Cashmore, Ellis. "The ghetto inside." *Beyond Black: Celebrity and Race in Obama's America*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012. 111–124. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781780931500.ch-010>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 11:19 UTC.

Copyright © Ellis Cashmore 2012. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

The ghetto inside

'Where else could you find the irresistible combination of charismatically athletic black men bounteously rewarded for their muscular skills with every toy and stimulant they desired, regressing as if ordained by nature to a more primitive stage of evolution?'

Was it a sign that the rehabilitation was complete, or just a cosmetic show when Nike announced it had welcomed back NFL superstar Michael Vick to its roster of celebrity endorsers? That was July 2011, barely six months since a pundit on Fox News pronounced: "I think personally [Vick] should have been executed." Even if Tucker Carlson later retracted this, the expression suggested how high emotions rode when Vick was the subject of discussion.

In 2007, Vick was in the third year of a contract with Atlanta Falcons, believed to be worth \$70 million. At 22, Vick was the second-youngest quarterback ever selected to play in the Pro Bowl, the honor coming after a season in which Vick set four NFL records. He was regarded as one of the most valuable players in the sport. Then, a search of a property owned by Vick in Surry, Virginia, turned up 54 pit bulls, and a later search revealed graves of other dogs said to have been killed during fights organized by members of a group called Bad Newz Kennels. On July 18, 2007, Vick and three other men were indicted on federal felony charges. The indictment charged that Vick had sponsored illegal dogfighting, gambled on fights and permitted acts of cruelty against animals on his property. He was sentenced to 23 months' imprisonment.

By the time of his release in July 2009, Vick, then 29, reckoned his incarceration had cost him a total of \$142 million. This included his \$2 million endorsement deal with Nike: the sports apparel company even suspended the release of a range of Zoom Vick V footwear. The NFL conditionally reinstated Vick, making it possible for him to resume playing professional football. He signed as a backup player for Philadelphia Eagles. The club's decision to sign Vick drew a response from the Humane Society of the United States, which announced that the group and Vick would work together to eradicate dogfighting among youths. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, the animal-rights group, was more reticent: "PETA certainly hopes that Vick has learned his lesson and feels truly remorseful for his crimes – but since he's given no public indication that that's the case, only time will tell."

He played sparingly in 2009, but when Donovan McNabb moved to Washington, Vick assumed his position and played arguably the best football of his life. In 2011, Vick signed a one-year contract with the Eagles, under which he would make an estimated \$20 million. The restoration of the endorsement contract didn't square the circle: Vick's offense was unforgivable in a nation of dog lovers. But this is where we recognize Nike's role as a major player in what we could call the racial politics of sports.

Nike has, for decades, been a purveyor of easy-on-the-conscience representations of the black urban experience to the middlebrow masses. In 1985, after eight years of steady growth and increasing profits, the sports goods company reported two consecutive losing quarters. Competitors, such as adidas, Puma and, especially, Reebok were taking advantage of the enthusiasm for aerobics, which Nike had missed. Nike's marketing strategy was to use established sports figures to endorse its products. So, when it signed Michael Jordan, there was a risk: he was, like the majority of other NBA players, black and, at that stage, unproven in the pro ranks. The NBA itself had an image problem: it was widely regarded as, to quote the *Los Angeles Times Magazine* writer Edward Kiersh, "a drug-infested, too-black league." Its players were, to use Tyrone R. Simpson's arresting phrase, "excessively libidinal, terminally criminal, and socially infernal" (p. 7).

This had commercial implications summed-up by Kiersh: "Sponsors felt the NBA and its black stars had little value in pitching colas and cornflakes to Middle America." Nike used Jordan primarily as a sales instrument: his role was to move branded footwear and apparel. But, in the marketing process, something else happened: he was presented as an "atypical Black figure," as David L. Andrews and Michael L. Silk call him, "distanced, from the discourses of irresponsibility, hypersexuality, deviance, unruliness, and brutish physicality routinely associated with African American males in general, and NBA players in particular" (p. 1,629).

During the 1990s, the NBA was a one-man show that other players were allowed to crash. Jordan was like air, or, I should say, Air: he was everywhere, all the time. There was no escape from his image, whether on tv, movies, cereal boxes, posters, you name it. It was as if he was a palpable presence. All most people saw was a representation, usually in the context of advertising. Yet, there was a sense in which people not only liked him, but felt they knew this crisply wholesome, indubitably clean-living and utterly harmless dark-skinned, but not dark, man.

There were, on closer inspection, two Jordans. One was the flesh-and-blood mortal who played ball for the Bulls, and, according to a 1992 book by Sam Smith, demanded special treatment at the expense of his teammates and had an unseemly gambling habit (Jordan admitted he'd written a check for \$57,000 in settlement of a gambling debt). The other Jordan existed independently of

time and space, residing in the minds of the countless acolytes who believed they knew him. This was the Jordan of the imagination. It was the Jordan Nike made and sold – just like a commodity. Jordan was not just the cynosure of 1990s sports, but the first truly modern sports celebrity.

What of his service to African Americans? For some, it was what Roman Catholics call *supererogation* – doing more than is required by duty and yielding a reserve fund of merit than can be drawn on in favor of sinners. For others, it was pious sales pitch in the service of only the commercial sponsors who paid him to advertise their products. In 1992, Kiersh wrote of Jordan: “Some condemn him for peddling expensive sneakers to impoverished black teen-agers.”

By then compensatory consumption had been replaced by something different, as Andrews and Silk discerned: “The acquisition of material goods has become so commonplace that social distinction is frequently sought” (p. 1,631). While the authors are not explicit about this, I presume they don’t understand social distinction to be just difference or excellence; perhaps a more basic human striving to express social standing or other qualities.

David Halberstam argues that Nike was the greatest beneficiary of its commercial relationship with Jordan. In 1984, the company had revenues of \$919 million and a net income of about \$40 million, and by the end of 1997, Nike’s revenues were \$9 billion, with a net of around \$800 million (pp. 412–13). Jordan had made about \$130 million from Nike at that stage. In a 1998 issue of *Fortune* magazine, Roy Johnson analysed what he called “The Jordan effect,” meaning Jordan’s impact on the overall US economy. The Air Jordan line was worth, in sales, \$5.2 billion (about £3.2 billion). For that, you could buy Manchester United, Dallas Cowboys, New York Yankees and still have enough change to snap up Jordan’s own club from 1984–98, Chicago Bulls. But, the overall value of Jordan-related sales over a 14-year period from 1984 was even more: \$10 billion (£6.16 billion).

No figure in history had moved so much merchandise as Jordan. While often described as an icon, it’s worth remembering that icons are usually regarded as representative symbols of something: manhood, for example, or freedom, or a new era, and so on. What did Jordan symbolize?

The first point to bear in mind is that, unlike any other athlete in history, Jordan was delivered to his audience gift-wrapped. “It was Nike’s commercials that made Jordan a global superstar,” Naomi Klein suspects (p. 52). There had been other gifted athletes before Jordan, though none reached what Klein calls “Jordan’s other-worldly level of fame.”

Klein isn’t questioning Jordan’s basketball prowess. But, pre-Jordan, sports stars, no matter how good or great, were athletes who happened to do advertising. They weren’t synonymous with a brand, as Jordan was. Nike changed all that: the company embarked on what Klein calls “mythmaking,” creating an aura around Jordan. “Who said man wasn’t meant to fly?” asked one of the early ads, showing the apparently gravity-defying Jordan. The other-worldliness translated

smoothly into sales. So, while other figures, such as Jesus, Che Guevara, Marilyn Monroe and Muhammad Ali were icons, none was manufactured as such. Jordan was. His iconic status was designed to sell Nike goods. But somewhere in the manufacturing process, Jordan came to symbolize a new version of blackness, what Helán E. Page, in 1997, called “embraceable male blackness,” something with which whites would feel safe.

“When we view black men in our media, their representations generally fall into two reductive, disparate categories,” revealed Ed Guerrero in 1995 (by reductive, he means presented in a simplified form). “On the one hand, we are treated to the grand celebrity spectacle of black male athletes, movie stars, and pop entertainers ... conspicuously enjoying the wealth and privilege that fuel the ordinary citizen’s material fantasies.” On the other, “we are also subjected to the real-time devastation, slaughter, and body count of a steady stream of faceless black males on the 6 and 11 o’clock news” (p. 183).

Guerrero named Jordan, along with Michael Jackson and Bill Cosby, as personifications of the former category. Jackson had, in 1993, been accused of making “sexual offensive contacts” with a 13-year-old boy. Cosby was 58 when Guerrero wrote. Jordan, at 32, was a more apposite reflection of the “grand celebrity spectacle” category.

When Thomas Oates and Judy Polumbaum conclude, “Jordan was able to escape both the patronizing and demonizing extremes often associated with black athletes,” they miss the point (p. 196). He didn’t “escape” them: he rendered them irrelevant. Here was a black man with none of the usual faults habitually associated with black men; in fact, no faults at all. He didn’t talk politics and his comments about the condition of black people were anodyne. Rasheed Z. Baaith condensed Jordan’s philosophy thus: “Get the money, don’t say anything substantial and, for heaven’s sake, never offend white people” (p. 8).

Nike didn’t want Jordan to upset *anybody*. That was the whole point: his embraceable quality was intended to be good for all groups, male and female, black and white, old and young. So why, eight years after Jordan’s 2003 retirement, did Nike re-sign Vick, a black athlete whose transgressions would appear to make him not just “unembraceable,” but detestable? The answer is the arrival of an enthusiasm for clothes, hairstyles, music and language that had their origins in the American ghetto.

Sports. Where else could you find the irresistible combination of charismatically athletic black men bounteously rewarded for their muscular skills with every toy and stimulant they desired, regressing as if ordained by nature to a more primitive stage of evolution?

In 2007, just after charges were filed against Vick, Steve Visser, an *Atlanta Journal Constitution* journalist, talked to Vick’s neighbors, one of whom invoked an old adage to characterize the football player and his well-to-do friends who

enthused over dogfighting. “They moved out of the ghetto, but the ghetto is still in them” (July 19, p. 3B). Think about this saying for a while. Is it uttered in contempt, disrespect, and disgust? Or in empathy, as a way of expressing commiseration with others’ inability to rid themselves of what nature endowed? Or is it smugness that colors the sentiment: a sneering satisfaction deriving from the thought that the same gift that brought them their extravagant talent and all the worldly excesses also tethered them to their instincts?

Recall how rap music, once acerbic and challenging, was domesticated in a way that made it exploitable: commodified forms of the black experience were delivered via downloads to consumers’ MP3 players, smartphones or tablets. Andrews and Silk argue that the same logic guided basketball and, to push their argument, other American sports. Andrews and Silk describe this as ghettocentric logic, but they don’t define it. So let me try: the systematic use of symbolic qualities and principles thought to originate from the viewpoint of people living in black ghettos. While the authors witness its pervasion in basketball, I see it everywhere. In music, cinema, tv shows, advertising – practically all aspects of contemporary culture are affected by “street” or “urban,” both terms that thrum with blackness. Not an imagined blackness, either: a commodity that can be consumed from the comparative safety of the bleachers or your favorite armchair, or even while driving.

Jordan provided a new coding for blackness, in the sense that he assigned a meaning that was unusual and surprising: a black man that had none of the usual pathological flaws and did pretty much as whites did – except he played better ball and earned much more money. The trouble was, it contained none of the frisson of the older codes. There was no thrill or fear attached to Jordan. Nor the danger and satisfaction of watching high-earners succumb to the base instincts of their race, or the resurgence of an unruly, primitive force capable of destroying everything conferred by civilized society. Were Jordan to emerge as a prodigiously promising college player in 2012, the likes of Nike wouldn’t be twisting his arm to sign endorsement deals; at least not unless he demonstrated a capability for being bad as well as good. He lacked the capacity for regression. And here we’re reminded once more of the importance of context: time, place, events that precede and follow and circumstances that form settings for ideas and action – all these influence how we understand and assess practically anything. Imagine, for example, how Mike Tyson (b.1966) would be understood today.

In the late 1980s, early 1990s, Tyson was universally acknowledged the best heavyweight boxer for three decades. His almost primeval ferocity took him from his native Brooklyn streets, where he was a habitual young offender, to one of the most famous men on earth with career earnings from sport estimated at \$500 million (£300 million). He had no education to speak of, had little interest in engaging with the media and, when he did, spoke often gauchely. “I try to catch him right on the tip of the nose, because I try to push

the bone into the brain,” he famously described a punching technique. In 1986, when, at 20, he won the first of three world heavyweight titles, he had no peers. He was unbeaten in 23 fights and seemed set to dominate heavyweight boxing for the next decade. By the end of 1987, he had added two more heavyweight titles and could lay claim to being the most fêted sportsman in the world. PepsiCo, in an uncharacteristically intrepid move, signed Tyson to feature in commercials for Diet Pepsi in 1988. In 1984, the soft drinks company had paid Michael Jackson \$6 million to make two commercials, and sales response had presumably convinced PepsiCo that black celebrity endorsements were value for money.

Then came signs of regression. Tyson’s marriage to tv star Robin Givens was an ill-starred liaison, a domestic psychodrama often played out in full public view. He got involved in scrapes with the police, nightclub brawls, and undignified episodes with women. His boxing suffered and he was beaten for the first time in 1989 in one of the biggest upsets in sports history (his victor, Buster Douglas, was a 42-1 underdog). In July 1991 he was accused of raping Desiree Washington, a Miss Black America contestant he had met while judging the pageant. On March 26, 1992, after nearly a year of trial proceedings, Tyson was found guilty on one count of rape and two counts of deviant sexual conduct: he was sentenced to six years’ imprisonment. A poll, taken shortly before Tyson’s release from prison, found 71 percent of black people considered the rape charge false, while just 33 percent of whites thought so. Tyson served three years and was released in March 1995, still three months from his 29th birthday and young enough to resume his boxing career.

No longer an intimidating force, Tyson struggled against the very best and lost unexpectedly to Evander Holyfield. The rematch earned Tyson \$30 million and Holyfield \$35 million, by far the biggest purse in boxing history (not exceeded until 2007). In the fight for which Tyson is best remembered, his true nature seemed to reappear, this time red in tooth and claw. During the fight, frustrated at his opponent’s persistent headbutts, Tyson bit a chunk from Holyfield’s ear and was disqualified. He was later fined \$3 million and banned from boxing by the Nevada State Athletic Commission. The next several years of Tyson’s life were spent leaping from one crisis to another. His troubles with the law continued, his domestic life remained in perpetual turmoil and, to compound matters, he was broke – he filed for bankruptcy in 2003. Somehow, he had managed to blow a half-billion dollars and still end up owing about \$11 million in tax. He last fought professionally in 2005, a few days before his 39th birthday.

Appearances in movies, such as *The Hangover*, ensured he stayed in the public eye, though a tame Tyson had far less *appeal* than the terrifying beast. I emphasize *appeal* because Tyson was not a popular figure, at least not across the spectrum. He had his supporters among both African Americans and whites, but, of course, convicted rapists who cannibalize rivals in sports

arenas rarely register much of an approval rating. Which is not to say that Tyson did not fascinate virtually everyone. He was a mesmerizing character, who attracted people perhaps as Joice Heth had in the nineteenth century: as a freak of nature.

This was an African American who had dragged himself off the streets and taken advantage of the only conceivable edge nature had given him. He worked like a demon to refine that natural benefit into a tangible advantage and, for a while, had riches beyond his own imagination and a status superior to most rock and movie stars. He had everything, including a glamorous Hollywood wife. And what did he do? Revert to something like an early stage of the evolutionary scale. Early in his career, when people would admire the bestial manner in which he savaged opponents, they presumably thought this was a side to Tyson he confined to the ring. Later, they realized this was a kind of microcosm of the man: he wasn't just like a beast, he *was* a beast.

As his film career indicated, Tyson was, and probably had been for several years, an actor. On his release from prison, he may have sensed that his image was the only thing he had left worth anything. His ring skills were in steep decline and his motivation had long since receded. But he knew his market. Asked to discuss his tactics against an upcoming opponent, Tyson promised, "I'll eat his babies!" He played the beast.

On September 7, 1996, Tyson entered the boxing arena to the sound of "Wrote the glory," a track written in his honor and performed by his friend and fellow New Yorker Tupac Shakur (1971–96), who was in the crowd at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas when Tyson beat Bruce Seldon. At the time Tupac was one of, if not the leading rap artist in the world. He'd spent time in prison for assault, and had himself been victim of an attack, getting shot five times in the lobby of a recording studio during a mugging. He'd also been convicted of a sexual offense. They were the street credentials of a true gangsta rapper.

In 1997, John Hoberman wrote: "The Black male style has become incarnated in the fusion of Black athletes, rapper, and criminals into a single menacing figure" (p. xix). Tyson, like Tupac, was a body part of that figure.

After the Tyson fight, Tupac was shot. He died six days later; his killer has never been caught, though the murder was assumed to be part of the feud between East and West Coast rap that accounted for the life of Biggie Smalls, as I noted earlier. In 1994, Tupac had released an album *Thug Life, vol. 1*, much of its material rugged, expletive-charged disquisitions on the black experience, the culture of criminality with its own moral code and its own values. Tupac was a denizen of Thug Life and, in his way, so was Tyson. They were both representative of an aspect of black America that was both repugnant and enticing. The mixture elicited guiltsploitation, the interest of whites in what they took to be authentic aspects of the black experience.

Let me illustrate this. In Barbet Schroeder's 1995 remake of the movie *Kiss of Death*, Little Junior, an utterly dislikable villain, prepares to beat an enemy to

death by zipping up a protective suit to keep the blood off his white tracksuit. The scene offers a way of understanding the secret power of guiltsploitation – the exploitation of white guilt for profit. Imagine that, every so often in the mid- and late 1990s, whites clothed themselves in waterproofs and ventured into the ghettos, where they confront blacks, still angry at whites' historical sins. The ghetto residents then exact their revenge by urinating over the well-protected whites. Cowering under the cataracts, whites observe studiously, admiring the arc, color, even the smell of the urine. Once returned safely to their own neighborhoods, they shed their wax clothing, shower and discuss the experience. So goes a fable of the 1990s.

Blacks wore menacing masks, scowled at lot and made noises that suggested they were boiling with rage. Whites liked to glare, though without actually doing anything – apart from spending money, of course. Both virtually countenanced it, at the same time keeping their distance from one another. Tyson, like Tupac, was a harbinger of what Andrews and Silk call, “the commodified, yet seemingly individualistic, performance of alterity” (p. 1,632). By alterity, they mean the state of being different: Otherness.

They seemed to challenge, but actually offered comfort. Comfort, that is, in knowing that, in America in the 1990s, anybody could make it. Even the most poverty-stricken kids from the projects could become millionaires several times over and enjoy the respect of everyone. But what happens when you cover them with praise and fill their bank accounts?

“They moved out of the ghetto ... ”

In the early 2000s, “ghettocentric logic” crept into basketball and other American sports. Andrews and Silk detect that, after the Jordan era, in which the NBA became a respectable mainstream sport populated by carefully managed “nonthreatening” figures, there was a shift in sensibility. Tastes and aesthetic influences changed, giving rise to a demand for more authentic and perhaps exotic expressions of blackness than those provided by the virtuous Jordan. Tyson and the other dangerous characters offered serious alternatives, but they were ahead their own time. The transitional figure was Kobe Bryant.

A CNN/USA *Today*/Gallup poll conducted in July and August 2003 discovered that about 63 percent of African Americans felt sympathetic to Bryant, at that time facing charges of sexual assault, compared to 40 percent of whites. The consistency with similar polls taken at the time of the O.J. Simpson and Tyson cases is striking yet predictable. Whereas 68 percent of blacks believed the charges against Bryant were false, only 41 percent of whites saw it that way, reported Patrick O'Driscoll and Tom Kenworthy of *USA Today* in August 2003.

Bryant, the Los Angeles Lakers' guard, was eventually found not guilty of sexual assault. He had been accused by a white woman of raping her when she

was 19 and, if convicted, faced four years to life in prison. His widely reported reply was: "I didn't force her to do anything against her will." The case against him collapsed in 2004 when she refused to testify against him the day before the criminal case was due to start. Bryant later settled a civil lawsuit with the woman, though the terms were never disclosed.

Bryant was, in many ways, the antithesis of the stereotype black sportsman. Raised in Italy and in the suburbs of Philadelphia, he progressed through basketball without any of the histrionics that typically accompany a black athlete's ascent. No fights, drugs, wild parties, or any of the usual revelry associated with top-flight athletes. If anyone could take over the immaculate mantle of Michael Jordan, it was Bryant. His clean-cut image made him a favorite with advertisers: he had contracts with Nike, McDonalds, Nutella, and Sprite. But the accusation left grubby fingerprints and, while Bryant continued to play for the Lakers, his image was soiled. Coca-Cola pulled his Sprite ads and McDonalds announced that it would not be renewing its contract with Bryant.

As with O.J. Simpson, being cleared of all charges seemed to be of less significance than the initial smear. In 1995, during Simpson's murder trial, two-thirds of whites believed the charges against him were true, while just about one-quarter of blacks concurred. Fifty-five per cent of black respondents said they thought the charges were false; one-fifth of whites answered the same.

The Bryant case "reveals the centrality of race in both the adoration and condemnation of contemporary Black athletes," for David J. Leonard (p. 286). In his 2004 article, Leonard points out how "the simultaneous adoration of Black athletes and entertainers" legitimizes "claims of colorblindness" (p. 286). He means whites' enthusiastic admiration for, if not idolization of, the likes of Bryant and – to use Leonard's example – Denzel Washington permits and justifies their insistence that race or ethnicity are no longer relevant. People are evaluated solely on ability, or talent.

Because of the history of sports, black athletes, more than entertainers, "not only elucidate the fulfillment of the American Dream but also America's imagined racial progress" (p. 288). Leonard means prominent African American figures from sport help clarify or make clear America's advance to a colorblind or postracial society because they operate and excel in a sphere where race is not germane. Yet his argument has echoes of Guerrero's: the attention and values sports stars receive tend to "overshadow the realities of segregated schools, police brutality, unemployment, and the White supremacist criminal justice system" (p. 289).

Leonard goes even further, marshaling evidence from history and other scholars to contend: "Blackness within dominant society and within the world of sports represents a sign of decay, disorder, and danger" (p. 299).

Bryant's celebrity status earned him the kind of honor conferred on Jordan and, before him, Jackie Robinson, reasons Leonard: "The public assumed that Kobe had transcended his Blackness" (p. 301). Like the other

black sports stars, Bryant lost his blackness, but only temporarily and, as it turned out, conditionally. Once accused of a serious felony compounded by a sexual element and multiply-compounded by the accuser's ethnic status, the "White imagination" re-engineered Bryant's status; in other words, he became both black and Other, a term I've used before to denote distinctness from or opposition to whiteness. Bryant became just like the mythological black criminally inclined, hypersexual predators, or, as Leonard puts it, "another Black athlete" (p. 307).

Jonathan Markovitz is broadly in sympathy with this view. He reckons public understanding of Bryant was filtered through memories over decades, even centuries. America's racial history bore on the case, as Markovitz states: "The Bryant case cannot be understood without grappling with ways in which collective memories of racist violence and sexist injustice were constructed" (p. 397). While neither he nor Leonard mentions it, shortly before Mike Tyson's release from prison after serving three years for the rape of a Miss Black America entrant, most African Americans still believed the rape charge was false. Only one-third of whites agreed, as we saw earlier.

Both of these arguments were framed in the two years following Bryant's settlement in 2004. They may have seemed plausible at the time, though, in 2006, Bryant was rated the seventh-most popular athlete in America, and, by 2010, he emerged as "America's favorite athlete." Bryant tied with Tiger Woods for top spot, though got pushed into third position a year later when New York Yankees' Derek Jeter took the laurels. Far from being demonized, Bryant was consistently one of the most popular sports stars.

Bryant sidestepped a recurring cycle: African American athlete blessed with an abundance of natural athletic talent draws the loud and enthusiastic acclamation of everyone, especially sports fans, earns as much as the annual turnover of a national gym chain, and acquires a celebrity status on a par with top movie or rock stars; *then* gets enmeshed in action that arouses moral distaste and contempt and winds up either in prison, or near it, and watches his stock plummet.

Bryant did get close and America is not usually forgiving. Had his case been five years earlier, there would have been no forgiveness at all. What Leonard and Markovitz fail to take into consideration is that, by 2003, ghettocentric logic had pervaded sports and many other aspects of popular culture. Writing in 2008 for the *New York Press*, Armond White considered the wide-reaching effects of the enthusiasm for commodified black culture. "More Americans come to identify with black figures than ever before," he concluded. "They [the black figures] are stars who charm rather than challenge."

Days before the allegations against him were made public, Bryant signed an endorsement contract valued at about \$40 million with Nike. At the time,

Jordan was still under a contract, which would earn him \$47 million over five years, and LeBron James, the basketball player, held a seven-year, \$90 million contract. But Nike's *pièce de résistance* was a five-year deal contract worth \$99 million with Tiger Woods.

Wood's strength, as benefits a broad-spectrum athlete whose appeal spanned all demographics, was in painting his image on a wide canvas and letting us splash goodness, cleanness and wellness all over. His weakness had the same source; given the chance, we daubed the canvas with seediness, licentiousness and the by-now-familiar trait associated with black athletes: regression. Nike signed Woods to the record-breaking endorsement contract in 2002 to help the company break into the lucrative golf equipment market. By 2008, golf accounted for nearly \$725 million in sales, dropping to \$648 million in 2009, but still enough to make the Woods contract good business.

On November 25, 2009, the *National Enquirer* carried news that the married Woods had been seeing a New York nightclub hostess, and that the pair had recently been spotted in Melbourne while Woods was playing in the Australian Masters tournament. At 2:25 a.m. on Friday, November 27, 2009, Woods backed out of the drive of his home in a gated community near Orlando and drove off, crashing into a fire hydrant and a neighbor's tree. There he lay unconscious until his wife emerged with a golf club, with which she smashed the car window before rescuing her husband. There were initial fears for his career after reports that he had sustained serious injuries. They were well founded.

It's unlikely that any reader will not know of the ensuing *cause célèbre*. But, just in case, here is a simplified timeline (for a more detailed alternative: <http://bit.ly/-WoodsTimeline>).

November 29, 2009: In a statement released on his website, Woods maintains the accident is a private matter and that his wife "acted courageously;" he describes all other "unfounded and malicious rumors" as "irresponsible."

December 1, 2009: Jaimee Grubbs, a cocktail waitress, alleges a several-year affair with Woods; she claims to have pertinent photos and text messages.

December 2, 2009: Woods apologizes on his website for his "transgressions," but expresses dismay at the tabloid coverage.

December 11, 2009: In a statement posted on his website, Woods admits to and apologizes for his infidelity and announces "an indefinite hiatus" from competitive golf.

December 12, 2009: Gillette reduces exposure of Woods in its advertising.

December 13, 2009: Accenture announces it will end its sponsorship agreement with Woods.

December 14, 2009: Nike and Electronic Arts confirm their continued support of Woods.

December 18, 2009: TAGHEUER announces it will not continue to use Woods' image in its advertising.

December 31, 2009: AT&T announces it will no longer sponsor Woods.

January 16, 2010: Woods is reported to have checked-in as a patient at Pine Grove Behavioral Health and Addiction Services, in Jackson, Mississippi, for treatment of sexually compulsive behavior.

February 5, 2010: Woods checks out of rehab and is collected by his wife, Elin Nordegren.

February 19, 2010: Woods appears in public and affirms he will play golf again.

February 26, 2010: Gatorade ends its commercial relationship with Woods.

April 2, 2010: Woods' wife walks out on him and spends two nights away from their Orlando home.

April 8, 2010: Woods returns to competition at the Masters.

July 21, 2010: Woods remains the richest sportsman in the world, earning a reported \$105m in the previous year, according to *Forbes*.

August 23, 2010: Nordegren divorces Woods.

October 31, 2010: Woods loses the world number one ranking to Lee Westwood.

March 21, 2011: Woods is seen with Alyse Lahti Johnston, a 22-year-old aspiring golf pro.

May, 2011: Despite struggling to win tournaments and the absence of new endorsements, Woods continues to be the world's highest-earning athlete; this is, according to *Forbes*, mostly attributable to "two sponsors that stuck with him: Nike and Electronic Arts."

July 25, 2011: Woods drops out of the top 20 in the world rankings for the first time since January 1997.

Throughout the sequence of events, Woods' reputation mutated. Lurid tales of hush money, porn stars, and gambling circulated widely, each new story contributing to a new conception of a celebrity whose every attempt to avoid publicity caused exactly the opposite reaction. But would it be accurate to describe Woods' travails as a Fall, whether of Man, from grace, or to pieces?

In 2010, an unpublished report by Kevin Chung et al., of Carnegie Mellon University, concluded: "Nike's decision to stand by Tiger Woods was the right decision because even in the midst of the scandal, the overall profit was greater by \$1.6 million for Nike with Tiger Woods than without him" (p. 1). It's possible that Nike's experiences with Bryant had been salutary: in June 2003, a few weeks before Bryant was charged with sexual assault, Nike signed him to a five-year deal valued at \$45 million. It could have invoked a clause in the contract to escape its obligations, but it stood firm. In February 2006, Nike launched the first of its Zoom Kobe range of footwear; in the following year, it extended Bryant's contract and expanded the Zoom Kobe range. The lesson? Scandals, even scandals involving sex, that would have proved ruinous to a black man's marketability as recently as the end of the 1990s, were not so disastrous in the 2000s.

Ghettocentric logic was coursing through popular culture. Maybe Nike considered Woods' philandering added devilry to a hitherto sanctimonious character, thus making him more congruent with "urban African American experiences and associated aesthetics," as Andrews and Silk put it (p. 1,627). The sex scandal changed the way consumers engaged with Woods, but it certainly didn't jettison him to obscurity. If anything it just made him *blacker*, meaning it rescued him from his status as a goody-goody, an obtrusively virtuous figure, who looked like a black man but didn't talk, act, or dress like one – and never owned up to being one. Or perhaps it just made him appear more of a human, replete with the usual flaws and fallibilities.

"Tiger coerced no child, copped no plea, jumped no bail, whacked no white woman," JoAnn Wypijewski reminded her readers. "He had merely to bust up the prison of his own image, and ... became 'the new O.J.'" (p. 7). Or did he? "The new Kobe" might be more accurate: remember, in July 2010, shortly after his return to competition and just before his divorce, he shared with Bryant the distinction of being America's most popular sports star. In escaping "prison," Woods lost his uniqueness, but found universality.

When he won his first major in 1997, America was feeling the effects of *The Declining Significance of Race*, as William Julius Wilson called it. During the 1980s, the Reagan administration appeared to hasten the trend towards insignificance, reining back race-specific policy and entrusting equal opportunity to the market. Occasional incidents were interpreted as isolated episodes rather than reflections of continuing historical unease. The Rodney King beating and the subsequent riots disclosed a less propitious image of America. Rap music supplied what Pero Gaglo Dagbovie calls "personal histories of resilience, which mirror the overall theme of perseverance against the oppression that dominates the African American experience" (p. 301). So, in many sense, Woods' appearance was as a *deus ex machina* – an unexpected arrival saving an apparently disintegrating situation.

By the end of 2009, when the sex scandal erupted, Barack Obama was in office. Halle Berry was the year's winner of the Oscar for Best Actress. Kanye West was the best-selling male recording artist. Rapper 50 Cent had launched his own clothing range known as G Unit. Far from being a passage to oblivion, Woods' transgression, to use his own description, was a route to humanity. But it was also a sign of regression.

Imagine Nike owner Phil Knight's reaction if Woods had walked into his office in 1997, spread out the Tarot cards, and turned over the one depicting a tower – not a good omen. Knight (b.1983) was, indeed is, a man who plays whatever he's dealt. He started selling athletic shoes out of the trunk of his car in 1964 and built a business with a market capitalization of \$41.43 billion (£26 billion) by 2011; he did so not so much by responding to market demand, but by creating new demands. Woods may have divined the future and told Knight that, after over a decade of purity and integrity, he, or rather the media,

would defile his image. “No problem,” Knight would probably have laughed. “By then there will be ... let’s call it ‘the new black.’ The popular image of blackness will have changed to the point where, to be popular, black people won’t have to conform to either the timeworn image of the gifted but savage brute, or the equally gifted saint.”

The two images still evoke memories, of course. But sport’s African American *dramatis personae* are no longer forced into roles scripted in slavery and played out for decades after. They’re living, breathing people with similar kinds of beauty and grotesqueries as everyone else. But there’s satisfaction in watching nature reassert itself over nurture, daring onlookers to smile at the triumph of base instincts over civilized manners. This is surely what White has in mind when he perceives “charm rather than challenge” in prominent black figures. Charm is the quality of giving delight or arousing satisfaction through the fulfillment of expectations. Extraordinary athletes with extraordinary flaws.

Nike didn’t go sentimentally moral when it offered Michael Vick a contract that practically certified his re-admission into the celebrity pantheon: it made a sound business decision, an acknowledgment that there was value in an imposing athlete who had all the money and adulation he could have wanted and, in sports terms, had the world at his feet, but who found it impossible to eradicate a defect sown by nature. “They moved out of the ghetto, but the ghetto is still in them.”