

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

94' X 50': THE DIMENSIONS OF A GLOBAL GAME

ZACH VALENTA
Summer 2010

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for a baccalaureate degree
in English
with honors in English

Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Eric Hayot
Professor of Comparative Literature
Director of the Asian Studies Program
Thesis Supervisor

Janet Lyon
Associate Professor of English, Women's Studies, and Science,
Technology, and Society
Honors Adviser

Michael Bérubé
Paterno Professor of English and Science, Technology, and
Society
Faculty Reader

* Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.

Abstract

My thesis, *94'x50': The Dimensions of a Global Game*, intertwines two parallel narratives of the past quarter century: the expansion of the National Basketball Association into a global sporting force and the ascendance of globalization as a buzzword, academic concept, and pressingly emergent material reality. More than coincident, these two stories have been mutually reinforcing, with the NBA carrying basketball and its financial seeds across the globe, as purposeful as globalization is haphazard. With this discussion of the past, present, and future of the league, I hope to demonstrate that the NBA has seen and acted in advance of its own financial actuality at nearly every stage of its existence and that this action has taken place on a stage wider and more promising than any other professional American sport. At the same time, my work also points to the way in which, even its moments of potential exceptionalism, first during the league's financial and cultural renaissance in the 1980s and the present's own portents, the NBA's growth marks basketball's gradual but decisive shift for the only original American game to a simultaneous indicator of America's ongoing cultural pervasiveness and oncoming financial decline. It is through the economic booms and busts of the world economy that American professional basketball rises to the fore as its own national origins begin to fray and possibly tear loose.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....iii

Chapter 1: Cap Space.....1

Chapter 2: Race Still Matters.....21

Chapter 1/Cap Space

All histories need for themselves a start, and I have started late. Since the conglomeration of competing American professional basketball leagues into the National Basketball Association (NBA) in 1949¹, the sport of basketball and its private champion have undergone parallel journeys to their current aggressively globalized present. Basketball and the NBA; this thesis is concerned with both. Separating the American professional game from the game played in gyms, parks, and ad hoc courts has become increasingly difficult. Regarding each, a number of likely origins recommend themselves: the first professional game in America, the first amateur game, the first televised game. Or, looking backwards through the lens of one possible future, perhaps the first game pitting Houston Rocket Yao Ming versus the (then) Milwaukee Buck Yi Jianlian on November 9th, 2007.² Some more plausible than others, but all carry their own utility, and each recommends a different facet of sports studies: its intersection with amateurism, professionalism, media studies, and globalization. The swirling, unstable bedrock of my thoughts concerning the NBA and basketball here is globalization, more specifically its phenomenological import to the Sino-American relationship and separate considerations of national pride and international standing. Much has and remains to be said about the basketball in America, the currents moving basketball around the world conjure an equal excitement that one associates with globalization. Of course, in many ways that early period of exploration is over. The days when an NBA team on the Great Wall of China was not

¹ Alex Sachare, ed., *The Official NBA Basketball Encyclopedia* (New York: Villard, 1994), 45.

² The game drew over 250 million Chinese viewers, nearly the population of the United States, making it the league's highest rated game to date. See Jonathan Feigen "Yikes! Yao vs. Yi Is Huge: Matchup of Rockets, Bucks Seen as Touchstone among Chinese", *Houston Chronicle*, 9 November 2007.

part of the NBA's marketing strategy, as the Washington Bullets strange 1973 visit to China was not, are surely and irrevocably over.

But globalization as a practice does not rest, stretching forwards and back again, beyond the nostalgia of the just out of reach past to entanglements unknown. And so Wes Unseld gives way to Wataru Misaka, who broke the NBA color barrier in 1946³, and to Yao Ming and Yi Jianlian today. The NBA forges ahead into a new market, one in which it currently reaches 300 million Chinese viewers through CCTV; the ratings for the Yao/Yi game look all the more enticing; the equivalent 250 million Americans tuning in to watch the NBA Finals will be a percentage forever out of the NBA's reach in the States, but China is capable of doubling its already enormous audience. Simultaneously, in the earliest ledgers of basketball's history at least, basketball has always thrived in China, whether under the waning Qing dynasty, the Kuomintang, or the CCP, says Jeff Coplan. "By the 1920's, the game was a mainstay among urban students; in 1935, it was declared a national pastime."⁴ Despite its status as the only indigenous major American professional sport, the game's past and future both American and foreign. Here for me lies the importance of basketball, both at home and abroad.

《》 America in the Jordan Years 《》

Michael Jordan's career created an epoch and entirely new arc for the history of the NBA; it is simultaneously the past dreamt of and the future out of reach. Jordan "like all truly great men...bestrides two ages."⁵ Historically speaking then, the easiest division to make in the NBA's long history is this: pre-Jordan, and everything after. Though they saved the NBA from its late-

³ George Vecsey, "Pioneering Knick Returns to the Garden", *New York Times*, August 11, 2009.

⁴ Jeff Coplan, "The People's Game", *New York Times*, November 23, 2003.

⁵ C.L.R. James assessment of famed cricketer W.G. Grace, whom James considered a pivotal figure in the passage from Edwardian to Victorian culture within England. (C.L.R James, *Beyond a Boundary*, [London: Hutchinson & Co., 1963], 173)

70s malaise, the work of Bird and Magic primarily served to prepare the way for beatific⁶ figure of Michael, who pushed the early 80s buzz surrounding the league into a sustained hype. David Halberstam, Jordan's best and certainly most esteemed biographer, states that "this was the generation, the Larry-Magic-Michael generation, that had helped take the NBA from something of an athletic backwater, almost unsalable to network television and to corporate sponsors, to the zenith of its popularity and affluence."⁷ Certainly, Magic and Bird turned the tide of what was a growing public dissatisfaction with the NBA; after the emergence of their rivalry, the NBA could no longer be relegated to tape delay and regular blackouts. But neither had it reached any sort of zenith, or, if so, only a zenith compared to the 1980s. As Halberstam puts it, "professional basketball was in the midst of something of a pleasant renaissance in the year in which Michael Jordan was drafted."⁸ Whatever heights scaled would be left behind in the continued ascent led by Jordan as basketball in the early 1990s became the sport of the future.

It is this future from which David Halberstam wrote; his biography of Jordan came on the heels of his second (not yet final) retirement at the end of the 1998 season. The book interweaves Jordan's long career around that final 1998 season. It is around 1992 when things become unpleasant. "Both (Michael Jordan and Scottie Pippen, teammates on the Chicago Bulls) would go [to the Barcelona Olympics], of course, because it was never really about basketball, it was about showcasing the NBA and above all else pleasing its corporate sponsors, who wanted to use this special platform to maximize exposure for what were now the most famous athletes in the world."⁹ We see here, though Halberstam never states it outright, basketball moving from a national game, a game that athletes play amongst themselves for fans in attendance, to an

⁶ For Grant Farred, "Magic and Bird were doing little more than playing a bi-racial John the Baptist to the True (black) Savior" of Jordan. (Grant Farred, *Phantom Calls* [Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2006], 9.)

⁷ David Halberstam, *Playing for Keeps* (New York: Random House, 1999), 297.

⁸ Halberstam, *Keeps*, 115.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 295.

international platform, whose scale and reach make matters of gate sales and team salaries less pressing and global brands, league expansion, and synergistic marketing the new barometers for success. Growth, big growth, 1990s growth. Though the international economy had not accelerated to the point of prefix investing, American funds slowly thawed from the late 1980s and early 90s. Barcelona proved to be the first snapshot of an American sport whose stake, in contrast to a national economy gone global, was diffused to the world over. On this point, Halberstam remains silent; his chapter on the Olympics narrates the immense popularity of the players¹⁰ and their eventual victory, then skips back across the Atlantic and chronologically forward to resume his main narrative, that of Jordan's farewell 1997-1998 season.

What he omits along the way is one of the most telling tales of Jordan's career, and one rarely discussed around the NBA campfire when His Airness comes up. Following the afterthought championship game, in which the U.S.A. easily bested Croatia by 32 points¹¹, the team stood ready to receive their gold medals. A canny salesman, and hyper-conscious of the Reebok logo perched on his warm-ups (where "Nike" should have been), Jordan decided that to receive a medal, even a gold, while broadcasting the appearance of conflicting allegiances, could not be permitted. An answer, a *deus ex machina* for the god of basketball, emerged in the shifting shape of an American flag: red and glazed with sweat on Jordan's uniform as he propelled his country to the top of the basketball world, waving to represent the world's lone superpower.

There is a bad way to handle this. Not endemic to cultural studies, but certainly characteristic of its less nuanced practitioners, is a tendency to take instances of capital made manifest as necessarily hostile incursions, indicating the unfathomable shallows of the system to

¹⁰ Recounting, somewhat befuddled, that even John Stockton was hounded by fans and reporters during the Barcelona Games.

¹¹ As *The New York Times* put it, "the United States won the gold medal it couldn't possibly lose". (Harvey Araton, "Mission Accomplished, for Better or Worse," *New York Times*, August 9, 1992)

which they give their name. Far be it from me to object outright; Jordan's insistence on Nike was undeniably crass, one of the few PR blemishes on his record at the time.¹² Even now, there is little by the way of commentary from Jordan concerning the less than savory parts of his professional life, or even acknowledgment that such a thing exists. "No one had to market Michael Jordan. I marketed myself by what I did on the court."¹³ This and other equally thoughtless displays by renowned jump shooters can lead to a loss of nerve, however. "Before his championship dominance with the Chicago Bulls, before his literal embodiment of America and the true national pastime—consumerism, Michael Jordan stood for one thing: Michael Jordan. And he defined that potent symbol with one shot."¹⁴ That "one shot", of course, was Jordan's game-winner against Patrick Ewing's Georgetown Hoyas in the 1982 NCAA title game, and which in Robert Lipsyte's *Idols of the Game* becomes a quick placeholder for the days when Michael Jordan played basketball for free; the rest of the chapter goes at lengths to remark that this arrangement no longer held. The book around Jordan's chapter turns similar tricks on idols like Knute Rockne. It is strange move, all things considered, to assume that early Jordan was somehow self-representative at any point; Lipsyte is treading heavy to paint a school that ran the four corners offense¹⁵ as liberating. Lipsyte has a laudatory catalogue of essays and YA fiction promoting the sort of sports environment he envisions here as Jordan's past, an environment in which individual ethics and play trump rigid team hierarchy and commodification. Again, I agree. This stance, reiterated throughout *Idols of the Game*, is indicative of an ongoing aversion to capitalism on the part of many cultural studies scholars and their non-academic allies like Lipsyte. And though it may be sung by the angels, the usual refrain against capital in sports or capitalism

¹² Harvey Araton, "Making the 'G' Stand for Gold, Not Greed", *New York Times*, August 8, 1992. Still relatively unscathed by age, his recent divorce, Hall of Fame acceptance speech, and managerial failures have dimmed his persona ever so slightly; still, Michael Jordan remains MJ.

¹³ Michael Jordan and Mark Vancil, *Driven From Within* (New York: Atria, 2005), 25.

¹⁴ Peter Levine and Robert Lipsyte, *Idols of the Game* (Atlanta: Turner Publishing, 1995), 314.

¹⁵ The closest basketball has come to approximating football since a jump ball after every made basket.

more generally comes across not so much incorrect as incomplete. That incompleteness could be attributed to a number of things, but the most suggestive solution I can imagine is globalization. Lipsyte's underlying critique, not directly stated and all the more trenchant as a result, is that Michael Jordan no longer represents Michael Jordan; Michael Jordan now represents capitalism, itself equated with a particular economic determinism that has come to characterize America. The terms of this threat will be examined further regarding Halberstam's narrative, but first, let me offer an asymmetrical response to the problem I have just outlined, one which hopefully demonstrates what can be lost in a mishandled exchange between cultural studies and sports.

At the outset of the penultimate section of *Beyond a Boundary*, "The Art and Practic Part", historian and social theorist C.L.R. James demonstrates the inscrutable nature of his fascination with cricket. "I have integrated it in the historical movement of the times. The question remains: What is it? Is it mere entertainment or is it an art?"¹⁶ This line glances back over the previous two hundred pages of *Beyond a Boundary*, a stirring account of a life in cricket that wraps the game up in the social fabric and unrest of Trinidad, the formation of the Victorian era, and the educational system of England, amongst other things. But the glance turns sharply to the question at hand, of art and/or entertainment, repositioning the many debates in the book as ancillary concerns. Perhaps not wholly inscrutable for the reader who has been privy to James' quickened analysis of cricket's players and the distinction of their bodies in motion, the book's new and explicit focus on art does seem to find James brushing away the documents of his difficult travels for an airy conversation of aesthetics. Though not a complete break from the rest of *Beyond a Boundary*, this rhetorical dismissal remains jarring nonetheless.

Though James was mostly associated with the great material struggles of his time, his Marxist background and social concern for the independence of the West Indies seem to find

¹⁶ James, *Boundary*, 191.

their match in the weight given this question of entertainment and art. There is no mistaking the location of the “The Art and Practic Part” as penultimate to “Vox Populi” (the final section of *Beyond a Boundary*), where the will of the crowd breaks through the boundary lines of the field both figuratively and literally¹⁷. In their combined conclusions to the book, these last two sections mark where the book could *not* start, whose conversation between art and its public whose dialogue emerges only on the heels of the previous two hundred pages and the world of politics, box scores, and more easily discussed conditions that precede it.

Why must art wait? Thinking of the audience James would attract as the author of *World Revolution: 1917-1936* and *The Black Jacobins*, the need for tact and delay dealing with aesthetics becomes apparent. In their co-edited volume on Marxism and sports, Ben Carrington and Ian McDonald assert that “Beyond a Boundary is not an explicitly Marxist critique...nor develop[s] a theoretical framework for a ‘Marxism of sport’”; James is “pre-history”¹⁸. Their assessment of James and his place in the chronology of Marxist sports studies strike me as useful, but suggestive of an affective split between a theoretical project and that project’s perception of James own Marxist theory in *Beyond a Boundary* as extant but inchoate. I disagree, and the rest of the volume seems to as well: Brett St. Louis’ essay brushes off any dust clinging to James’ ideas by situating his work as legitimately post-Marxist¹⁹, and Carrington agrees with St. Louis in his own contribution to the book²⁰. If anything, the relevance of James to Marxist theorization of sport grows in time. The argument’s true foundation rests most firmly (and ironically) on James’ own style: knee-deep in newspaper clippings and Thackeray, panoramic, offhand. It would stretch the

¹⁷ In the case of the West Indian captancy, and in the case of broken bottles hurled from the stands.

¹⁸ Ben Carrington and Ian McDonald, “Mapping the Field”, in *Marxism, Cultural Studies, and Sport*, eds. Ben Carrington and Ian McDonald (London: Routledge, 2009), 2.

¹⁹ Brett St. Louis, “Post-Marxism, black Marxism, and the politics of sport” in *Marxism, Cultural Studies, and Sport*, eds. Ben Carrington and Ian McDonald (London: Routledge, 2009), 115.

²⁰ Ben Carrington, “Sport without final guarantees” in *Marxism, Cultural Studies, and Sport*, eds. Ben Carrington and Ian McDonald (London: Routledge, 2009), 22.

ordinary use of language to call *Beyond a Boundary* a theoretical project, that is true; it is also true that theory's camouflage unrecognized should not lead to declarations of theory's absence.

Also answering the frank existential question "Is it mere entertainment or is it an art?" are James' cricketers "who only cricket know." In the many intra-cricket debates throughout the book, the judgment "it isn't cricket" springs forth as a repartee to the question left unspoken until the final pages of *Beyond a Boundary*.²¹ Both James' question and his fellow cricketers' answer indicate their seriousness through the form of an ultimatum, which delineates the bedrock of the discussion and the arbiting terms upon which claims can be made about cricket itself or, in the case of our author, the role of cricket as a cultural form of importance in the world at large. The lurid world of entertainment sits on the lighter half of James' formulation, unaccustomed to accommodating such morally evaluative dicta. Inside the question here is its own answer, that yes, cricket is art, and yes, art matters.

What James' question indicates is the necessity of the debate in which he finds himself about to enter and the belated entrance he feels it to be making within the work as a whole. The late inclusion of an aesthetic discussion fails to bedevil James only because so much of his previous analysis hinges on a visual critics' eye. "I have taken people who knew nothing at all about cricket to see him [Wilton St. Hill] and as soon as they saw this easy, erect rhythmic back-stroke to the fast bowler they burst into murmurs of admiration. His right toe was always towards point, left elbow high and left wrist as a fulcrum."²² As he takes us through the West Indies cricket history and politics, asides like this are tossed off with a delightful frequency. And yet a more thorough treatment, standing alone as an issue itself, wiggles to the fore. James rails against the racism of captain selections, weighs in on the debate about Don Bradman, while at the same time arranging an argument for the aesthetic merits of the game with a sprezzatura that

²¹ James, *Boundary*, 190.

²² James, *Boundary*, 89.

makes his question, “Is it entertainment or is it mere art?” a cocksure bait for the unschooled reader.

David Halberstam is not Marxist, at least not far as I can tell, and *Playing for Keeps* does not elide the viscerally pleasurable flights that sports provide. His reportage is straight from the front row and invested in the lay strategizing that all public and private sports discourse lives by. About Toni Kucoc’s defense, for example, he writes “his defense was better—he was not a very good man-to-man defender, but his anticipatory feel for the game on defense was good, and that allowed him to play good team defense.”²³ So why, one wonders, does he omit Jordan’s unceremonious censure of Reebok in favor of Nike, which works so well to encapsulate the title of his book, showing Jordan at the center of a moment where the old world passes into the new, of national, global, and personal capital colliding? Even if the omission isn’t deliberate, its absence surely poses a problem within the avowed panorama of *Playing for Keeps*. Perhaps the complexity of forces flowing into and arising out of such a moment might be a bit much to handle in a feature magazine piece, but Halberstam sinks four hundred pages and one of journalism’s best reputations into the modern history of the NBA and Michael Jordan; clearly, he lacks neither the space nor the skill to confront such a question. Nor is Halberstam shy about confronting the NBA’s aspirations. In the first chapter of the book, he almost teasingly portrays Commissioner David Stern in a moment of triumph: “It had been a very happy couple of days for David Stern: baseball was struggling with its image and its ratings, and Michael Jordan was bringing the NBA a full measure of fame in a city [Paris] normally slow to grant homage to American celebrities.”²⁴ Halberstam spots Stern’s gambit: shepherd the national competition onto the world stage.

²³ Halberstam, *Keeps*, 380.

²⁴ Halberstam, *Keeps*, 6.

The decisive step he seems unwilling to make, which marks the disjuncture created by the medal ceremony's omission from serious discussion, would involve accepting a National Basketball Association unmoored from its national base entirely. The exhibition games and media blitz that make up the early pages appears as a transnational exchange, albeit one with only two principals, France and the United States. Chicago's team lands in France "with all the fanfare of a great touring rock group."²⁵ Whirlwinds such as this, exciting and imposing as they are, reside in the category of the cultural invasions that Halberstam alludes to when he suggests a comparison between the Bulls and the Beatles, both storming stars truck continents (albeit in opposite directions). The barnstorming that Halberstam captures revels in the spirit of an international capital, but personalities such as Jordan and Stern work so well as metonyms for globalization that they often obscure mention of globalization by its own name. This elision can be explained in a couple of ways. Though he makes "the world" his purview throughout the book, Halberstam is not ready to see the NBA's globalization as a force detaching from its home-grown American roots. For Halberstam, MJ, astride the globe on billboards and millions of feet, stands firmly as Michael Jeffrey Jordan, country boy from North Carolina, graduate from the state school made good. Halberstam's is a genuine problem, to be sure: how to represent and understand globalization while retaining the national borders of a professional sports league?

When Halberstam states in the paratext that Michael Jordan has made a world, I take it for granted that this is a new world, and not the world that came before. But the new "world" is not pregnant with the promise of any New World; this present future's fresh expanses only portend an uncomfortable marriage of commerce and sports to David Halberstam. The world Halberstam articulates, it should be noted, is not our present, not yet; it retains a consistency that cordons it off from Jordan and the Magic-Bird era. In my estimation, Halberstam's is an

²⁵ Halberstam, *Keeps*, 1.

omission of purpose rather than ignorance. If indeed Halberstam's omission boils down to a wound in his sense of being American, I think it not ignoble of him. Even for an author who has been consistently to the left of his peers in journalism²⁶, there is a wide gulf between chastising over-ambitious foreign policy by a nation powerful enough to enter an international morass and realizing the wide scope of the world has substantially shifted away from the purview of the nation-state.

A second reason for Halberstam's omission in his belief in his subject, a belief that seemed valid in the wake of Jordan's retirement, when the world that Michael Jordan made seemed to vanish. As Halberstam writes at the beginning of *Playing for Keeps*, Jordan's effect on the game was too outsized to last. When Jordan left the NBA in the middle of his career and heights of his ability, the NBA Finals ratings dropped from 17.9 on the Nielsen scale (roughly 27 million viewers) to 12.4 (or 18 million viewers) for 1994²⁷. When Jordan returned to the Finals, the ratings rose to 25 million viewers for a Bulls team virtually unchanged and a league whose dominant stars (Patrick Ewing, Akeem Olajuwon) remained, leading *Sports Illustrated* to ask during Chicago's record-breaking 1996-97 regular season campaign, "Are the Bulls So Good They're Bad for the NBA?"²⁸ Of course, the real question revolved not around the team; it is doubtful whether the owners were concerned about Steve Kerr's effect on gate sales; rather, as NCAA commentator and perpetual curmudgeon Billy Packer complained, "The NBA doesn't show the NBA, the NBA shows Michael Jordan."²⁹ Given Packer's preference for the college game, such criticism of the NBA makes sense. College basketball remains program-based, wherein passing classes of students neither remain nor move laterally; for fans, the university itself is the star: Kentucky, North Carolina, Michigan State, etc. Indeed, Packer's angle of

²⁶ From the war in Vietnam onwards.

²⁷ Halberstam, *Keeps*, 8.

²⁸ Jack McCullum, "Are the Bulls So Good They're Bad for the NBA?" *Sports Illustrated*, March 10, 1997, 44.

²⁹ Mark Heisler, "Bulls Came in the Knick of Time", *Los Angeles Times*, March 16, 1997.

criticism dogs LeBron James when he declares his desire to be “a global icon.”³⁰ And while Packer’s criticism here comes across as cranky and unrealistic, it does point to a few lingering concerns that intersected both in the inauguration of the Jordan era—with its shift away from powerhouses like the Lakers, Celtics, and Sixers to a star system in which Jordan was undoubtedly the celestial center—and in its close.

By the time #23 rode into the sunset for the second time, the fans and press worried about when his successor would emerge. For a league and owners so future-oriented, never hesitant to gamble on high-school players with potential while whole franchises sat in the basement of the standings, the specter of “the Next Michael Jordan” already loomed even while the first and only Michael Jordan still laced them up. Perhaps even Michael himself felt his own shadow; during the brief intermission of his first retirement³¹, the Bulls had erected a bronze statue to him outside the stadium and it was this Michael Jordan, always young and dunking and a champion, unbowed by age or ill-fated comeback attempts or bungled GM responsibilities, that would perpetually haunt the NBA from his first retirement until the recent emergence of a new crop of superstars.³² During the interim, the league struggled with a succession of hoped-for MJ replacements to pick up the game that the league’s preeminent superstar had left behind. Players as diverse as Penny Hardaway, Harold Miner, and (young) Kobe Bryant all failed to live up the impossible demands of being next.

This story of failure gets recounted fairly often, usually as a lesson about how there will be never be another Michael Jordan. As Jordan wrote in an ESPN the Magazine issue about the

³⁰ Chris Broussard, “LeBron would consider European offer of \$50M a year or more,” ESPN.com, August 6, 2008, <http://sports.espn.go.com/nba/news/story?id=3520860> (accessed August 9, 2009).

³¹ The first retirement followed the 1993 NBA Finals and ended with his return to the Bulls during 1995 regular season. His first game back, the most watched regular season game since 1975, affirmed Jordan’s status as ratings bonanza. (Jerry Hausman and Gregory Leonard, “Superstars in the National Basketball Association”, *Journal of Labor Economics*, 15:587, 1997).

³² Wade, James, Anthony, et al.

NBA's perceived image problem, "David Stern hates when I say this, but in some ways he created his own problem. Look at the way the league markets its players. When I came in, they marketed the athletes themselves, how they performed, what they accomplished."³³ Jordan was the most singular athletic entity during the brief window of the 1990s in which the United States held court as the world's lone superpower. The Jumpman logo on Brand Jordan clothing and shoes became a metonym for Michael Jordan's own power of export, stemming as it did from style and political no-comments, making him capable of perfect translation into any native tongue or onto a sneaker tongue, standing with the feet of millions in cultures that would experience American hegemony during the decade through the diffusion of the higher organizing force of financial globalization, whose tightening vortex was the American entertainment market. According to Jarvie et al., for example, "Michael Jordan...was voted 'Greatest Man in the World' by Chinese students" in 1990; "recognition of the NBA brand logo among Chinese teenagers was over 79%"³⁴ The aggregation of these multipliers, portentous of future financial problems, was necessary at the time to extend the league's prestige and buying power, sowing the seeds for an international basketball community with viable financial connections. Indeed, Farred argues that "the Sternian ethos allowed him [Michael Jordan] to transcend American society itself. By the end of his career in 2003, Jordan was one of the most recognizable athletes in the world."³⁵ The rapid rise in salaries that followed Jordan's tenure and were in many ways provided by him would prove to be the initial mechanism through which foreign stars were bought and along with them foreign fans.³⁶ However, what the league was left with the wake of Jordan was an unworkable

³³ Michael Jordan (as told to Ric Bucher), "Don't Try to Duplicate", *ESPN the Magazine*, February 25, 2008, 61.

³⁴ Grant Jarvie, Dong-Jhy Hwang, Mel Brennen, *Sport, Revolution, and the Beijing Olympics* (New York: Berg, 2008), 101-102.

³⁵ Farred, *Phantom*, 11.

³⁶ "The preceding decade [the 1990s] allowed the United States to enjoy faster growth, lower unemployment, and low inflation all at the same time." Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003), 48.

financial system that is currently heading towards another lockout. In February 2010, David Stern projected “a league-wide loss of about \$400 million.”³⁷ Unworkable in the long-term, of course, feels much different than the unworkable in the short term, a lesson half the league seems to forget every offseason when signing free agents. With David Stern’s admission that the domestic market already too many teams, where could the longtime expansionary desires of the NBA turn?

《》 Year of Yao 《》

Of course, an ending as formally perfect as Michael’s could not last, precisely because of Jordan’s seemingly pathological competitive streak³⁸. And so Jordan came back for another go-round. His return, marred by injury, diminishing talents and a Washington Wizards’ roster misassembled (in part) by Jordan himself, ended on a meaningless³⁹ April night against Philadelphia. A better and more telling send-off came months before at the All-Star game. Other than the comprehensive television coverage the league marshaled on Jordan’s behalf and the (belated) offer of a starting spot from Vince Carter, the mid-season spectacle also featured a first-time All-Star, a rookie in fact: Yao Ming of the Houston Rockets. Amidst Jordan’s farewell, the game promised something more, something different. As the players traded hugs before the opening jump and starting lineups were called, TNT announcer Dick Stockton may have captured the NBA’s future best: “It is the final appearance of Michael Jordan...and Yao Ming will start at center, representing China.”⁴⁰ While David Halberstam’s hefty account of the NBA provides a compelling story for the modern sporting age, characterized by oversized dollar

³⁷ Ian Thomsen, “Stern projects \$400M in losses”, *SI.com*, February 13, 2010, *SI.com* (accessed February 13, 2010).

³⁸ Remember, this is someone who cheated college roommate Buzz Peterson’s mother in a game of pinochle.

³⁹ With the Wizards well out of playoff contention.

⁴⁰ *Year of Yao*, DVD, directed by Adam Del Deo. Los Angeles, New Line Home Video, 2006.

amounts and the celebrity of a 24-hours news cycle, he seems to miss the importance of this moment, when a Chinese superstar inaugurates the world stage . In many cases, the reader gets the sense that the NBA and even Michael Jordan, despite his magnetic personality and fantastical skill, drop into history at the right time and place. This, of course, is true. The unanswered question of Halberstam’s account remains: why basketball? What about basketball allows it to make worlds, or at least make manifest the world as it is made elsewhere? The answer, I suggest, is the sport’s internationalization. While the NBA has proven itself adept in Europe for quite awhile, it is China that cinches the global reach of the game.

The economic success of China exists in America most cogently as an emotional mark of its material onset. As James Fallows point out in *Postcards From Tomorrow Square*, most Americans simply do not know the role of China in the world economy and how that system has generally benefitted the middle and lower-class American consumer while keeping “the buying power earned through China’s exports out of the hands of Chinese consumers.”⁴¹ Nonetheless insidious and ineluctably leaden, China and its seemingly imminent rise currently presses into the American psyche and more broadly onto the Eurocentric bases of economics and history. Any picture of the “world” scale of the current economic downturn is incomplete without a consideration of China; how can China not be accounted for? Much commentary until very recently has used “world” as a placeholder for the U.S. and Western Europe or in reference to geographical spaces outside these zones of power whose apparitions originate from within the West. But recent calls for Chinese currency responsibility reflect a more uncomfortable realization, that the international community has been paradoxically been made manifest with the economic crisis. “The rise of China” has become a watchword effectively masking China’s own

⁴¹ James Fallows, *Postcards From Tomorrow Square* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), 156.

position in the international community. Strangely, it doesn't recognize that China might have constitutive economic designs, or put similar priority on its own position.

All of which makes the NBA's open courting of China both dangerous and promising, The normal bugaboo for American firms in China, Chinese workers perceived as taking jobs from the U.S., are the exact quarry for the league. Despite the delicacy of this courtship, China provides plenty of purely economic problems for the U.S. What makes the NBA's choice of China difficult—even in spite of its unspoken promise to buy hundreds of millions of shoes, balls, and tickets make any notion of choice foregone—is the divide between the China the global consumer market and China the national consumer. The rising chorus about the rise of China tends to focus on the country's mass rather than its volume, which is understandable to a degree. When GDP growth continues at better than 10%⁴² during an economic dust storm, fine distinction may be overlooked. However, a better conversation going forward and better reckoning of China's strengths and weaknesses must take into account of the slippage between the Chinese consumer and the Chinese economy as a whole, which does not register in the States and has been deemphasized in China itself. The Chinese government has made strides towards mending the gap; since its WTO membership in 2001, Chinese imports of a percentage of GDP have risen to 13% (in 2004) from a paltry 4.1% in 1998.⁴³ However, there are good reasons, I would suggest, for staunch PRC resistance on this issue. At the risk of placing too much emphasis on the historical past, a useful point of reference for this same divide—between Chinese government spending and Chinese consumer spending—can be found in the most traumatic instance of macroeconomic globalization; certainly the most traumatic in the Chinese cultural imagination. I refer here to the trade of opium between China and England during the

⁴² 10.3%, to be exact. Sharon Lafraniere, "China Still Successfully Taming Growth", *New York Times*, July 14, 2010.

⁴³ Barry Naughton, *The Chinese Economy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 390.

19th century, and specifically to the two wars which christened what was to be China's subordinate role to the power of the age, England. The Opium Wars were inaugurated in reaction to the century's long trade imbalance between China and its economic rivals, including England. An export surplus driven by "silk, tea, and porcelain...expanded the money supply and contributed to economic expansion", primarily through the purchase of British silver.⁴⁴ Only when the British found a suitable commodity for the Chinese consumer market in Indian-grown opium could they turn the tide; "by the 1930s, China was importing more than it was exporting".⁴⁵ All of which is not to suggest that a dramatic shift in the PRC's holding of U.S. Treasury bonds and U.S. debt in general will spur a consumption binge of American products; that dramatic shift is unlikely anyways⁴⁶. The more likely result is a reevaluation of the Chinese consumer's relative dearth. From the financial wreckage of the past few years, debate (re)emerges concerning the metrics of economics. The quarry for all parties, for and against, is GDP. With an increased emphasis on the consumer by virtue of a move away from GDP to GDI or any other number of metrics, a revised picture of power relations, economic and otherwise, should emerge which sheds a sharper light on the internal divisions of China. GDP masks the pointillist engine of growth by being best suited to measure multinational entities, whose productivity cannot be reckoned either for or against the actuality of American wealth at the current moment. The biggest effect of any change would again seem to me phenomenological. It is easy for the American consumer to comprehend outsourcing, off shoring, and the like; the magnitude of Chinese manufacturing⁴⁷ needs little explain. The

⁴⁴ Naughton, *Economy*, 41.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Robert J. Samuelson, "China's \$2.4 Trillion Stash", *Newsweek*, February 1, 2010.

⁴⁷ It is likely that the Pearl River Delta alone contain more manufacturing jobs than the entire United States, and by a wide margin (roughly 4 million more). See Fallows, *Postcards*, 66.

following step, simply but emotionally complex, involves explaining that the relative poverty of China's citizens is not the wealth of Chinese citizen's government.

Strangely enough though, this poverty brightens basketball's future in China, if not the immediate future. Clearly the league hopes for a future in which Chinese customers will pay for satellite packages, buy merchandise, and (just maybe) attend home games. Indeed, this is already China right now to some degree. The most promising demographic, however much they are lamented in accounts of modern Chinese life, is the itinerant lower class, moving from town to the city for factory jobs. "As modern transportation and communication reach the majority of the Chinese people, a modern, secular notion of the nation becomes possible for the first time in a land where it has historically been the political state, and not the "natural" socioeconomic relations of a community, that gives form to the nation".⁴⁸ This desire to become secular, here a synonym for an embrace of capitalism (with Chinese characteristics) is especially focused in the modern Chinese city. "Today, as China wades into the global market economy, as its children embrace Western youth culture, as a new urban professional set seeks self-expression at every turn, what better vehicle than basketball? What sweeter dream of ascendancy than the N.B.A., that brand of brands, that glittering symbol of U.S. hegemony and hipness and the good life?"⁴⁹ The city and the individual are, for better or worse, the new site and unit of China's next century.⁵⁰

Basketball has long had a tradition as a city game; the city, while not necessary per se, cannot be discounted in the sustained life of the game. Unlike baseball or American football, the individual player can and does play a decent facsimile of the more rigorous, organized game; basketball offers the chance to do things by yourself that you might do in a game with others. I

⁴⁸ Xudong Zhang, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics: China in the Last Decade of the 20th Century* (Durham: Duke UP, 2008), 106.

⁴⁹ Coplan, "People's Game".

⁵⁰ Regardless of whether "the Chinese Century" materializes or not.

see no way to individually approximate an off-tackle sweep, while a contested jump shot is, in many respects, within the common imagination; hence, a gym full of people shooting jump shots at game speed and not a concomitant field of solo running backs. The need for migrant Chinese community life has been equally sated by basketball in the United States. Historically, Chinese immigrants “became an urban population...by 1900, 45 percent of all Chinese in California lived in San Francisco and the Bay Area, and two thirds of the state's Chinese were urban dwellers”⁵¹; these immigrants make up the cast of characters that populate Kathleen Yep’s account of basketball in San Francisco before WWII.⁵² “More than seventy-five years after opening its gates, the Playground still stirs a sense of connection between the staff members and the adults who played there as children”.⁵³ The lack of legal and organizational structure makes basketball an adoptive game, not unlike “some activities that require a relatively low skill level and few facilities (such as walking, running, traditional Chinese exercises, disco dancing, etc.) remain the most frequent and popular forms of physical activity.”⁵⁴ Its minimal requirements which have been key thus far on the American basketball scene.⁵⁵ As Lipsyte puts it, “basketball was the city game because it was such a natural for the singularities of urban recreation. Simple and cheap, all you needed was a ball and a hole to drop it in. Immigrant white ethnic kids on Manhattan’s lower east side [sic] dunked rolled up socks into garbage cans”.⁵⁶ Unlike the regimentation of other sports, whether in training (for Olympic sports) or football, baseball (for actual practice),

⁵¹ Ronald Takaki, *Strangers From a Different Shore* (New York: Little, Brown, & Company, 1989), 79.

⁵² Kathleen Yep, *Outside the Paint: When Basketball Ruled the Chinese Playground* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009).

⁵³ Yep, *Paint*, 117.

⁵⁴ Jarvie, *Olympics*, 104.

⁵⁵ And ruinous for sports like baseball, whose formerly significant African-American has been whittled down in recent decades.

⁵⁶ Lipsyte, *Idols*, 320. This conjures the immortal Delonte West (PG-Cleveland Cavaliers), who, when asked about the resistance of the NBA players to the introduction of a new game ball for the 2006-07 season, responded: “You know, I never really paid that much attention to it...I’m a player, Greg [Delonte smiles], if we gonna play with a sock we gonna play with a sock”. Despite West’s *caulier* attitude, the new ball was replaced by the previous leather model on January 1, 2007.

basketball lines up with the aspirations and still impoverished realities of China's youngest generation. While the NBA is criticized for catering to youth culture, that is exactly the market it has always had to pursue to find a racial acceptance (in the U.S.) and sufficiently cosmopolitan aspirations elsewhere (China). Basketball is the sport of the new China for many reasons that go beyond the NBA's expansion there, including... “the notion that everyone should play sports... promoted by the Ministry of Education, which in December 2006 decreed...that every village in the country should have two Ping-Pong tables and a basketball court by 2012”⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Mary Nicole Nazzaro, “The Chinese Athlete”, *Sports Illustrated*, July 22, 2008, 58.

Chapter 2/**Race Still Matters**

《》 Yellow Peril Past & The Future China 《》

~And all the while China hanging over us like Fate itself~

Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*

The threat of the Chinese, which is to say the Chinese worker, the nation of China, the Chinese body and Chinese bodies, has an American history most nearly concomitant with the history of Chinese immigration to the United States, which between 1849 and 1930 brought "about 380,000 Chinese to the U.S. mainland."⁵⁸ It should be noted that this migration, typically posed as a flow East to West and led by its emigrants from China, was from the beginning an acute response to America's need for immigrants. "By 1848 the United States was poised on the Western edge of the continent, ready to advance the 'entering wedge' of its market civilization into Asia."⁵⁹ Thus, the response to this migration, eventually manifest in the statements of public will like the Chinese Exclusion Act, also responded to this same economic reality and the same pressure for jobs. At the time of the act's passage, only .002% of the United States was Chinese, yet Chinese exclusively were targeted in the voters' ire⁶⁰. Meanwhile, today's battles do not on their surface pit American individuals against Chinese individuals; no matter how overlaid with unwieldy racial stereotypes these individuals may have been in the past, and despite the persistent specter of a nameless horde of Chinese operating as a hive mind, the bones of contention (jobs,

⁵⁸ Takaki, *Strangers*, 31.

⁵⁹ Takaki, *Strangers*, 23.

⁶⁰ Takaki, *Strangers*, 110.

racial purity in the populous, etc.) still hung within reach of the layman. These were issues that, in their inspiration for anti-Chinese racism, appealed to the emotional reactions of the voters because of proximity and comprehension. It is doubtful that anyone can conceive of the renminbi replacing the dollar without conjuring a much bigger world picture simultaneously. Scenarios involving the transference between mediums of financial liquidity require a macro-economic compass, orienting⁶¹ between a multitude of international markets, industries, regulations, and trends. Meanwhile, the racism of the past persists in new forms. Although most of the Americans who supported the many anti-Chinese immigration laws over the course of the early 20th century were unlikely to confront a real live Chinaman in the course of their daily lives, their fear was abstracted as an image of a nameless horde, itself only located within the theoretically possible. World politics, lacking the high definition of the World Wars or the Cold War, becomes too muddled as the century passes for large scale abstraction to reaffirm prejudice rooted to locality. It is only now, with China's ineluctable rise, that the stereotype of the Chinese body politic, a unit of immeasurable number and volume, has tangibly emerged as a paradoxically delayed fulfillment of anti-Chinese racist ideologies in American politics.

This marks, to me, a decisive shift *still within* a long continuum of Orientalist thought whose regard for the multitude has historically focused on a chronology without beginning, end, or change. In an important way, the present American imagination of a coming “Chinese century” is a breaking point, certainly for the U.S. but also the constellation of states over which the U.S. has exerted considerable influence since the end of WWI. Indeed, the measure of that influence reflects American worry, not only for itself but for what has been a generally American way of doing things in the world. But, in keeping with an even longer Western world system and

⁶¹ No pun intended.

narrative arc, for which the “American century” is but the most recent development, China’s rise situates itself back at square one in the Oriental/Occident split, the stakes of war : battles of rhetoric, economy, and perhaps military for a hegemony not contested by these particular forces in quite awhile. What the NBA and China now display is a potentially graphic clash surrounding cultural adaptation and reappropriation. Not an unfamiliar terrain, now or ever; yet cultural appropriation taking place across the apparently upward and downwards economics arcs of China and the United States portends something different in magnitude when one takes into account basketball’s origins. Failing to escape the financial occasion which marks China’s entrance as a superpower, I nonetheless point towards a long past, bleeding into the present, of racial and national questions whose presence complicates some of the suppositions about what China’s rise means in the first place. The sum of such racial reinstantiation confirms the coming multipolar world, but one whose various poles recreate the balance of power in a colonial Europe world-picture much more than most prospective liberal accounts of the future credit.

* * *

A joke originally, I relay the following as a brief fable in/of history:

While vacationing at Kennebunkport, George Bush [41] is hit on the head with one of his beloved horseshoes. He slips into a coma. Nine months later, he awakes and President Quayle is standing at his bedside.

“Are we at peace?” Mr. Bush asks.

“Yes. The country is at peace,” says President Quayle.

“What is the unemployment rate?” Mr. Bush asks.

“About 4 percent,” says President Quayle.

“Inflation?” queries Mr. Bush.

“Under control,” says President Quayle.

“Amazing,” Mr. Bush. “How much does a loaf of bread cost?”

President Quayle scratches his head nervously and says, “About 240 yen.”⁶²

In his book *Naked Economics*, author and former speechwriter⁶³ Charles Wheelan offers this potential dystopia as star evidence in his chapter on the vagaries of national economy. While working for the then-governor of Maine during the late 1980s, Wheelan penned a joke about the astonishing rise of the Japanese economy that used humor a shade darker than the typical fare for campaign trail. But as Wheelan notes, “times change”⁶⁴. Smiling at his joke again, he recalls the real-estate bubble burst soon after the joke’s first telling, inaugurating Japan’s Lost Decade; meanwhile, America spent the 90s growing as never before⁶⁵.

China is not Japan; or rather, the perceived threat of China to United States power is not that of Japan’s two decades ago, despite their grouping in the 1993 World Bank report on the East Asian miracle.⁶⁶ Though that report and the subsequent commentary emphasized the role of state intervention in East Asia⁶⁷, the difference between a parliamentary and economically dynamic Japan and nominally communist China cannot be dismissed, despite the market

⁶² Charles Wheelan, *Naked Economics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), 149.

⁶³ For Joseph McKernan, governor of Maine from 1987 to 1995.

⁶⁴ Wheelan, *Naked*, 150.

⁶⁵ Stiglitz, *Discontents*, 48.

⁶⁶ The World Bank, *The East Asian Miracle: Economic Growth and Public Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁶⁷ Especially to limit the outflow of “hot” money. See Stiglitz, “The East Asia Crisis: How the IMF Brought the World to the Verge of a Global Meltdown”, *Globalization and Its Discontents*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003).

freedoms China has instituted. So, in light of the economic evidence presented in Chapter 1, we should be especially aware of how China differs from its similarly miraculous East Asian fellows and specifically how the early rise of Japan differs from the current situation.⁶⁸ The economic challenge from China, presents itself as more insidious (and more hysterical, therefore, when it is portrayed as such) because it cannot be easily recognized/embodied in an industry like automobiles. Popular sentiment is moving towards a conception of China that may be similar to how other nations imagine the U.S., as so dominant that it can no longer be recognized in its true force. In China, the U.S. can see its own abundant natural resources, sizable population, shipping access; American exceptionalism recognizes the exceptional features of China.

But before any imagined Chinese economic hegemony impressed itself onto the current global scene, it was America's burgeoning reach, at the outset of "the American century," that brought the game of basketball to China. Basketball came on the heels of a longstanding interest in unconverted China on the part of the Young Men's Christian Association. "By 1858, the Treaty of Tianjin had further provided for the freedom of movement for all missionaries. None of these early agreements conceded any rights to educate Chinese children, but Westerners bought land and opened schools".⁶⁹ The missionary zeal of the YMCA, and the manner of their mission, is consistent with China's own cultural history of its "century of humiliation". In Jarvie's account of the China's own sports history, "Fletcher Brockman, one of the early YMCA's Secretaries to China, claims that the typical reason for this social and political movement emerging in China at this time was one of opportunism".⁷⁰ Brockman outlines his own opportunity as "a fight to the finish between light and darkness...we must conquer them or they

⁶⁸ Paul Krugman, in fact, suggests that the U.S. is beginning to resemble pre-Lost Decade Japan and points to the real-estate bubble and perceived ineptitude government ineptitude as two warning signs. "Lost Decade Looming?" *New York Times*, May 10, 2010

⁶⁹ Jarvie, *Olympics*, 25.

⁷⁰ Jarvie, *Beijing Olympics*, 25.

will conquer us”.⁷¹ The Chinese struggle against Western influence, however, made use of one of the tools of oppression. If, as British propaganda suggested, China was defeated in the Opium Wars “not only because of their [China’s] relatively weak military power, but also because of their alleged physical weakness and the lack of martial spirit”, then Chinese reformers took their nationalist cues from this account, urging their people to “learn from Western physical culture in order to develop Chinese military spirit and power.”⁷² This response on the part of reformers, though derived from the west, proved a significant threat to the system it adopted; for China today, the economic evidence of such a turnaround is clear. In some sense the Chinese mastery of American economic systems is not unlike the tendency of former British colonies to master the sporting games used by the British to instill a sense of British mastery over the colonies. C.L.R. James famously narrates this effect on Trinidad: “I had been brought up in the public school code. It came doctrinally from the masters...from the foundation of the school...Oxford and Cambridge men. The striking thing was that inside the classroom the code had little success. Sneaking was taboo, but we lied and cheated without any sense of shame...but as soon as we stepped out on to the cricket or football field...all was changed.”⁷³ In this passage, one glimpses, at the fringe of first world’s penetration into the third, the ability of sport to literally and figuratively create a different order of sociability through the seemingly rigid bounds of a rulebook.

For Grant Farred, this trend is unlikely to abate in the case of China, represented most forcefully in the NBA by Yao Ming. Yao’s entrance into American culture and the NBA has thus far fulfilled the expectations of his handlers. The excitement of Yao’s arrival was met with both breathless guesses about the future Chinese market and xenophobic responses on the part of

⁷¹ Fletcher Brockman, *I Discover the Orient* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935), 16-17.

⁷² Jarvie et al., *Beijing Olympics*, 17.

⁷³ James, *Boundary*, 34.

some NBA players.⁷⁴ The present situation, with Yao’s career sidetracked by injuries⁷⁵, fails to inspire any further sweeping assessments; nowadays, Yao is an injured player on a lottery team. Yao’s importance for Farred emerges out of his ability to trace the remaining racial difficulties of the NBA in broad daylight. This argument is excavated from the alleged “phantom calls” whistled on the Rockets’ center during the 2005 playoffs, but in turn reveals an even larger racial difficulty, that of the American multinational in China. “But that supposition [“who will win China”?] is foolhardy in the extreme, and its proponents [“Nike, McDonalds, IBM” et. al], instinctively if not articulately, know that. The real Chinese Phantom that Yao’s subjectivity as nationalist-globalist articulates, is more disturbing to US imperial ambitions”.⁷⁶ A lot happens quickly in Farred’s account, which may be ordered in this way.

- 1) American multinational companies are trying to “win” China, but such an aim is fruitless; it is implied that China will “win” them.
- 2) The real threat is economic; “China is now primarily feared because it is the US’s most powerful economic competitor”⁷⁷
- 3) So, in short: “Economics have triumphed over ideology, if we ignore for a moment how constitutively ideological all economic practice is”

Point number one seems right, instinctively so; China’s capitalist reforms entail all that economic system offers, the competitive market most of all. Farred’s second statement, which turns China’s threat from a racial to economic one, follows necessarily from his first point.⁷⁸ The whole concept of “winning” here seems to be either a Cold War anachronism (c.f. McNamara’s use of “winning their hearts and minds”) or a contemporary militaristic strategy of international relations that certainly cannot be employed towards China (c.f. the reuse of “winning their hearts

⁷⁴ Most notably, Shaquille O’Neal’s bizarre attempt at a Mandarin taunt.

⁷⁵ Yao broke his left during the 2009 Playoffs and missed the entire 2009/2010 regular season as a result of the following surgery.

⁷⁶ Farred, *Phantom*, 85.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Whether Chinese multinationals exert their might over American counterparts or not.

and minds” in Afghanistan and Iraq). It is dubious such a totalizing concept of economic success could turn backwards on the United States if it proves methodological untenable in China. Farred wants to draw these two countries together when he states that China is now “only secondarily an ideological foe”.⁷⁹ True, but only in the old capitalist/communist dialogue. Lacking any compelling ideological opposite in the world at the present moment⁸⁰, China will do as an enemy, and rightfully so if the battle can no longer take place over *who* has capitalism but who has the *most effective* capitalism. In this way can Yao become the advance representative of “Chinese globality”, Farred’s word for globalization with Chinese characteristics, but really just a synonym for leading the capitalist system.

This is the specter of race, within the specter of a new world, in whose grasp race, economics, and power as they are currently arranged appear as specters, that is to say, and in the most forceful language available, unimaginable. This, we call the future, and it is not the post-American future or any of the multi-polar worlds promised us; for the United States, the future of China is the other that cannot be other-ed, the other not of our making (although, of course, all ghosts sustain themselves on the living). In keeping with the deconstructive vocabulary from which Farred draws the word, the “specter” that Yao’s presence calls forth the past into the present and reveals that the two constitute a continuous whole; the post-racial moment of Jordan never really was. Part of the power of the NBA’s particular ghost is that it is so present, so corporeal. Unlike other sports leagues or even the general tenor of American society, the NBA always calling or having the race card called on it. The Phantom with a capital “P” is China the nation, not Yao the player. At the same time, this battle over global capital takes place quite literally on a stage where Yao’s representation of the Chinese body politic consistently casts him

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ I would consider the U.S. engagement with various Islamic states and groups too confused and the groups too varied to produce the same rise the United States gather from China (itself varied, but in this case the U.S. response seems more sure of itself).

in racial light. The NBA, in the charged and particular retrogressive arena of critique that surrounds it, provides the forum for the individual racial injuries of Yao to be articulated even as they are overwhelmed by the economic and global dominance of China. Yao represents China, an avatar for its wealth to be sure, but despite his stature, also a marker of the many individual Chinese for whom both China and the United States' wealth remains out of reach.

《》 Post-Racial Ad Infinitum 《》

In many respects it would seem as though the racial problems that have dogged the NBA throughout its history have been seriously alleviated from without. Other sports have been beset with a string of PR fiascos, from the ongoing steroids crisis in baseball to football's off-field issues⁸¹, all of them unlikely to inspire fan devotion, especially during a concomitant economic crisis. A more promising indicator arrives at the moment in which black America sees the confluence of its most daring political hopes with the only game that can lay a stake in representing the ups and downs of the black community during this crucial phase (civil rights). Hell, even the racial determinacy of the South, an axiom of the political landscape and culture wars that have implicated professional basketball directly or indirectly, has been called into question.⁸² Still, keeping in mind the uses to which "post-racial" have been put in the aftermath of the 2008 presidential election, anything suggesting an afterwards to race can only be treated as a watchword for the most nefarious sort of racism, smiling as it tries to bludgeon the very tools which have created our (im)possible post-racial situation. Now, perhaps it goes without saying,

⁸¹ Michael Vick, Terrell Owens, the Bengals, etc.

⁸² Richard Johnston and Byron Shafer, *The End of Southern Exceptionalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

but the moment “racial” follows “post”, the latter is invalidated by the former; its presence in the public conversation, especially under the auspices of “post-racial”, only further confirms the multitude of ramifications that race continues to dole out in American life. The end of racism still exists as an imagination just as futuristic as King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, its announcement always and forever premature, and will probably remain so going forward.

Also extant, and necessarily so if race should still exist, is the NBA’s racial dilemma. Unlike baseball, in which the fall of the league’s color barrier in 1947 marked the end of its serious self-questioning about race, race has taken on an almost ontological dimension in the NBA’s every move. The NBA is robbed of a chance to celebrate race as a part of the national conversation due to its not-yet emergent popularity during the time of racial integration. To be fair, football was a distant second at the time and doesn’t get any credit thrown its way either. Baseball’s dominance allows the sport and league least relevant to the racial conversation (not surprisingly) the most prominent place on sports racial mantle. Perhaps because of the league’s relatively late start⁸³ and emergence onto the national sporting scene, it missed out on the chance to shake off its racial baggage, only coming of age in popularity during the turbulent 1960s. David Halberstam asserts that “in the particular schizophrenia of American society...[the NBA] was seen as far too black, and the majority of its players, it was somehow believed, were on drugs”.⁸⁴ As Bill Simmons rightly points out in his book, although coke was circulating in society at large and particularly in celebrity culture, the effects of cocaine in the NBA were especially noticeable in the NBA because viewers could see the physical toll of the drug (whenever they could find a game on TV that is). And unlike the film or music business, where drug use could help solidify an outsider identity or start a career, in the sports world, drug use simply made you a washout. In

⁸³ The first NBA game commenced in 1949

⁸⁴ Halberstam, *Keeps*, 115.

other words, Spencer Haywood, who fell asleep on cocaine stretching before the 1980 Finals⁸⁵, was not in a position to parlay his rebellion. It took the league until 1983 to institute a drug policy⁸⁶, with Michael Richardson as the first player kicked out.⁸⁷

It is easy to see why the NBA would want to move away from this past, and most of their PR efforts over the past twenty-five years have been directed towards smoothing over the issue, with David Stern leading the charge. “The conventional wisdom was a black athlete wouldn’t do well as a pitcher, but Magic chipped away at that.”⁸⁸ But, again, what gives the league an important voice is the frequency of its response and how, in answering, it is forced unwittingly or unwillingly to undercut its own PR. Compared to the much vaster system of recreational, high school, and college sports, the NBA has not been able to successfully dodge its image as an all-black, and therefore not-quite-American, professional sport. “The final game of the 1980 Finals—seemingly an ideal matchup for a network...had been shown to most of the nation late at night on a tape delay by CBS. The college game by contrast was in good shape. The nation seemed to love the skillfully promoted Final Four”⁸⁹ But this has proved to be a productive failure, though. The college game provides fans a world of immutability amidst the yearly graduation of seniors: UNC will always suit up in baby blue, mid-majors will always be “scrappy”. Problems arise for the college game when it rubs up against the NBA, especially the NBA’s age limit.⁹⁰ The virtue at the bottom of college sports—college—does not thrive when players barely attend. On one hand, this can be attributed to the NBA’s rule, which encourages the best players to dutifully serve out their time as their administrators, coaches, and fans realize they will not be

⁸⁵ Simmons, *Basketball*, 142.

⁸⁶ Simmons, *Basketball*, 150.

⁸⁷ Halberstam, *Keeps*, 4.

⁸⁸ Chris Broussard, “Welcome to My World”, *ESPN the Magazine*, February 25 2008, 58.

⁸⁹ Halberstam, *Keeps*, 115.

⁹⁰ To be drafted, players have to be 19 years of age and out of high school for a year, forcing most to college. See Pete Thamel, “College Offers Attractive Pit Stop on the Way to the N.B.A”, *New York Times*, December 23, 2006.

staying much longer. This criticism loses its edge, however, in the face of the league's response. "This is not about the NCAA. This is not an enforcement of some social program. This is a business decision by the NBA, which is, we like to see our players in competition after high school."⁹¹ By treating its future employees as just that, the league demonstrate that "the true amateur was an ideal type"⁹², one that the NCAA monopoly may wish to maintain. The great benefit of the NBA, then, is in providing a very public, very fraught forum for grappling with the racial considerations that lurk beneath professional sports. To ignore these difficulties yields not an abatement of racism but its intensification and reallocation from the athletes in question. The NBA obviously plans to make quite a lot of money in China; far be it from me to suggest that their interest in the Chinese audience stems from any charitable urge towards Chinese people in general; likewise with African-Americans. The first real step in the globalization of the league was its Americanization, its capture of the most important consumer group in the world at the time and still perhaps now, Americans. What the NBA's incursion into China allows, then, is an American confrontation not only with the Other that has been China, but reimagining of the domestic Other.

⁹¹ Michael Wilbon, "One-and-Done Rule Song and Dance", *Washington Post*, June 25, 2009.

⁹² Holt, *British*, 100.

Works Cited

- Brockman, Fletcher. *I Discover the Orient*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935.
- Broussard, Chris. "Welcome to My World." *ESPN the Magazine*, February 25 2008.
- Carrington, Ben. "Sport without final guarantees." In *Marxism, Cultural Studies, and Sport*, eds. Ben Carrington and Ian McDonald, 15-31. London: Routledge, 2009.
- Carrington, Ben and Ian McDonald, "Mapping the Field." In *Marxism, Cultural Studies, and Sport*, eds. Ben Carrington and Ian McDonald, 1-12. London: Routledge, 2009.
- Fallows, James. *Postcards From Tomorrow Square*. New York: Vintage Books, 2009.
- Halberstam, David. *Playing for Keeps*. New York: Random House, 1999.
- Hausman, Jerry and Gregory Leonard. "Superstars in the National Basketball Association." *Journal of Labor Economics*, 15:587, 1997.
- James, C.L.R. *Beyond a Boundary*. London: Hutchinson & Co., 1963.
- Jarvie, Grant, Dong-Jhy Hwang, and Mel Brennen. *Sport, Revolution, and the Beijing Olympics*. New York: Berg, 2008.
- Johnston, Richard and Byron Shafer. *The End of Southern Exceptionalism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Jordan, Michael (as told to Ric Bucher). "Don't Try to Duplicate." *ESPN the Magazine*, February 25, 2008.
- Jordan, Michael and Mark Vancil. *Driven From Within*. New York: Atria, 2005.
- Levine, Peter and Robert Lipsyte. *Idols of the Game*. Atlanta: Turner Publishing, 1995.
- McCullum, Jack. "Are the Bulls So Good They're Bad for the NBA?" *Sports Illustrated*, March 10, 1997.
- Ming, Yao. Disc 1. *Year of Yao*, DVD. Directed by Adam Del Deo. Los Angeles: New Line Home Video, 2006.

- Naughton, Barry. *The Chinese Economy*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007.
- Nazzaro, Mary Nicole. "The Chinese Athlete." *Sports Illustrated*, July 22, 2008.
- Sachare, Alex, ed. *The Official NBA Basketball Encyclopedia*. New York: Villard, 1994.
- Samuelson, Robert J. "China's \$2.4 Trillion Stash." *Newsweek*, February 1, 2010.
- St. Louis, Brett. "Post-Marxism, black Marxism, and the politics of sport." In *Marxism, Cultural Studies, and Sport*, eds. Ben Carrington and Ian McDonald, 109-129. London: Routledge, 2009.
- Stiglitz, Joseph. *Globalization and Its Discontents*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003.
- Takaki, Ronald. *Strangers From a Different Shore*. New York: Little, Brown, & Company, 1989.
- Thomsen, Ian. "Stern projects \$400M in losses." *SI.com*, February 13, 2010, SI.com (accessed February 13, 2010).
- The World Bank. *The East Asian Miracle: Economic Growth and Public Policy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Yep, Kathleen. *Outside the Paint: When Basketball Ruled the Chinese Playground*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009.
- Zhang, Xudong. *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics: China in the Last Decade of the 20th Century*. Durham: Duke UP, 2008.

ZACHARY JAY VALENTA

123 Lakewood Drive Coatesville, PA 19320 | 610.496.7451 | zjv5002@psu.edu

EDUCATION

The Pennsylvania State University, Schreyer Honors College

B.A. in English

2006-2010

THESIS

94'x50': The Dimensions of a Global Game, overseen by Eric Hayot

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

Grader

01/10 –5/10

Graded assignments for “Introduction to Lesbian and Gay Studies,” an undergraduate course

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

WPSU, State College, PA

Editorial Intern

01/10 –5/10

Wrote, reported, and produced radio feature for broadcast on local Morning Edition.