBAMA

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Abstract

This paper explores sporting media's attempts to link Barack Obama with an elite group of black athletes including Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, and Muhammad Ali because of their common ability to transcend race. Media portrayal of successful black athletes in this way resulted in the projection of a façade of racial equality. By aligning Obama's image with these black athletes who "transcend race," this media rhetoric provided a way for citizens to negotiate racial tensions surrounding Obama's election as the first African-American president. I argue that the media not only tokenized Obama, but categorized him as a member of an elite "super race" consisting of former and current black athletes who "transcend race" without disrupting America's racial equilibrium.

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Introduction

Despite Tiger Woods' desperate efforts throughout his career to remain politically neutral, he could not resist commenting on Barack Obama's election as the first minority President of the United States: "I think it's absolutely incredible," Woods told CNBC. "He represents America. He's multiracial. I was hoping it would happen in my lifetime. My father was hoping it would happen in his lifetime, but he didn't get to see it. I'm lucky enough to have seen a person of color in the White House" (ESPN.com news services).

Similarly, Michael Jordan, infamous for his "Republicans buy sneakers, too" stance on politics, publically admitted that he cried tears of joy the night of Obama's election (Aldridge, 2009). Another iconic American black athlete, Muhammad Ali, saluted the nation's first black president at an inaugural soiree. "What's interesting is that Muhammad had time to grow into his role as being a world humanitarian," said Lonnie Ali, Muhammad's wife. Obama on the other hand "will inherit the world on his shoulders, not just the U.S" (Kellman, 2009).

These three black sporting heroes publically supported Obama, despite the fact that Obama's platform did not align with their financial interests. Also, in a corporate society dominated by white conservatives, endorsing any candidate, especially a black Democrat, could be potentially detrimental to sponsorships and business relationships. Obama's election as the first black president drew media comparisons to these three black superstars' groundbreaking racial accomplishments in the sporting world. Despite the political arena of Obama's stardom, his image was publicized by the sporting media in the same manner as "white-friendly" black athletes such as Michael Jordan or Tiger Woods. This essay will analyze how the sporting media negotiated Barack Obama's fame and

categorized him as a member of a “super race” of black Americans who utilize their natural talents in a way that conforms to a white-dominated capitalistic society.

Various scholars have observed the connection between Obama and Woods.¹ “Woods and Obama have a similar self-image, that it's not about race,” Michael Dawson, a professor of political science at the University of Chicago, told *The New York Times*. “It's a central part of Obama's campaign,” he said. “He can transcend race” (Rubenstein). The phrase “transcends race” was frequently used in the media to describe Jordan, Woods, and Obama as a method of categorizing these men as members of a “super race” rather than members of the black race.

Previous scholars have closely examined the constantly-evolving relationship between sport and race and the media's role in constructing and projecting a certain image of black athletes to the American people. Many have studied the media's tendency to highlight two extremes of black athletes; the flamboyant and boisterous black athletes are often negatively labeled with stereotypically racist adjectives while the black athletes who respectfully conform to white-dominated society and only celebrate their blackness in the appropriate setting are typically praised verbally and rewarded financially. Yet, these rewarded figures are often not truly “free” because of the unspoken understanding that they owe their financial success to the white corporations and media outlets who paved the way for their positive image. Previously, this tokenism theory had mostly been applied to entertainers and athletes, but in this paper, I analyze the 2008 presidential campaign and sporting media's coverage of Barack Obama through the lens of tokenism. Conducting this analysis requires understanding of the media's role in shaping public opinions and

¹ This analysis was conducted prior to Tiger Woods' sex scandal which began in November 2009. At the time of Obama's campaign and election, Woods was not only one of the top global icons, but was also considered the ultimate symbol of biracial success in America.

images of candidates. In *The Reasoning Voter: Communication and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns*, Samuel L. Popkin argued:

Media play a critical role in shaping voters' limited information about the world, their limited knowledge about the links between issues and offices, their limited understanding of the connections between public policy and its immediate consequences for themselves, and their views about what kind of person a president should be. The campaigns and media, in other words, influence the voter's frame of reference, and can thereby change his or her vote. (p. 9)

Most Americans fail to independently research each candidate and instead rely upon the media to help them interpret how candidates and issues translate to their own lives.

Popkin explained (p. 13) that "voters will rely on information shortcuts because they do not have much incentive to gather information about politics solely in order to inform their voting choices." Therefore, we ought to consider the media's role in a deliberative democracy which professes to allow each citizen to make progressive choices for himself without external manipulation.

This paper will demonstrate that the white-dominated American media (only eight television stations are owned by black men) use intelligent black athletes as an example of racial equality in the United States, despite the persisting racial discrimination (Muhammad, 2008). I specifically analyze how the media dealt with black superstar athletes Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, and Muhammad Ali, and the unspoken terms of cooperation between black athletes and corporate sponsors. Finally, I address the sporting media's construction of Barack Obama as a member of the black "super race" throughout the 2008 presidential campaign. I conclude by arguing that this concept of a super race

was created by the media as an outlet for white-dominated society and corporate sponsors to celebrate black Americans without handing over substantial political power.

Literature Review

Sport and Race in the Media

Sport and race maintain an intimate connection in American society. Sport symbolizes racial equality yet simultaneously exposes the rampant racism that still exists in the United States today. Sports have been portrayed as the most common pathway for black Americans to achieve a celebrity status in a white-dominated society and typically have been the only option for social mobility for millions of underprivileged black Americans. Ever since 1947 when Jackie Robinson integrated Major League Baseball, curiosity runs high when African Americans make inroads into territory that was once off-limits to them (Smith, 2007). From Tommie Smith and John Carlos's black power salute in the 1968 Olympics to Muhammad Ali's anti-white establishment demonstrations to LeBron James's criticism of the media as racist for its disapproval of his 2010 "Decision," sports have been one of the only platforms for black Americans to voice their opinions on racial injustice.

Howard Cosell (1974), a legendary sports announcer of the 1960s, claimed that sports are simply a microcosm of human life. Analyzing the media's portrayal and society's relationship with black superstar athletes may give us a glimpse into some of the racial issues that haunt our society today. Earl Smith, author of *Race, Sport, and the American Dream*, argued that the institution of sport holds immeasurable importance for African Americans because it has been one of the only arenas in which whites have come to tolerate African Americans' presence. He explained: "Whites, even those who are sympathetic and fight against racism and racial oppression, feel at ease on Sunday afternoon when they turn on ESPN and see successful African American men who make

millions of dollars on a field or court” (p. 213). Smith argued that by allowing African Americans to participate in sports, the white-dominated society satisfies the needs of the nation to feel good about our treatment of African Americans. In other words, sports are a convenient way for white Americans to simply appreciate the success of black athletes as a sign of racial equality in the United States rather than considering that African Americans have little to no power in the areas where money and power truly lie, even in the sporting world itself.

African Americans are typically on the outside looking in when it comes to opportunities to lead, manage, or *own* teams (Smith, 2007). Even Michael Jordan, who had conformed for many years to be the token, white-friendly, business-savvy model of a black athlete, was unexpectedly ousted from his ownership position with the Washington Wizards after retiring. Jordan stated:

I came to Washington 3½ years ago excited about the challenge of turning around this franchise. During my tenure, I dedicated myself to bringing excitement, credibility and my love of the game of basketball to Washington. It was well understood that when I finished playing, I would return as president of basketball operations and this was definitely my desire and intention. However, today, without any prior discussion with me, ownership informed me that it had unilaterally decided to change our mutual long-term understanding. I am shocked by this decision, and by the callous refusal to offer me any justification for it. (*Sports Illustrated*, May 2003)

Jordan, like so many black athletes of the past, had been used, manipulated, and misled so that the white owners of the Washington Wizards could showcase the franchise’s diversity to the public by making Jordan the figurehead owner. Jordan’s presence increased fandom

among white and black Americans alike, yet the majority owners never fulfilled their promise to give Jordan true power in the organization. As William C. Rhoden, author of *Forty Million Dollar Slaves* so aptly wrote, “[Black athletes] stand as living, active proof that it does not necessarily follow that if you make a man rich, you make him free” (p. 8).

In April 2006, *Sports Illustrated* published “Brother Beware,” an article that presented racism as a problem that black people benefit from and seek to perpetuate where they can make personal gains (e.g., black people use the ‘race card’ to gain an advantage in business). The message of this article was later reinforced by a strongly-worded letter to the editor, written by a black reader. The November 2006 issue of *Sports Illustrated* published his editorial: “As a black man I am infuriated that, once again, some people are playing the race card to excuse bad behavior.” Kevin Hylton, author of *‘Race and Sport’: Critical Race Theory*, argued that although *Sports Illustrated* did not specifically state that racism is a problem that impacts us all equally, the silence of alternative voices in the publication certainly implies this theme.

Hylton claimed that many of the problems associated with sports, race, and the media stem from the media’s tendency to categorize black athletes’ identities as exclusively “black.” Hylton defined this concept as “whiteness as (in)visible” (p. 102), outlining how representations of ‘black’ crime, black entertainers, black sportsmen and sportswomen are ordinary in the media while their ‘white’ equivalents go unremarked. He explained that we never hear the terms “white football player Tom Brady” or “white rock star Bon Jovi,” yet ESPN and other sporting media outlets overly-focus on the race of athletes such as tennis stars Serena and Venus Williams or formula 1 racer Lewis Hamilton instead of simply focusing on their athletic feats. Hylton argued that the associations of placing a unique

individual in a well-defined social group can have both positive and negative effects, depending on how the social group is viewed by others. Hylton wrote:

In sport what we often get are versions of conceptual whiteness or blackness that themselves signify notions of ‘achievement’, ‘middleclassness’, ‘intelligence’ and ‘education’ as normative characteristics of whiteness while ‘gangs’, ‘basketball player’, ‘entertainer’, ‘sprinter’ become the ‘marginalised [sic] and delegitimated [sic] categories of blackness.’ (p. 108)

Often talented athletes are immediately branded by the media, who collectively construct and sensationalize their image to force them into a categorized stereotype, whether this mold naturally fits them or not.

Yet, these athletes themselves often embrace a false image, as it is nearly irresistible to reject the millions of dollars offered via endorsement deals. The book *Souled Out?: How Blacks Are Winning and Losing in Sports*, written by Shaun Powell, outlined the major obstacles that black athletes face, both self-imposed and external. Powell explained the meaning behind the book’s title:

Blacks are being systematically kept out and Souled Out of influential positions in the major media companies that, for the most part, control the sports leagues and the images we get on TV and in print...Highly paid black athletes are too busy hiding behind their previous public profiles and endorsement deals to lend a voice to activism, which means they’ve Souled Out in their worship of the almighty dollar. We’d like to say that blacks have Souled Out of golf, but blacks were never souled in, even with Tiger Woods. (p. xix)

Powell argued that the good and healthy portion of black athletes who carry themselves in a dignified manner such as football players who conclude their end zone appearance with a simple toss of the football to the referee or basketball players who hustle back to play defense after a spectacular slam dunk are simply ignored by the media. The TV cameras do not focus on these types of players, and endorsing companies choose to not hire these athletes because they are considered “too boring and white bread and not ethnic enough” (p. 170). Black athletes are stamped as one extreme or the other, and both ends are under the media’s microscope and often, highly criticized.

Black Celebrities as Tokens in Society

With the relatively recent push for a more diverse America, the mainstream media make a concerted effort to showcase the few unique minorities who fit the white-friendly mold. This effort allows the media to broadcast an impression of diversity and racial equality while white Americans retain the power of the country. The concept of a “token” has been addressed by previous scholars as they analyze one of the most baffling paradoxes in our society: the wealthiest and most high-profile celebrities are black but are nearly completely at the mercy of white corporate America, both financially and in the media.

The concept of “tokenism” applies not only to racial equality but gender equality as well. Lynn Zimmer outlined the societal purpose for tokens in her article “Tokenism and Women in the Workplace: The Limits of Gender-Neutral Theory.”: Tokens are “hired, admitted, or appointed to a group because of their differences from other members, perhaps to serve as ‘proof’ that the group does not discriminate against such members” (p. 66). Despite the influx of token celebrities in the past twenty years, the concept of a token

is not a recent discovery. In 1975, Judith Long Laws of Cornell University laid the academic groundwork for tokenism:

The Token is a member of an underrepresented group who is operating on the turf of the dominant group, under license from it. The institution of tokenism has advantages both for the dominant group and for the individual who is chosen to serve as Token...the flow of outsiders into the dominant group must be restricted numerically, and they must not change the system they enter. (p. 53)

Laws raised a critical point, as she emphasized that the token must not shift the power of the system that he or she is entering. In today's society, the superstar athletes who are endorsed by billion-dollar companies such as Nike and Gatorade are expected to celebrate their blackness, but it is understood that they will not address their race's history or economic struggles. The tokens are rewarded with riches beyond their wildest dreams, considering that many have come from a poor upbringing.

These "chosen few" who are allowed to infiltrate the white-dominated power positions are not simply picked at random, but instead must be superior beings, extremely capable and intelligent, and unparalleled at their craft. Dana Cloud, author of "Hegemony or Concordance? The Rhetoric of Tokenism in 'Oprah' Winfrey's Rags-to-Riches Biography" analyzed the tokenism of Oprah Winfrey, the world's richest African American. Cloud described the plight of these individuals: "representatives of oppressed groups often must be more qualified and hardworking than members of dominant groups in the same positions" (p. 120). This holds true for celebrity athletes such as Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods, as these men undoubtedly persevered through obstacles of

racism during their careers and are widely considered two of the greatest athletes of all time.

Whoopi Goldberg said, “You can win the race no matter how far behind you start out.” Technically, the metaphor is true, but what are the odds of a young black woman making it through college when she is raised in poverty? Of course, a small percentage of black women can overcome seemingly insurmountable odds (e.g. Goldberg and Winfrey), but we must ask: is it appropriate for white Americans to overly celebrate the small percentage of blacks who achieve celebrity status, or should this celebration be postponed until there is a higher percentage of successful black Americans? Cloud wrote:

The rhetoric of tokenism, while internally contradictory regarding the existence of inequality, serves to interpret success and failure as a matter of individual responsibility regardless of one’s structural location in systems of power and privilege; it provides the dominant culture a defense against charges of racism while continuing to naturalize and justify racism. (p. 123)

Despite Goldberg’s politically-correct encouragement to the underprivileged, she recognized the tokenism of herself and Oprah, stating “If we didn’t have an Oprah Winfrey, we’d have to invent one” (p. 130).

The rhetoric used by the media is an extremely powerful tool, capable of inventing false images for public figures and reinforcing this image until it becomes reality for the figure. For example, Tiger Woods assumed the media’s role as a savior of the human race. They even called him “The Chosen One.” Woods was constructed as the squeaky clean public figure, but as a consequence had to ignore racism to avoid any controversy that could tarnish his image. Woods typifies successful black Americans who are often

forced into a financial and social bind as they assume the token position in their respective arena.

Barack Obama's Constructed Image as a "Jock"

In 2008, Barack Obama entered an arena unfamiliar to blackness, a similar scenario to Jackie Robinson's integration into Major League Baseball in 1947. With so few prominent black politicians, no black man (let alone a black woman) had ever been considered a legitimate and viable presidential candidate before Obama. As American society continued to subscribe to a more progressive stance toward racial equality, voters began to question the racial tyranny in politics. Out of the forty-three presidents in history, all forty-three had been white and wealthy. To avoid a permanent shift in power and to uphold the "great melting pot" image that has greatly contributed to America's prosperity, corporate powers and the mainstream media endorsed the implementation of a token to validate America's diversity.

Only a handful of Americans possess the rare qualities that fit the requirements of the token, especially in the political realm. Token or not, all candidates must construct and uphold a certain image that suits the American people's familiarity. The delicate art of constructing and maintaining the perfect presidential image has evolved over time. No matter the medium, presidential candidates must connect with voters who enjoy sports, since voters often consider a candidate's tie to sports as an inside view on her or her character. The media adopted familiar traits and images of black athletes and applied them to Obama; Obama molded to this constructed image because those traits fit the standards of presidential image. John Sayle Watterson outlined Americans' expectancy for presidential candidates to

participate in athletic competition in his book, *The Games Presidents Play: Sports and Presidency*. Watterson explained:

Former athletes often look and act like the leaders they were on the playing field. As a result, a winnowing process takes place whereby nonathletes—the small and unimpressive males—simply never seem to reach the point where they can win presidential primaries and rarely are they chosen to run as vice-presidential candidates. (p. 349)

Americans search for presidential candidates who demonstrate the confidence necessary to lead a country, and this confidence is often associated with the ability to captain a sports team.

Watterson argued that presidential involvement in the sporting world has evolved into a mandatory component of presidential image in the twenty-first century. For instance, 43rd President George W. Bush was very publically linked to sports as a baseball enthusiast and owner of a Major League Baseball team, the Texas Rangers. Watterson described Bush as the president who “pushed the sporting presidents into a still another realm—the jock presidency” (p. 348). Obama built upon Bush’s success in the sporting arena and took the promotion of his athleticism to a new level. Obama’s enormous effort to align with ESPN and sporting fans across the country was likely the most successful in campaign history; Obama overwhelmingly dominated the vote of the valuable young male population—a clear example of the importance of constructing and projecting a certain image through sporting media. Watterson wrote about Obama’s tie with sports: “It’s so much a part of what he does, it’s almost as if this is becoming a post-sports presidency” (Futterman & Chozick, 2009, p. B16). Ross Baker, a political scientist at Rutgers University, agreed that Obama’s “jock

image” is good politics. “Intellectually he's so lofty that I think he feels it's necessary to bring himself down a bit,” said Baker, “There is nothing better to temper that loftiness than sports” (Futterman & Chozick, 2009, p. B16).

The tokenism of black celebrities has primarily occurred in the sporting and entertainment industries rather than the political realm, but only because so few black politicians have possessed the celebrity appeal necessary to gain the approval of the white community. The few widely-known black political figures in history such as Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, and Colin Powell gained popularity within certain subsections of the voting populace, but never “transcended race” in the same vein that Jordan and Woods effectively connected with both white and black Americans alike. In 2008, this changed when “rock star” Barack Obama campaigned for the presidency of the United States in a “media extravaganza unparalleled in American history” (Sabato, 2009, p. 167). Despite Obama’s “rock star” image and celebrity status, the media rarely classified Barack Obama as exclusively a “black American.” Diana Owen, contributing author to *The Year of Obama: How Barack Obama Won the White House* explained, “Despite Obama’s history-making candidacy, press reports generally treated the issue of race with ambiguity. The ‘race issue’ or ‘post-racial politics’ were terms employed by the media, but only occasionally were they defined or discussed in detail” (Sabato, 2009, p. 175). Rather than overly celebrating Obama’s blackness, I argue that the media instead categorized Barack Obama as a member of an elite “super race” consisting of former and current black athletes who “transcend race” without disrupting America’s racial equilibrium. This begs the question: how was sport particularly significant to the media’s handling of Obama’s race? This essay analyzes how Obama’s sporting background played into white American’s

familiarity with African-American sports stars. Because Americans are now comfortable with black leaders on their favorite professional sports teams, the media could “safely” focus on the athletic aspect of Obama’s blackness.

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In this paper, the concepts developed by previous scholars regarding tokenism and black athletes' role in the media are applied to Barack Obama's constructed image within the scope of the 2008 presidential election. I argue that the media not only treated Obama as a token, but also categorized him as a member of the super race in an effort to celebrate his blackness as a symbol of racial change in America. This media categorization negotiated racial tensions surrounding the notion of a black president and ultimately, minimized the shift in America's racial equilibrium.

Analysis

Barack Obama: Baller-in-Chief

Barack Obama utilized his image as a hip, young black male to catapult himself to the presidency of the United States. However, one must wonder whether Obama's extensive image campaign would have succeeded in any election prior to the twenty-first century. The age difference between Obama and McCain helped Obama bond with the youth of America, but more importantly, the media's constant association between Barack Obama and superstar athletes such as Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods allowed Obama to absorb the media glory that these two black icons have benefited from in the last two decades. Frank Deford, a writer for *Sports Illustrated* since the 1960s, commented:

I think African-American athletes have played a key part in the process. You get to be a great player, then you become an idol, to whites and blacks alike.

Unconsciously or not, Obama in that sense is the end product. Maybe Barack Obama would have been the nominee if there had never been a Jackie Robinson, a Michael Jordan, a Tony Dungy and a Derek Jeter. But I don't think so." (Merrill, 2008)

Mark Avington, a professor of Medieval History at California State-Fresno recently wrote an article titled “Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, and the Obama Phenomenon,” in which he called Jordan and Woods “an obvious factor in Mr. Obama’s electoral success.” Avington explained that Jordan and Woods “have also done much to change the perception of the country about the efficacy of race as a barrier to success.” Despite the racism each has faced, Jordan, Woods, and Obama have never used their race as a valid excuse for failure. The media suggested that if these successful young men never acknowledge racism in the United States, neither should anyone else.

America’s recently increased open-mindedness towards black authority figures was crucial to Barack Obama’s election as the first African-American President. Some pundits suggested that Obama utilized his natural athletic abilities to connect with young American males, a surprisingly large voting demographic. Media giants ESPN and *Sports Illustrated* frequently featured Obama’s face, enough for opponent John McCain to state that he rarely turned on ESPN because it was so saturated by his opponent’s presence (Issenberg, 2008). Alexander Wolff of *Sports Illustrated* claimed in his 2009 article “The Audacity of Hoops,” that “if there’s any one reason Barack Obama was elected president, it might just be this: As a boy he began playing basketball, and he never stopped.” Wolff quoted Oregon State head basketball coach Craig Robinson (and Michelle Obama’s brother) as claiming that basketball is the reason why Obama is “sitting where he’s sitting,” implying that Obama would have never succeeded politically without the leadership and teamwork skills that are learned naturally through the game of basketball. Obama gained the sporting media’s admiration through his elegant athletic abilities,

frequent and friendly interviews, and even one-on-one basketball games with reporters such as *Sportscenter* anchor Stuart Scott (Scott, 2008).

Obama played into the media's carefully constructed "athletic image" during his campaign to appeal to Americans' infatuation with the sporting world. Judy Polumbaum and Stephen Wieting wrote in *Stories of Sport and the Moral Order: Unraveling the Cultural Construction of Tiger Woods*, that:

While each athlete, each sport, each instance has its idiosyncrasies, in a generic sense, the reason we fixate on Tiger Woods in golf is the same reason we venerate Michael Jordan in basketball or Cal Ripken in baseball—because widely shared beliefs, judgments, hopes, dreams, and much else that concerns us find heightened expression in these sports figures and their activities.” (p. 89)

Sports are typically viewed strategically by politicians. *New York Times* sportswriter Murray Chass has explained that politicians “attach themselves to sports connections because sports are popular with much of the public” (Green, 2007). Sports represent ongoing cultural and political struggles and can be used as a valuable asset in the political arena.

Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods distorted stereotypes about black athletes by handling the media pressure of stardom from a racially-neutral approach. Douglas Hartmann argued (p. 311) in *Out of the Shadows: A Biographical History of African American Athletes* that the media's affinity for Michael Jordan as a cultural icon represented “a kinder, gentler, more inclusive America.” The media's image of Jordan was carefully constructed and maintained to promote Jordan as the ideal black American. Mary G. McDonald contended that Jordan's success came from leading by example rather

than engaging in the “dangerous” waters of political activism in *African American Icons of Spot: Triumph, Courage, and Excellence*:

His participations in advertisements for Nike and the NBA stand in stark contrast to the vision of African American athletes as outspoken critics of the white establishment. Jordan certainly had myriad reasons to work with these institutions, preferring to serve as a role model for the ideas of racial tolerance, dedication, hard work, and achievement. (p. 150)

The media portrayed Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods as being able to continuously cross unspoken racial barriers between whites and blacks in America. Curry Kirkpatrick wrote in a 1987 *Sports Illustrated* article about Michael Jordan’s “transcendence”:

Most black—or white— athletes who attempt this kind of cross-culturization come off as phonies, stilted and unnatural. Even the revered Julius Erving as a young player would use some of his \$10 words in comically misplaced situations. Jordan, his Barry White bass voice alternately starring at power lunches and slurring street jive in the locker room, seems totally secure in either world.

Even when complimenting Jordan’s racially versatile image, Kirkpatrick subtly stereotyped Jordan in this passage by comparing his voice to Barry White. Kirkpatrick also assumed that Jordan participates in “street jive” with his black teammates, despite the lack of evidence that Jordan ever spoke in such a way.

Michael Jordan emerged onto the national scene in 1985 as a charming young black male who novelist John Edgar Wideman described as “[making] us rise above our obsession with race” (Hartmann, 2009, p. 309). With his dazzling abilities, million-dollar

smile, and soft-spoken yet intelligent interviews, Jordan became an American icon.

Hartmann explained, “Much as Jordan the basketball superstar seemed to defy the laws of physics, Jordan-the-name-brand appeared to transcend all the unusual social labels and stereotypes with the unique force of his personality and athletic brilliance.” Michael Jordan became more than simply a spectacular athlete; his image transformed him into a symbol of hope for racial unity in America.

Michael Jordan’s agent, David Falk, explained: “We think he transcends race, transcends basketball” (Hartmann, 2009, p. 309). Jordan’s ability to “transcend race” put him in a social class above a standard black man. He was never projected as the savior of the black race or a representative for all African-Americans. Instead, sporting media ignored his cultural roots and placed him in a race of his own, which he would later share with Tiger Woods and Barack Obama.

Michael Jordan and the Absence of Race

Michael Jordan’s blackness was rarely addressed in the sporting media. He was portrayed as a safe “white-friendly” business man, who could cooperate with white-dominated corporate America. Michael Jordan has often been described as the first athlete who “transcends race.” Douglas Kellner wrote in *Media Spectacle*:

Jordan embodies national values of hard work, competitiveness, ambition, and success. As a black superstar, he presents the fantasy that anyone can make it in the society of competitiveness and status, that one can climb the class ladder and overcome the limitations of race and class. (p. 74)

Kellner uses the word “fantasy” because Michael Jordan is not truly an example of racial equality. Jordan redefined how basketball was played, and thus, provided entertainment

for white NBA viewers across the country. The media highlight Jordan's immense wealth to promote the idea that black men can achieve wealth in America if they cooperate with white businessmen like Jordan has throughout his career. The truth of the matter is that Jordan is not an example of racial equality; rather, he is an example of racial inequality. What if Michael Jordan had not been naturally gifted with his unparalleled athletic ability? What are the odds that he would still be a multi-millionaire? Jordan's willpower and competitive nature translate well to a business setting, but in reality, he could have fallen victim to corporate racism if he was unable to rely on his natural-born athleticism. Jordan is simply a money-making tool for white-owned major American corporations such as Nike, Coca-Cola, Gatorade, McDonald's, Wheaties, Chevrolet, etc.

Sports Illustrated's Jack McCallum wrote that Michael Jordan "stands alone on the mountain top, unquestionably the most famous athlete on the planet and one of its most famous citizens of any kind...He transcends sports" (LaFeber, 2002, p. 83). Nike showcased Michael Jordan's superhuman physical skills in his first commercial entitled "Air Jordan I" where Michael leaps and soars through the air with jet engines blaring in the background and eventually dunks the ball. Although this advertisement was effective, it dehumanized Jordan somewhat by only featuring his physical abilities rather than his intelligence or gentle demeanor. However, as time passed and white Americans witnessed Jordan's white-friendly mannerisms and seemingly cooperative nature, America dropped its guard and accepted Michael as a national hero, but not as a black national hero.

By neutralizing Michael Jordan's race, the media display the message that Jordan is not overcoming the white dominance in society, but instead is joining forces with white-

dominated corporate America. David Halberstam recalled in *Playing for Keeps: Michael Jordan and the World He Made*:

When Harvey Gantt, an early black civil rights leader, ran against Jesse Helms, the nemesis of Carolina blacks (among many others), for a Senate seat in NC, it seemed like an easy call for someone who was black and who was still so amazing popular in the state. But Jordan would not take a stand, pointing out that Republicans buy sneakers too. (p. 359)

Jordan's business and image-oriented mindset typifies the plight of intelligent, successful black men who understands the importance of white Americans' favor and their financial support. The media endorse the concept that black males can in fact succeed in a white-dominated society; however, the message is clear that black men's positions of power are allowed by white authorities under the conditions that the black man will cooperate and deemphasize his black heritage. In other words, powerful black men like Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, and Barack Obama will be supported financially by white men as long as their public actions consistently lie within conservative America's comfort zone.

Tiger Woods and the Conversion of Race

Although Jordan was at one time, the most recognizable face on the planet, even identified more often than President Bill Clinton or Jesus, he never utilized his immense power to attempt to rework America's social structure (Hartmann, 2006). As Jordan's career waned, Tiger Woods burst onto the professional golf scene with something to prove both athletically and politically, and although he never took his foot off of the gas athletically, Woods quickly abandoned his image as the savior of the black race. Some scholars suggest the possibility that Tiger's decrease in racial identity was a product of

receiving private advice from his friend and frequent golfing partner, Michael Jordan (Houck, 2006).

Woods' first commercial, "Hello World," was racially charged as it briefly scanned his outstanding career accomplishments before stating, "There are still courses in the U.S. I am not allowed to play because of the color of my skin." As dramatic music blasted in the background, Tiger directly challenged America's social system "I've heard I'm not ready for you. Are you ready for me?" This statement implied that Woods would completely change the way that blacks and whites coexist in society. The commercial "Hello World" could be interpreted as a direct challenge to white America. Woods was in an immense position of power at this point in his career and could have potentially redefined social boundaries in not only golf, but also across the globe.

Again, in Woods' second commercial with Nike titled "I am Tiger Woods," Tiger represented a social movement that was more than golf, more than athletics. In the commercial, blacks, Asians, Latinos, and children of other various races all proclaimed "I am Tiger Woods" symbolizing the idea that Tiger was placing the political burden and social hardship of all minorities in America on his shoulders. Tiger had forged a path for black children in America to seriously consider a career in golf, a sport which was once completely monopolized by white men. Woods has endeared the blatant racism of his peers (Fuzzy Zoeller suggested on national television that the Masters would serve fried chicken and collard greens after Woods' victory), yet Tiger has upheld a race-neutral image (despite his black skin) in a white-dominated society.

Tiger, in his father's own words, was "The Chosen One." Earl Woods claimed in a 1996 *Sports Illustrated* article titled "The Chosen One" that "Tiger will do more than

any other man in history to change the course of humanity.” However, as time passed, Tiger’s commercials became more “white-friendly.” Tiger’s image was shaped by the media so that he was no longer challenging to the white establishment, but was instead seen as an ally. Woods even resisted referring to himself in the media as a black man. In front of a national audience, Oprah asked Woods how he would classify his race, and he responded “Cablinasian”—“Ca” for “Caucasion”, “bl” for Black, “in” for Native American, and “asian” for Asian. Woods even admitted that he preferred not to be called African American. No longer was Tiger portrayed as the savior of the black race in America, but rather as a representative for a future peaceful coexistence between races, a coexistence where racial identity is not a concern.

Woods willingly adopted the race-neutral image that Michael Jordan displayed throughout his career. During the coverage of the Hawaii's Mercedes-Benz Championship in January 2008, broadcasters Nick Faldo and Kelly Tilghman were discussing Woods’ dominance on the tour when Faldo said, “To take Tiger on, well yeah, they should just gang up for a while until ...”. Tilghman interrupted and playfully added “Lynch him in a back alley.” Although she intended for the comment to be a joke, the word “lynch” stirred up racial emotions. The Golf Channel suspended Tilghman for two weeks; however, that was not enough punishment for Reverend Al Sharpton. Woods, who had witnessed the benefits of upholding a race-neutral image from Jordan’s career, downplayed the scenario completely. Woods was presented with a choice in this scenario: he could either side with the white commentator who had just reinforced the concept of Tiger’s racial inferiority in the United States, or he could side with the radical, pro-black, Al Sharpton. Woods issued a statement through his agent saying that he was friends with Tilghman and respected her

and remarked, “We know unequivocally that there was no ill intent in her comments.” Tiger’s word choice in this statement also symbolized his alliance with white America. By showcasing his extensive vocabulary in his statement, Tiger promoted the concept that his education and intelligence serve as his weapon as a black man rather than anger and violence. “Unequivocally” and “ill intent” are not used by the average American in everyday conversation and are likely not used by Reverend Sharpton or the typical followers of Sharpton. Al Sharpton took the aggressive “don’t back down to the white establishment” approach by demanding that Tilghman be fired for her words. He threatened to picket outside of The Golf Channel’s headquarters in Orlando, Florida. Sharpton looked for Tiger’s support, but instead Tiger considered the remark “a non-issue in our eyes. Case closed” (McLaughlin, 2008).

In 2007, Tiger Woods was partnered with Michael Jordan at the Wachovia Golf Championship Pro-Am. After the round, Woods told an interviewer:

We can relate, on so many different levels. Not many people have gone through the same kind of things we've had to go through. He actually did it first, and because of that I was able to basically cherry pick all the knowledge that he's accumulated over the years.

Similar to how Tiger Woods borrowed Michael Jordan’s techniques in dealing with racial issues in the media, the presidential candidate Barack Obama in a sense was able to “cherry pick” from Woods and Jordan.

Obama learned that it was simply best to downplay any racial controversy that could stir animosity from white Americans. For instance, in a CNN article published in January 2007, Senator Joe Biden, Obama’s future running mate, commented on Obama: “I

mean, you got the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy.” This statement could be interpreted as highly racist, suggesting that Obama was the single exception to his race. Yet Obama took a middle ground, just as Woods and Jordan tended to do when racial controversies arise. Obama quoted in response, “He called me. I told him it wasn't necessary. We have got more important things to worry about. We have got Iraq. We have got health care. We have got energy. This is low on the list” (Thai & Barrett, 2007). Although Obama downplayed the racist comment, he did not pass the chance to defend the black community:

I didn't take Sen. Biden's comments personally, but obviously they were historically inaccurate. African-American presidential candidates like Jesse Jackson, Shirley Chisholm, Carol Moseley Braun and Al Sharpton gave a voice to many important issues through their campaigns, and no one would call them inarticulate. (Thai & Barrett, 2007)

Obama supplied a media statement which pleased both the white and black communities, a feat that requires careful pruning of image and delicate word-choice. In this case, as well as others, Obama had to walk the tight rope of racial neutrality that Tiger Woods and Michael Jordan have walked before.

Muhammad Ali and the Sporting Media

Although black Americans have been much more broadly tolerated since the Civil Rights era, black citizens are still not included in the political realm, and it is still controversial to talk about racial equality. Beginning with Muhammad Ali in the 1960s, the media have adopted a specific stance in dealing with racially and politically charged black men. Sporting media often paint these racially aggressive or politically active

athletes as “troublemakers,” and these men quickly find themselves gaining negative publicity. The American sporting media teach citizens to appreciate a hard-working black male who never complains about racism rather than a flamboyant and controversial black athlete. Both the media and corporate America reward conservative black athletes with positive coverage and endorsements, respectively. On the other hand, if it becomes apparent to the media that a black athlete is unwilling to maintain a healthy relationship with white-dominated corporate America, the sporting media typically begin a “shut up and play” campaign.

Muhammad Ali was arguably the first superstar black athlete to bring his racial struggles and concerns to the media forefront. Ali’s image in the sporting media has evolved over time as he himself has evolved from a radical pro-black advocate to a subdued old gentleman, submissive to the white Americans whom he fought for years. When Cassius Clay first emerged into the sporting world, he was loud, arrogant, flamboyant, conceited, and even expressed racist ideas against whites. Clay closely followed Elijah Mohammad, a radical man who preached that blacks should refuse to integrate with “white devils.” Ali made a point of dating only black women and condemned men and women who engaged in interracial sex. In an interview with *Playboy*, Ali declared: “A black man should be killed if he’s messing with a white woman.” When the interviewer asked about black women engaging with white men, Ali responded: “Then she dies. Kill her, too.” At this point in his career, Ali was clearly unconcerned about maintaining a healthy relationship with the media and the corporate world. Ali’s remarks were not only controversial, but were outright racist. The *Playboy*

journalist scolded Ali in the published article, saying “You’re beginning to sound like a carbon copy of a white racist” (Shelden, 2009).

Other important political figures and media outlets noticed Ali’s radical behavior and began formulating a negative public image of the young boxer. Conservative white Americans could not have appreciated Ali’s alliance with racial nuisance Malcolm X, who commented to *Sports Illustrated* about Muhammad Ali:

[He] will mean more to his people than any athlete before him. He is more than Jackie Robinson was, because Robinson is the white man’s hero. But Cassius is the black man’s hero. Do you know why? Because the white press wanted him to lose [his heavyweight championship bout] ... because he is a Muslim. You notice nobody cares about the religion of other athletes. But their prejudice against Clay blinded them to his ability.

Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali blatantly polarized themselves from white Americans. Because of his amazing athleticism and entertaining style, Ali was in a position to obtain the peaceful respect of the white community. However, white America’s respect must be earned under the conditions that complaints of racism and stirring hatred against white-dominated corporate America will not be tolerated. Because Ali chose to violently reject the Caucasian, Christian majority of America, the media sparked an image campaign against Ali which climaxed with *The Chicago Tribune* running eleven anti-Ali stories in a single issue (“The Greatest’ Is Gone, 1978).

When Ali declared himself a conscientious objector for the Vietnam Draft, his already negative image evolved into a public uproar against him. Ronald Reagan, Governor of California at the time, proclaimed “That draft dodger will never fight in my

state, period” (Gom). Jack Olsen wrote a *Sports Illustrated* article in 1966 titled “A Case of Conscious” describing the growing hatred for the “best-known” and “most hated” athlete in the world:

The governor of Illinois found Clay ‘disgusting,’ and the governor of Maine said Clay ‘should be held in utter contempt by every patriotic American.’ An American Legion post in Miami asked people to ‘join in condemnation of this unpatriotic, loudmouthed, bombastic individual.’ The *Chicago Tribune* waged a choleric campaign against holding the next Clay fight in Chicago. ... The noise became a din, the drumbeats of a holy war. TV and radio commentators, little old ladies ...bookmakers, and parish priests, armchair strategists at the Pentagon and politicians all over the place joined in a crescendo of get-Cassius clamor.

Ali considered himself a martyr for a political cause, but in order to succeed, a political cause needs financial backing and a positive public image. Because Ali made enemies with the sporting media, his abrasive public image damaged his credibility with white Americans. Ali’s ranting, extremist voice was drowned out by the angry, conservative white community, and eventually, Ali could no longer fight, both physically and politically.

Muhammad Ali in his prime was portrayed by the media as a threat to the white community with his Islamic religion, racy street rhymes, and flamboyant ego. Yet, as time passed, Ali settled into the white comfort zone. The white community now looks back at him in awe since they know he is no longer able to stir the political pot. Mark Collings wrote in *Muhammad Ali: Through the Eyes of the World*:

Now, of course, he's been absorbed by the white establishment. But of course Ali has always been paid by white people, from the beginning of his career. White people were always in control of his career, and he has no illusions about that. That's where the money is, and he certainly wants money. His audience is largely white. He has no illusions about that, and it does not bother him. (p. 62)

Now, due to his devastating Parkinson's disease, Ali can no longer offend white Americans with his words. His life and career feats are celebrated by sporting giants such as ESPN and *Sports Illustrated*, and they simply deemphasize his racially radical past. Michael Shelden, sports author for *The Daily Telegraph*, wrote in his article "Let's Not Pretend Ali was Gandhi":

The transformation of Ali from a great fighter to a celebrated man of conscience and social purpose has succeeded so well because the actual history of his career has been altered to reflect the kinder, gentler man of today. Unpleasant remarks or facts from the past have been swept away or excused.

Now that Ali has become a "white-friendly" public figure like Jordan and Woods, the white-dominated media can safely "celebrate" his positive impact on civil rights to prove America's social change since the 1960s. Yet, this begs the question, how would the media of today deal with a young Muhammad Ali? Has the media truly changed?

Ali understood the image game that Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, and Barack Obama would eventually play. Ali was quoted in a 1966 *Sports Illustrated* article:

The white want me hugging on a white woman, or endorsing some whiskey, or some skin bleach, lightening the skin when I'm promoting black as the best....

They want me advertising all this stuff that'd make me rich but hurt so many others.

However, Ali underestimated the influence and power of the white-dominated media. Decades of slow racial progress would pass before white Americans grew comfortable with the notion of a black authority figure. Much different than Muhammad Ali's strategy, Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods carefully crafted a "white friendly" image in order to gain power in America. Although these two gained immense power in both the sporting and corporate world, they still did not have any true political power and were ultimately at the mercy of their white financial supporters. Black athletes face an intimidating bind—either choose to conform (like Jordan and Woods) or speak out and be neutralized as a crazy radical, like Ali.

Obama attempted to walk the fine line of approval where many black athletes and public figures have failed in the past. Obama acted politically, which has been traditionally difficult for black citizens, but he also conformed to white society by denouncing anything that might be construed as radical, threatening, or empowering to black citizens. In the upcoming section, I will discuss a specific example of Obama denouncing the hip-hop culture heavily embraced by many black Americans.

Obama's Strategies in Attempting to Conquer "The Bind"

The media highlight Obama's accomplishments in such a light that demonstrates to black Americans that it is possible to achieve success by conforming to the white community rather than challenging it. One common stereotype of the black community, including black athletes, is that African-Americans tend to wear their clothing significantly baggier than white Americans, a clear counter-culture movement against the

white-dominated corporate America, where clean-cut is the only accepted image. As the percentage of black players in the National Basketball Association has increased drastically since the 1960's (currently about 80% black), the required uniform went from tight and form-fitting to a baggier style (Lelinwalla, 2004). Ironically, black players have become the overwhelming majority in a sport that previously segregated against them. The NBA's image quickly strayed further from the Gene Hackman classic *Hoosiers* and evolved into a symbol of the hip-hop culture movement and black dominance of a previously white-owned league. This new style included baggy and outlandish street attire, which was not very popular with white audiences, who likely could not relate to the African-based fashion movement from the players.

In 2004, Larry Bird—arguably the most famous white NBA star in the league's history—made it quite clear on an ESPN special titled “Two on Two” that he thought the “lack of white superstars” was not necessarily a good thing for the league. Bird commented:

When I played, you had me and Kevin [McHale] and some other [white players] throughout the league. I think it's good for a fan base because, as we all know, the majority of the fans are white America. And if you just had a couple of white guys in there, you might get them a little excited. But it is a black man's game, and it will be forever. I mean, the greatest athletes in the world are African-American. Bird admits that the greatest athletes are black; he implied that they are able to play the game at a higher level, yet he still suggested that more white players would increase ratings. Bird's statements hinted at the concept that white Americans don't enjoy feeling

overpowered by black culture, even in a situation where blacks are naturally superior to whites.

At first, “the NBA tried mightily to fuse its product with hip-hop culture, viewing its young players and their street fashion sense as a way to connect with a new generation of fans in the post-Michael Jordan era,” wrote Mike Wise, Sports Columnist for *The Washington Post*. But, ultimately, the NBA is a business with a predominately white audience (nba.com) and David Stern, commissioner of the league, concluded that “they might be driving fans away from the sport.” The NBA made an obvious effort to distance itself from the negative hip-hop, urban image that included a violent brawl between the storied franchises of the Detroit Pistons and Indiana Pacers, climaxing with athlete-rapper Ron Artest jumping into the stands to attack a fan.

In 2005, one year after Bird’s statements and the Pacers-Pistons brawl, the NBA issued a strict dress code, which prohibited players from dressing in baggy clothes associated with the urban image and required “Business Casual” attire, the standard dress code for white-dominated corporate America. This new dress code sparked a plethora of responses from African-Americans associated with the NBA. Charles Barkley, eleven-time NBA all-star, recognized the racial subtexts of the new dress code. “If a well-dressed white kid and a black kid wearing a 'do-rag and throwback jersey came to me in a job interview, I'd hire the white kid. That's reality.” It is interesting to note that Barkley, like Jordan and Woods, must maintain his white-friendly image for many reasons. Aside from Barkley’s current career as a NBA studio analyst for Turner National Television (owned by white billionaire, Ted Turner), Barkley also revealed to CNN's Campbell Brown on

national television that he was making plans to run for the Governor of Alabama in 2014 as an Independent (Barkley, 2008).

On the other end of the spectrum, Allen Iverson, notorious for his lazy work-ethic and off-the court troubles, defended the hip-hop culture. In a television interview Iverson objected to the dress code, “They're targeting my generation—the hip-hop generation. You can put a murderer in a suit, and he's still a murderer.” Iverson didn’t disguise his thoughts that dressing up black players like white men would still not change their skin color. However, one may argue that Michael Jordan’s suave, CEO-esque attire helped Jordan gain white Americans’ trust. Richard Lapchick of ESPN argued, “It was no accident that Michael Jordan received as many endorsement contracts as he did. When Jordan donned good-looking suits, corporate America took notice.” Jordan knew how to play the corporate game that Iverson rebelled against. Iverson’s public resistance to the implemented dress code symbolized his resistance to comply with a white-dominated society.

African-Americans’ style of dress seems to be a growing topic to gain acceptance into white, corporate America. But the majority of corporate America stays loyal to the conservative candidate, regardless of his or her skin color. Thus, Barack Obama made a clear effort to gain the approval of a more youthful, open-minded white demographic. He frequently appeared on cable networks ESPN and MTV, two of the most popular markets for white teenagers (Malinowski). In an interview on MTV, Barack denounced the “hip-hop” trend of baggy pants, dissociating himself from “gangsters” like Allen Iverson. He commented, “Brothers should pull up their pants. You are walking by your mother, your grandmother, your underwear is showing. What’s wrong with that? Come on.”

Ironically, Obama used the term “their” to describe black Americans, not “our.” When speaking to a mainly white audience in the viewers of MTV, Barack projects an image that he is disconnected from the anti-white, “hip-hop” fashion movement.

By the time that Barack Obama had started gaining the media’s attention, white Americans had seen his kind before. Arvagian (2008) explained:

Mr. Obama, for his part, shows the same genius for connecting with white America as Mr. Woods, who is genuinely adored in and out of the sporting world, for his golfing achievements, and his personal story. Mr. Obama’s trail has therefore already been blazed by the cross-over appeal of Winfrey, Jordan and Woods. Their personas and achievements have allowed him to tap into a white electorate already more receptive to the notion of prominent, establishment blacks — especially younger voters, who may have no recollection of a world before Oprah and Michael.

Jordan had basketball, Woods had golf, and Obama had his words, but all three had something in common: they used a combination of intellect and athletics to gain white America’s trust. Additionally, all three icons are excellent speakers. Bob Greene, author of *Hang Time: Days and Dreams with Michael Jordan* wrote:

Jordan handled himself with such seeming effortless in talking to people—he could converse with a kid outside the Stadium, the CEO of a billion-dollar corporation, or the lead singer of a visiting rock band with equal facility...It was impossible to rattle him on the court, and it seemed impossible to rattle him in conversation, either. (p. 92)

Similar to Michael Jordan, Obama gained a reputation for being calm, cool, and collected in almost any conversation, no matter its intensity.

Michael Blebly wrote an article in *Business Day* titled “Barack Obama Needs the Tiger Woods Factor” explaining that Barack should not be depicted in the media as an exceptional black candidate, but as an exceptional candidate—period. In the case of Tiger Woods, he is widely considered the greatest golfer in history, regardless of skin color. U.S. diplomat Brooks Spector said during the campaign, “The jury is still out on whether [Obama] is an African-American candidate or a Tiger Woods candidate.” Tiger has risen above all of his potential racial stereotypes and has maintained a high level of human achievement, almost as if he has begun his own “Tiger Woods race” that these scholars are referring to. Spector insinuates that Obama must completely separate himself from typical African-Americans in order to succeed. Obama needed his public image to conform to the “Tiger Woods race,” rather than the African-American race. This desirable media image would force Americans to associate Obama with Tiger Woods, who is one of the most successful Americans of all time, regardless of skin color.

In summary, Obama was attempting to capitalize on his blackness while simultaneously downplaying it. Sports were a rare medium where Obama’s blackness would conjure positive feelings from both black and white Americans because of the inherent association with revered black athletes. Obama was included in the American super race because he is black but also not black. In other words, he possesses the “good” qualities of being black (e.g. diversity, proof of racial equality) without the negative qualities that threaten white America and its power. Obama recognized the benefit of

diplomatically developing this skill set, and in most instances throughout the 2008 campaign, he was able to successfully conquer “the bind” of black public figures.

Conclusion: American Media’s Creation of a Super Race

The media has implemented a concept of a “super race” where certain individuals exude only the positive qualities of each race without the negative baggage. The media send the message that it is American citizens’ responsibility to allow these remarkable individuals to carry the human race forward to a better place. Barack Obama has been pegged as one of these elite human beings such as Michael Jordan or Tiger Woods. Harry Edwards, a black sociologist at the University of California, Berkeley and former Civil Rights leader, described Michael Jordan as “representing the highest level of human achievement, on the order of Gandhi, Einstein or Michelangelo.” Edwards stated, “If I 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” (Hartmann, 2006, p. 309). Orlando Patterson, Harvard social scientist, described Jordan as “American’s only living man-god,” and called him a “Dionysian figure”—individuals who not only cross boundaries but also dissolve them, pointing the way to fuller, more complex understanding of self, citizenship, culture, and civilization.” Barack Obama bears a similar burden of responsibility, as he has already appeared on the cover of *The Daily Telegraph* alongside the caption “Barack Obama’s first task: Saving the world.”

The media categorize Obama in the white-friendly group of African-Americans who will not threaten the white-favored racial equilibrium that currently exists in the United States. The media project the notion that Obama represents “hope” for black Americans by using Obama as an example that conforming to white society is the only

pathway to long-term success. The most important thing to achieve this acceptance, however, is education. Without education, black Americans cannot move up in society, and the media highlight this by focusing on Jordan, Woods, and Obama's superior speaking skills and business instincts. Yet, they still lump these men into the category of a "super race" so that they don't technically represent black America. Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, and Barack Obama have all been described as one who "transcends race," an apparent attempt to dissociate these powerful figures from the black community and pro-black radicals such as Rev. Al Sharpton.

Claude Johnson, founder of the website "Baller-in-Chief.com" (a webpage that follows and highlights Obama's connection to the game of basketball) explained in Wolff's *Sports Illustrated* article: "Here you have a laced-up professional off the court—a 'white' persona—who throws behind-the-back passes and busts crossovers." Again, Johnson is referring to Obama's place in America's "super race" since Obama possesses the best qualities of both white and black men. Obama is portrayed as a white man when he needs to be professional, yet he has the redeeming athleticism and style of a black man.

By portraying these men in such a positive light, the media set an example of how to achieve social mobility. The media offer black Americans a path to rise up to— but not above— the white establishment by utilizing their natural athleticism and by achieving a higher level of intelligence. Jordan, Woods, and Obama do not beat the white community with force, aggression, or numbers, but instead, choose to join forces with the white community. These men are eternally linked to the upper class of society through their education.

Although certain anomalies have risen up with education and respect to the white community, most of the black public figures today are still entertainers. When the media focus on the “corporate” stars of America such as Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, or Mark Zuckerberg—Americans who have achieved their wealth strictly from an intellectual and educational approach—minorities are severely underrepresented. Although Obama is gaining wealth and fame strictly through his intelligence and political energy, the media have a tendency to categorize Barack Obama as a “Rock Star” and lump him in with other members of the “super race” such as Tiger Woods and Michael Jordan—famous and successful black entertainers who conform to the white establishment.

The media tend to emphasize black athletes who have achieved immense wealth as a way of negotiating racial tensions without actually addressing the racial inequality that still exists in America today. In other words, the corporate-dominated media highlight wealthy black men to falsely showcase America’s diversity. By recognizing affluent and flourishing black men in the media, white Americans can pretend as though they appreciate our country’s diversity without actually giving up the privileges of living in a white-dominated society.

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Education:

The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA
Schreyer Honors College

May 2011

- Bachelor of Science in Chemical Engineering
 - Minor in Communications Arts & Sciences
- Dean's List every semester

Biotechnology Experience:

May-Aug 2010

Engineer, Genentech Inc., A Member of the Roche Group, South San Francisco, California

- Performed column chromatography using "Bind and Elute" method of protein purification
- Analyzed mechanism of action of various mixed-mode resins as the capture step of mAb
- Compared dynamic binding capacity and yields of mixed-mode resins to more expensive ProA resins
- Programmed specific pH and Conductivity Gradient Elutions

International Engineering Experience:

May-Aug 2009

Researcher, Universität Freiburg, Research Internships in Science and Engineering (DAAD), Freiburg, Germany

- Collaborated daily with German engineers, PhD students, and professors
- Assessed the performance and importance of Barium strontium titanate (BST) in thin-film capacitors
- Optimized colloidal suspension blends to increase resolution of ink jet printing

Engineering Experience:

May-Aug 2008

Process Engineer, Almatris Inc., Leetsdale, PA

- Utilized Six Sigma methodology to analyze possible causes for recent increase in impurity levels in product
- Created cost justification presentation analyzing company's current alumina grinding media
- Traveled to company's headquarters in Little Rock, Arkansas to learn about the initial refining process
- Developed and presented training program designed to educate plant employees on a more technical level

Research Experience:

Research project, Penn State Department of Chemical Engineering

Jan 2008 – May 2009

- Research Title: "*Process Development for Jet Fuel (JP-8) Production from Algae Lipid Alternatives*"
 - Algae's byproduct can be engineered to be military-grade jet fuel
- Grew cultures of *Botryococcus braunii* algae to high optical density
- Maintained axenic cultures of *Chlamydomonas Reinhardtii*, while quantifying hydrocarbon secretion
- Tested various chemical supplements to add to the algae's medium to optimize the growth rate
- Presented project findings at AIChE Annual Conference, Philadelphia, November 2008

Research project, Penn State Department of Communication Arts & Sciences

Aug 2008 – present

- Thesis Title: "*American Sporting Media's Categorization of Barack Obama*"
 - Analyzes the sporting media's association of Obama with superstar black athletes
 - Presented findings at 2010 Eastern Communication Association Conference – Baltimore, Maryland
 - **Submission Awarded "ECA Top Undergraduate Paper 2010"**

College Activities and Professional Memberships:

- Captain, Club Floor Hockey Team
- Intramural Teams: Football, Basketball, Volleyball (Captain), Softball, Tennis
- Musical Performer (acoustic guitar)
- American Institute of Chemical Engineers (AIChE) student member
- National Society for Professional Engineers (NSPE) student member