

**Tiger Woods at the Center of History:  
Looking Back at the Twentieth Century through the Lenses of Race, Sports, and Mass  
Consumption**

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*Can't you see the pattern?* Earl Woods asks. *Can't you see the signs?* "Tiger will do more than any other man in history to change the course of humanity," Earl says.

*Sports* history, Mr. Woods? Do you mean more than Joe Louis and Jackie Robinson, more than Muhammad Ali and Arthur Ashe? "More than any of them because he's more charismatic, more educated, more prepared for this than anyone."

*Anyone*, Mr. Woods? Your son will have more impact than Nelson Mandela, more than Gandhi, more than Buddha?

"Yes, because he has a larger forum than any of them. Because he's playing a sport that's international. Because he's qualified through his ethnicity to accomplish miracles. He's the bridge between the East and the West. There is no limit because he has the guidance. I don't know yet exactly what form this will take. But he is the Chosen One. He'll have the power to impact nations. Not people. *Nations*. The world is just getting a taste of his power."<sup>1</sup>

These quotes from Earl Woods, concerning the World Historical role that his son Tiger would eventually perform, struck most people as bordering on the insane when they were first published in a 1996 issue of *Sports Illustrated*. The grandiosity of a man declaiming that his son, in swinging a thin metal stick at a small white ball, would "impact nations" and change the course of history, strikes us as somewhat absurd, and it certainly struck most observers at the time as being the demented musings of a somewhat crazed parent. Yes, Tiger Woods was at the center of world news at the time,

having won the Masters golf tournament and enjoying tens of millions of dollars in corporate endorsements from companies such as American Express and Nike. Much of the news centered either upon his imagined breaking of racial barriers—just as Jackie Robinson had desegregated baseball after World War II, Tiger would open up the overwhelmingly white country club world of golf. Other stories focused upon Nike's fantasies for Tiger of global markets for its clothing and shoes. But being a news event was not the same as being the next Messiah; after all, Tiger would not save our mortal souls, he would just help Nike sell us a new pair of soles at \$150 each.

It might be interesting, however, to play a little with the notion that Earl Woods might not have been all that crazy, that perhaps in some fascinating way he really was right, that Tiger Woods--like the painter David's portrait of Napoleon on Horseback--really might be a figure of World Historical importance, an unwitting manifestation of a major change in History. I ask for your indulgence, therefore, to consider in this essay how Earl Woods might have been right, that Tiger Woods might really be considered somehow to be at the Center of History.

The study of the history of sports, a subject garnering little respect two decades ago, has come of age. Partially this has been due to the increasing number of high quality scholars who have built the field and who have placed it upon solid foundations in interdisciplinary enterprises such as American Studies and Cultural Studies, as well as in traditional disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, history, and English literature. But the scholarly importance of understanding sports has also been generated because of large-scale historical developments in the twentieth century. Without understanding how sports changed during the last century--from a set of bodily practices shaped by rhetorical claims of escape from the drudgery of work, to a central institution in the spread of global entertainment and leisure industries--historians will have missed one of the central social transformations of twentieth century history.

My aim in this essay is not to survey the burgeoning fields of sports studies, nor is it to offer future directions for studying the history of sports; rather, I will sketch a few broad developments in twentieth-century history, outlining how interpreting sports as a part of that history is analytically, pedagogically, and aesthetically compelling. This essay, in other words, is an argument that sports can be useful for thinking and teaching the history of the twentieth century. In addition, the sheer

excitement of understanding sports, a major part of why many academics disdain sports studies, results from the recognition of the central place of sports in the historical changes of the twentieth century. Incorporating the story of sports into our historical narratives is to have a more persuasive synthesis that explains key developments.

This essay will use the recurring example of professional golfer Tiger Woods as a way to sketch some of these changes in the history of the twentieth century. I am not arguing (unlike his father Earl Woods in the quote above) that Tiger Woods as an individual has actually changed the course of history. However, there are reasons that make Woods an interesting example beyond his utility as a recognizable and accessible explanatory device. When Woods left Stanford University in 1996 to become a professional golfer, the widespread confusion over his racial status was highly revealing, and analyzing the difficulties that Americans had in classifying Woods tells us much about transformations in concepts of race and culture during the twentieth century. Understanding how Tiger Woods came to possess such a complicated body also helps illustrate the very complex migrations and movements of human bodies around the globe that marked twentieth-century life. Furthermore, making sense of why Tiger Woods was so loudly heralded as a savior for golf--and at times for America and for the world--helps trace the changing politics of racial difference. That Tiger Woods was given in 1996 a \$37 million dollar endorsement contract from Nike before he ever played in a single professional golf tournament is a fact that can only be understood within a long-term history involving the increasing importance of entertainment and leisure industries, and the expanding reach of corporate business institutions in the social, economic, and political life of the United States. Tiger Woods's very existence, therefore, is the consequence of the transformations in twentieth-century history that this essay addresses.<sup>2</sup>

In this essay, I will make three points: 1) how contemporary descriptions of cultural difference retain many of the problems of older languages of biological race; 2) how the end of race-based conflict in the United States has been constantly imagined as an act of individual redemption, blinding Americans to the structural bases of racial hierarchy; and 3) how sports and celebrity have become powerful economic and political commodities with the rise of the entertainment industries. As an introduction, I will describe quickly how sports is also one of the best ways to understand the broad

transformation that occurred during the twentieth-century in bodily practices defined as work versus play. Therefore, let us begin with the question of why sports is supposed to be "fun" and not a serious activity.

Much of the lingering disdain for studying sports is itself a legacy of the early twentieth-century idea that sports was a leisure time activity to be indulged outside of the earnest hours of the industrial work day. Therefore, if sports was a fun activity, how could it be the subject for serious study? However, this ideal of sports as a transcendence or an opting out of industrial time--and the related assumption about intellectual production as a form of rigorous, professional work--was rooted in a particular historical period. Narratives of twentieth-century history that neglect later transformations in sports also miss important changes in the meaning of industrial time, of bodily practices, of what constitutes paid labor, and of what are valuable commodities in an expanding global market. The Olympic movement at the end of the nineteenth century, for instance, was founded on the ideal of amateur athletics. At the time, amateur sports almost exclusively involved men of privilege whose wealth meant they did not have to exchange labor for money, and therefore their sporting activities were practices exempt from monetary transactions.<sup>3</sup> Early events like equestrian clearly reflected the class basis of Olympic sports--the wealthy could afford to own and ride horses. Even when events like riding and rifle shooting could be connected to the criteria of military prowess (rather than the exclusively noble sport of hunting), they were still the accomplishments of gentlemanly officers. Although the United States seemed to have no hereditary nobility such as in Europe, it was from the ranks of the upper social classes that early Olympic participants were drawn. Rowing had long been an activity associated with student crew races between the gentlemen of Oxford and Cambridge, and in the United States elite students at Harvard and Yale had taken up oars in the mid-19th century in explicit imitation.<sup>4</sup>

The opposition between serious work and play time was therefore the product of a particular historical moment, when the bodily activities of paid laborers were in explicit opposition to the leisurely, unpaid, and thus amateur, activities of the privileged elite. In the United States, the amateur ideal quickly spread and became egalitarian in practice as well as in principle. By the early decades of the twentieth century American athletes from impoverished roots had achieved fame by representing the United States,

their achievements often gained despite great obstacles. Non-white athletes, such as African Americans track stars Jesse Owens and Wilma Rudolph and Native American long distance runner Jim Ryun became popular symbols of how people could seemingly overcome racism through sheer talent and hard work. The amateur ideal, however, often worked against such lower class athletes, since they were not allowed to accept any financial reward for their talent. The famous example is Owens, who lost his amateur status because he was paid for such spectacles as sprinting against horses.

One of the major transformations of the twentieth century in the United States was the blurring of the dichotomy between work and play, so that on the one hand, sports increasingly became a professional, paid form of labor, and on the other hand labor became commonly idealized as an activity that should be "fun" or intrinsically rewarding--in other words, like sports. Although the difference between work and leisure remained, the character of the bodily practices that marked each type of activity began to resemble each other. Today, people finished with their day job pay to "work out," mirroring the laborious lifting and exertion that in the nineteenth century would be disdainfully considered the exclusive province of wage laborers. Similarly, professional athletes are paid millions of dollars to perform in games that almost all would admit they would play for free.

Therefore, the early period of sports reflected a time when labor was a paid activity wrenched by financial coercion from the bodies of those who needed the money to live, and play was either the exclusive domain of those who did not have to work, or the precious leisure time of workers when their bodily practices were not leased by others. This was the relationship of human labor to production and leisure that Karl Marx described so astutely in the mid-nineteenth century. The twentieth-century saw a remarkable transition in the United States and other advanced capitalist nations from a bifurcated world where work was work and play was play, to one where the difference between work and play seemed much less clear. Whether in the realms of sports, leisure, recreation, or any of the myriad forms of entertainment industries, playing now seems the product of much hard work.

This is not to say that the privilege of working at something fun is at all widespread. Increasingly, the hard work necessary to provide for and support the playful activities of Americans is being performed in faraway or hidden places, whether

those be the sweatshops of Southeast Asia or East Los Angeles. The development of the industrial order of mass consumption in the twentieth century, and the centrality of leisure and entertainment activities such as sports, is crucial for understanding how these transformations in ideas of work and play connect to larger historical changes. The global expansion of capitalism (sandwiched around the anomalous period of the Cold War), has been marked by the spread of a distinction between work and play which has helped justify the social hierarchies of capitalism. No matter how much it seems that working is now less onerous, and playing is in the province of more and more people, one's play is still inevitably at the expense of someone else's work.

In addition, the hierarchy between those who work so that others can play has been marked by transnational connections, so that work performed in one nation is connected to the leisure of someone in another. One of the prominent recent examples, for instance, in the connection of play in the United States with work elsewhere has been the controversy over the low-wage labor, usually young women in Vietnam, Indonesia, or Southern China, who make products for the American sportswear company Nike. Nike's multibillion dollar sales were fueled by famous athletes such as Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods, who endorsed their products. In trying to understand the phenomenon of Tiger Woods, we can come to realize how it is that the fantasy of racial fair play on the golf courses of America came to be so intimately tied to sweatshop labor on the other side of the world.<sup>5</sup>

### **When Tiger Woods Lost His Stripes, or, How We're Forced to Capture a World of Color Using Black and White Film**

As the summer waned in 1996, the world was treated to the coronation of a new public hero. Eldrick "Tiger" Woods, the twenty-year-old golf prodigy, captured his third straight amateur championship and then promptly declared his intention to turn professional. The story became an American media sensation, transferring the material of sports page headlines to the front page of newspapers in a way usually reserved for World Series championships or athletes involved in sex and drug scandals. Television coverage chronicled every step of Tiger's life, debating his impact upon the sport and wondering if he was worth the millions of dollars which Nike and other companies

such as Titleist and American Express were going to pay him for an endorsement contract.

Tiger Woods's eagerly anticipated professional debut was hailed in August 1996 as a multicultural godsend to the sport of golf. As a child of multiracial heritage, Woods added color to a sport that was traditionally preserved for those who were white and rich. For its very significance as a bastion of hierarchy, golf had also become a marker of the opposition to racial and class exclusion. Similar to how Jackie Robinson's entry into baseball symbolized for Americans more than just the eventual desegregation of baseball but also that of American society, Wood's entry into golf was heralded as the entry of multiculturalism into the highest reaches of country club America.<sup>6</sup> A multi-colored Tiger in hues of black and yellow would forever change the complexion of golf, attracting American inner-city children to the game in the same way in which Micheal Jordan had done for basketball.

The manner in which observers initially explained Tiger's potential appeal was revealing. A *Los Angeles Times* article on 27 August 1996, the day after Woods turned pro, declared that Tiger had a "rich ethnic background," calculating that his father was "a quarter Native American, a quarter Chinese and half African American," and that his mother was "half Thai, a quarter Chinese and a quarter white." How did we arrive at these fractions of cultural identity? Did they imply that he practiced his multicultural heritage in such a fractured manner, eating chow mein one day out of four, soul food on one of the other days, and pad Thai noodles once a week? Obviously not. The exactness of the ethnic breakdown referred to the purported biological ancestry of Woods's parents and grandparents.

The racial calculus employed by both print and television reporters to explain Tiger's heritage harked uncomfortably to earlier biological classifications. Southern law courts tried for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to calculate a person's racial make-up in the same precise manner, classifying people as a mulatto if they were half-white and half-black, a quadroon if they were a quarter black, an octoroon if an eighth, and so on. The assumption was that blood and race could be broken down into precise fractions, tying a person's present existence in a racially segregated society with a person's purported biological ancestry. A single drop of black blood made a person

colored, and no amount of white blood could overwhelm that single drop to make a person pure again.<sup>7</sup>

Within historical and contemporary conceptions of race, Tiger Woods was African American. The intricate racial calculus that broke Tiger into all manner of stripes and hues was a farce not only in terms of its facile exactitude, but also in its purported complexity. According to the calculations, Tiger Woods is more Asian American than African American (a quarter Chinese on the father's side, plus a quarter Chinese and a half Thai on the mother's side, for a total of one half Asian in Tiger, versus only half African American on the father's side, for a total of one quarter black in Tiger...)<sup>8</sup> But this is an empty equation because social usage, and the major market appeal of Tiger, classified him as black.

The awkward attempts to describe Woods's heritage bear the legacy of Old South notions of race, but they also arose from the nineteenth-century context of massive international labor migration.<sup>9</sup> The rise and triumph of the concept of culture at the beginning of the twentieth century supposedly eclipsed earlier biological definitions of race, but in some ways the idea of culture is little more than the grafting of non-biological claims onto pre-existing categories of race.

Theories of biological race that arose in the nineteenth century emphasized belonging to some fictive category (for instance Negroid, Mongoloid, Caucasoid) that collapsed racial type and geographical location. This mythic tie between race and spatial location called forth an epic history stretching back to prehistoric ancestors, tying racial difference to origins deep in time. We still operate with a version of this classificatory scheme when we identify some physical features as "Asian" (straight black hair) and others as "African" (brown skin) or "European" (light skin).<sup>10</sup> For much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, racial theories that attributed variations in behavior and in physical and mental abilities to biological differences served as justification for social oppression and hierarchy.

An anthropological conception of culture that came to the fore in the early twentieth century redefined variety in human behavior and practice as a consequence of social processes. Meant to eliminate any association of mental capacity with biological race, the theory of culture proved relatively successful as a way of attacking biological justifications for social hierarchy. The culture concept, however, has



mirrored the suppositions of racial theories about the centrality of biological ties to the past. Particularly in the way differences in behavior between people whose ancestors have come from Africa or Asia or Europe have been explained as cultural in origin, cultural difference has paralleled the boundaries of earlier definitions of racial difference.

Created by anthropologists visiting exotic locales, culture as an intellectual concept has always been riven by the contradiction that it has come to be an *object* of description (the actual practices of various 'cultures') at the same time that it has really only been the *description* of practices. Culture, as it was defined by early theorists such as Franz Boas, was transferred between physical human bodies through social means of communication. Embodied in social rituals and practices, culture was a way of life, reproduced by social groups that were bound together by such acts. As a set of descriptions, ethnographies were claimed by anthropologists to describe actual "cultures"--a whole set or society of people which had strict boundaries. However, the differentiation between what was unique to one culture versus another always depended upon the perspective of Europeans or Americans implicitly comparing their objects of study to other ways of life (sometimes, unwittingly, their own).

Cultural theory worked best with societies that were seemingly static and had little in- or out-migration. Indeed, anthropologists quite consciously limited their studies to what they labelled "primitive" societies. Anthropologists defined "primitive" as those societies that could be studied using their theories about static, bounded cultures. Any social group that had any significant amount of human bodies entering or exiting was extremely difficult to describe using cultural theory, a serious shortcoming that nonetheless did not stop cultural theory from being applied eventually to all human societies.

Arising out of a systematic awareness of differences, the concept of culture is undermined when users forget its origin as a description. Culture as a word is continually used as if it were an object with causal powers ("Yuji did that because his culture is Japanese"). However, culture is the *product* of seeing the world anthropologically ("Yuji, in comparison with other people I have known, does things differently, and I make sense of that difference by describing those acts and linking them to my awareness that he and other people I have known who do it, all come from

the Japan"). Unfortunately the word culture has come to have universal significance at the same time that it signifies less and less.

At the heart of all of these distinctions between groups of people is not race as a biological category or culture as a non-biological category, but an historical awareness of population migrations. As historical narratives defining the origins of difference, theories of cultural and national belonging have linked the politics of the present to a biological genealogy of the individual body's past. If the reason someone has been treated differently in the United States is because his or her grandfather came from China, this tie is important less because of what was unique and native to China (both in the nineteenth century and now) and more because of how racial difference and animosity have been defined in North America--how, in other words, people in the United States have defined 'whiteness' and being full American citizens with European origin and have linked otherness in racial and cultural terms with non-European origin. Racial, cultural, and national categorization, therefore, have been inextricably linked in history, and in the most foundational sense, these linkages have depended upon an awareness of population migration.

The fractional nature of the racial and cultural categories in Tiger Woods was as arbitrary as the classification of him as African American. The key factor that undermines Tiger Woods's racial formula is the fiction that somehow his ancestors were racially or culturally whole. When he was broken up into 1/4 Chinese, 1/4 Thai, 1/4 African American, 1/8 American Indian, and 1/8 Caucasian, the lowest common denominator of 1/8 leads to a three generation history. Tracing a three-step genealogy of descent back to an original stage of pure individuals places us at the end of the nineteenth century. If we were to consider other striped, Tiger Woods-like bodies in a similar manner, they might be described as containing 1/16th or even 1/32nd fractions. But in any case the individuals who are imagined to live at the beginning point of the calculations are whole only because they have been assumed to originally exist in a shared moment of purity.

The timing of this moment of imagined purity is partly founded upon the coincidence of migration with national identity. The illusion of ethnic and racial wholeness of a grandparent's generation marks the importance of nineteenth-century nationalism in defining bodies. Emigrating from specific nations or nation-states

coming into being, migrants during the nineteenth and early twentieth century had their bodies marked by nationality--Irish, Chinese, Japanese, Italian, German. That their bodies were whole in a national sense allowed for a consequent holistic definition of their racial and cultural origin.

Even with the supposed eclipse of biological notions of race in the twentieth century, we cling to definitions of national and cultural origin as shorthand for describing biological origin.<sup>11</sup> The three-generation history of intermarriage that the 1/8th fractions ostensibly revealed, in actuality described a family tree arbitrarily truncated. The hypothetical, racially whole grandparents, given their own family genealogies of ancestry, would have themselves reached into the past to delineate histories of intermingling population migrations. Further and further back in time, these genealogies would reveal that there has never been a set of racially whole individuals from which we have all descended. Whether in purportedly mixed or pure fashion, biological descent that invokes racially whole individuals in the past is delusional.

When the 2000 U.S. Census no longer restricted individuals to single racial categories (allowing people to check more than one box for categories of racial belonging), it seemed that American views of racial and cultural descent might finally have left behind the notion of racially pure, whole individuals. But the new problem of complex logarithms and formula to try to convert the new fractions of identity into whole numbers still resulted from a need to produce data that made sense, in other words that counted humans as racial individuals. How will all those who rely on population calculations from the U.S. Census use totals that are not the sum of whole numbers of individuals, but crazy totals like 234,574.375 that themselves reflect the sum of a string of fractions such as 3/4 and 1/8 and 1/64?<sup>12</sup> Racial categories have always been fictional, but just because they are fictional does not mean we can either wish them away or simply leave behind their continuing use as politically powerful categories of existence.

By the end of the twentieth century, advertisements in every media displayed a seeming rainbow of skin color, as marketing surveys and political polls responded to demographic changes in the racial and cultural make-up of the U.S. population. A *Newsweek* cover published on 1 January 2000, described "Our New Look: The Colors of

Race.” But the new look is also an old look, and as Gary B. Nash and other historians have pointed out for years, the history of the United States has been a complex mix from its first moments.<sup>13</sup>

The attempt to see within Tiger Woods the embodiment of all his diverse backgrounds was a valiant attempt to contain within a single human body all of the ethnic diversity in the social body that multicultural America claimed to be. The awkwardness of description, and its inevitable failure, resulted both from the flawed conception of cultural and racial origins described earlier, as well as an inability to leave behind an obsession with the idea that race is a biological category represented by individuals.

It is seemingly possible to describe a person’s racial history in terms of fractions because each of those fractions is derived from a supposedly whole person several generations before; however, American categories of racial belonging do conceptual and political work because they fit individuals into larger categories of race, not because racial categories somehow fit together in complicated ways within individuals. Tiger Woods as a single human body could not express the fractions within--like almost all children of supposed mixed heritage in this country, his whole quickly becomes his darkest part. Woods himself as a child, attempting to rebut his reduction by others to a state of blackness, came up with the term "Cablinasian" (CAucasian + BLack + INdian + ASIAN) to encapsulate his mixed make-up. Mentioned briefly by the press, the term achieved no currency nor usage. Since the power of racial categories comes from their work of tying a number of people together under a single description, a label such as Cablinasian that serves only to describe Woods's own individual admixture had little use. Indeed, though Woods had found a name for his own unique brand of mixed-up pain, he might as well have used the term "Tiger" to label what was a singular racial description in practice limited to only himself. Tiger Woods was more politically useful, and understandable, as black.

The incipient power allegedly held by "mixed race individuals" to herald a new racially mixed millenium lies in the promise that such individuals will lessen the utility of prevalent racial categories. But a quick glance at the history of Latin America will show that social hierarchies of racial classification can co-exist for long historical periods with the large scale existence of racially mixed individuals. Racial categories, in other words,

achieve social power by connecting individuals into larger groups, and individuals who are apparently the resulting mix of these larger groups are only limited, temporary aberrations in the racial order.<sup>14</sup> Categories that make sense of biological ancestry inevitably repackage the complexities of the past by providing a group connection in the present. Individuals who cannot be made sense of using existent racial classifications may, if their numbers are large enough, change the nature of the categories, but their very existence as individuals historically has not destroyed the utility of racial categories.

There are three main conclusions to be drawn from the ways that racial and cultural categories have been defined in U.S. history: 1) that continual migration and biological admixture have been the rule rather than the exception in U.S. history (and therefore so-called 'race-mixing' is not a 'new thing' that will change the future, since it has always been our past); 2) that this history of migration and mixture has been erased or distorted as much with theories of culture as with racial theories based on biology,<sup>15</sup> and; 3) that a key to understanding the twentieth century is how changes in definitions of human difference, from languages of race to those of culture, did not eliminate the use of biological heritage as a way of understanding categories of human belonging. This is not to say that justifications for human oppression based upon theories about biological difference were not successfully attacked--one of the great stories of the twentieth century was the large-scale campaign waged against social hierarchy based upon theories about biological race. However, new theories about national and cultural belonging were still based upon historical narratives of biological origin, and sometimes these categories of cultural or national origin have proved quite useful in justifying, and at the same time in combating, social domination and oppression.

### **How Tiger Woods Lost His Stripes: Sports, Military Training, and the Black Male Savior From Jackie Robinson to Colin Powell to Tiger Woods**

The confusion of tongues regarding how to name Tiger's complex heritage was a direct result of the confusion over languages of race that continues to bedevil this country; however, Tiger's fading into black was not just the result of an inability to understand Tiger's complexity. Rather than a product of a negative phenomenon, a

confusion or ignorance, there was also a seemingly positive desire to paint Tiger in a darker shade, a pulling for Tiger to be a heroic black man who would save America from its racist past. In his trek from the sports page to the front page, Tiger Woods quickly became another example of a black man making it in America because of his athletic skill. Woods earned his success through his prodigious accomplishments, but his popular apotheosis as black male hero fit him into generic modes of understanding African American masculinity.

Early commentators, in trying to reflect Woods's complexity, often cited that he would bring a new found awareness of multiracial and mixed race children to the American public. Sportswriter Rick Reilly's 27 March 1995, *Sports Illustrated* article, "Goodness Gracious, He's a Great Ball of Fire," became the definitive introduction for hundreds of thousands of sports fans to Tiger Woods. Reilly remarked upon Woods's mixed ethnic background, describing how Earl was "a quarter American Indian, a quarter Chinese and half black" and how Kultida was "half Thai, a quarter Chinese and a quarter white." But Reilly also described how Woods's appearances as a young child on television shows such as *That's Incredible* and *The Mike Douglas Show* traced a long history from early childhood as a "Great Black Hope." By the end of 1996, other articles in *Sports Illustrated* were clearly emphasizing Woods's potential in this regard. In September 1996 writer Leigh Montville was asking of Woods: "Who can he be? Pick a name. Arthur Ashe. Jackie Robinson. Colin Powell..." Each of these three had been pioneer African American men.<sup>16</sup>

The strange way in which Tiger Woods was received in September 1996 revealed much about the more general American craving for individual black heroes to redeem its ugly history. Whether it was Jackie Robinson, Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, or Woods's contemporary Colin Powell, Americans had learned by the end of the twentieth century to fantasize that a single person would save them from racial problems which were endemic and built into the structure of U.S. society. Through much of the media hype that surrounded Woods's decision to turn professional in the fall of 1996, there was constant current questioning whether much of the hope invested in him was because of the color of his skin.

Because Woods's received so much money before winning a single professional golf tournament--a fact that distinguished him from almost any other golfer turning

from amateur to professional--observers such as sports writer John Feinstein placed Woods's race as being a prime factor in his potential marketability. On ABC's television show *Nightline*, in the week after Woods's turned professional, Feinstein remarked that Woods's race was major reason Nike was giving him such a rich endorsement contract, somewhat unwittingly plugging Woods into larger debates at the time about affirmative action and the role of merit in distinguishing individuals for their racial identity. Tim Finchem, the president of the USPGA (the Professional Golf Association), countered that Woods's was unique only because of the extraordinary amount of golfing talent he possessed, and that Woods would turn out to be worth every penny that Nike paid him. That both Finchem and Feinstein could turn out to be right was only clear several months later, when Woods's won the Masters Golf tournament in Augusta, Georgia, in April 1997. For several months, however, nobody could say for sure whether Woods would become merely a well-paid "Great Black Hype."

The Masters ended a period of speculation about the role of race in Tiger Woods's rich endorsement deals, but it also made the transformation of Woods from a highly paid multiracial body--in the news for switching from amateur to paid professional--into a heroic black male icon. In the weeks before the Masters tournament, the media hype intensified around the question of what impact Woods would have if he won. On 7 April 1997, in a *Sports Illustrated* article entitled "One for the Ages," Jaime Diaz wrote that Woods's "African-American heritage would make a victory in the tournament, in which no black was invited to play until 1975 and where every caddie was black until '83, a transcendent accomplishment."<sup>17</sup> The symbolism employed by many writers and observers was clear in regard to a potential Tiger Woods victory. This single act was going to change race relations. Lee Elder, one of the African American pioneers on the professional golf tour, remarked about the possibility that Woods would win the Masters that: "It might mean even more than Jackie Robinson breaking into baseball."<sup>18</sup> Woods played his ordained role as the inheritor of the hopes of a long line of black golfers who had paved the way for him, graciously acknowledging his debt to Lee Elder, Charlie Sifford, Ted Rhodes, and other early African American golfers.

When Woods won the Masters in record fashion in April 1997, shooting the lowest tournament score in history, he seemed to fulfill all prophecies of him, in the

words of one sportswriter, as "The Chosen One." Rick Reilly described Woods's accomplishment in the grand strokes of epic history:

Almost 50 years to the day after Jackie Robinson broke major league baseball's color barrier, at Augusta National, a club no black man was allowed to join until six years ago, at the tournament whose founder, Clifford Roberts, once said, "As long as I'm alive, golfers will be white, and caddies black," a 21-year old black man delivered the greatest performance ever seen in a golf major. Someday Eldrick (Tiger) Woods, a mixed-race kid with a middle-class background who grew up on a municipal golf course in the sprawl of Los Angeles, may be hailed as the greatest golfer who ever lived, but it is likely that his finest day will always be the overcast Sunday in Augusta when he humiliated the world's best golfers, shot 18-under-par 70-66-65-69--270 (the lowest score in tournament history) and won the Masters by a preposterous 12 shots."<sup>19</sup>

Reilly went on to say that Woods was "the first black man to win any major" golf tournament. John Feinstein, the writer who had emphasized the role of race in Tiger Woods's endorsement deal with Nike, opened and closed his celebratory article by describing how members of the Augusta National Golf Club, which until recently had excluded African Americans, gave Woods a standing ovation to welcome him after he won their club's annual tournament. Feinstein wrote: "They were welcoming him to their club, not grudgingly, but graciously--even happily."<sup>20</sup> Race relations, according to both Feinstein and Reilly, would forever be changed by Tiger's victory.

At around the same time that Tiger Woods was being hailed as the racial savior of golf, and perhaps of America, retired U.S. Army General Colin Powell, the U.S. Armed Forces Joint Chief of Staff during the 1991 Gulf War against Iraq, was eagerly being courted as a potential vice-presidential or even presidential candidate. Powell's popularity at the same moment as Woods's ascendancy marked more than just historical coincidence. Both Tiger Woods and Colin Powell represented a number of standard ways in which African American men were perceived as safe and non-threatening while offering the possibility of redemption. Like Gen. Powell, Tiger's father Earl Woods was a military veteran, a Lieutenant Colonel in the U.S. Army's Special Forces, embodying the safe black man who sacrifices himself in wartime for the nation.<sup>21</sup>



Tiger's father correctly channeled the violent masculinity that popular imagery at that time ascribed to African American males, forsaking the alleged criminality contained in rap and hip-hop music and videos and in mainstream movies such as *Colors* and *New Jack City*. The drug-dealing, drive-by-shooting, and gang-banging black male represented in such popular media was the negative twin of the figure of the black war hero. Better yet, Tiger's father directed the oft-represented dangerous, sexual desirability of black masculinity not toward white women, but to the safe option of a foreign, Asian war bride. Tiger himself, as the son of a black veteran who applied military discipline to create a black male sports hero, served to connect the appeal of the safe black male body as sports star to a lineage of the black male as a military man.

As the sports star progeny of the black male military hero and the Asian wife picked up in the United States's foray into Vietnam, Tiger Woods might have seemed to be an ideal symbol of a racial diversity that went beyond black and white. Media imagery, however, did not quite manage to represent the complexity of Tiger. Besides the added complications of describing his fractional nature, there was a more powerful story to be told. When Tiger Woods won his first professional golf tournament, and again when he won the prestigious Masters, newspaper photographs overwhelmingly showed him hugging his father. His mother Kultida was either cropped from the frame or blocked by the powerful imagery of the black American military father triumphantly joined with his black American sports star son. Along with the disappearing stripes of Tiger's racial complexity, Thai American Kultida Woods faded into black.

The dominance of Earl Woods in representations of Tiger was particularly apparent early in his professional career. When *Sports Illustrated* chose Tiger Woods as its Sportsman of the Year in 1996 (before Tiger's win at the Masters), writer Gary Smith spent a full page discussing how important Earl Woods's two tours of duty as a Green Beret in Vietnam were for understanding Tiger Woods development ("Tiger" was in fact the nickname Earl had originally given to his South Vietnamese friend, Nguyen Phong, during the war). The theme of Tiger's training--and the remarkable military-style discipline he showed--was eventually parlayed by Earl Woods into a pair of popular books, the first one entitled *Training a Tiger: A Father's Guide to Raising a Winner in Both Golf and Life*.<sup>22</sup>

Earlier *Sports Illustrated* articles had reported that Kultida had often been the arbiter of discipline--for instance, making Tiger do his homework--but this narrative had little popular resonance in the first few years. It was Earl Woods and the father-son relationship that dominated not only the book shelves, but renditions of the family dynamic on television and in print. In the same article that described Earl Woods's application of military discipline to Tiger, a picture of Kultida with hands clasped paralleled the article's suggestion that her contribution to Tiger's game was Buddhist serenity. Accompanying the photo was a caption reminiscent of the voice of Obi-wan Kenobi reminding the young Luke Skywalker to "use the Force" in *Star Wars*: "Tida's eyes close when she speaks, and Tiger can almost see her gathering and sifting the thoughts."<sup>23</sup> The attribution of such soft, feminine, Asian qualities of peace and serenity to Kultida Woods contrasted with the controlled violence of Earl Woods masculinity: "This is war, so let's start with war. Remove the images of pretty putting greens from the movie screen...Jungle is what's needed here, foliage up to a man's armpits, sweat trickling down his thighs, leeches crawling up them. Lieut. Col. Earl Woods, moving through the night with his rifle ready..."<sup>24</sup> Golf, like Earl Woods military career, was portrayed in the article as one of the ways both male Woods had channeled their anger towards white racists. Racism and the response of Earl and Tiger Woods was one of the major themes of the article, whereas the thoughts and responses of Kultida Woods to racism were not even a subject of the article.

It is interesting that by the middle of 2000, with Earl Woods in declining health and less of a factor in Tiger's post-victory celebrations, Kultida Woods was increasingly being portrayed as the actual disciplinarian of the two parents. Her maternal contributions to Tiger's winning ways became more prominent in articles, and the military career of Earl Woods was no longer the story line. In the beginning, however, representations of Tiger Woods as a popular hero had made extensive use of existing tropes of heroic black masculinity. Perhaps in the light of how popular representations had so overdetermined the meaning of his body, it is hard to imagine how Tiger could not have lost his stripes.

The desire for Woods to be a savior matched a widespread hunger for a great African American redeemer. In twentieth-century American history, a series of black sports heroes achieved mythic status for athletic exploits that transcended the social

limitations of their race. From Jack Johnson, Jesse Owens, Jackie Robinson, Muhammad Ali, Arthur Ashe, Jim Brown, and all the way through Tiger Woods, American writers have continually fantasized that a single person could save U.S. society from endemic racial problems.<sup>25</sup> These Christ-like narratives heralding the redemption of all through the sacrifice of a single martyr (with historic roots in abolitionist narratives such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), powerfully shaped the historical memories of African American sports figures. In particular, descriptions of Jackie Robinson and Hank Aaron often highlighted their suffering on the athletic field as somehow redemptive for the nation as a whole.

Transgression was progressive, and just as working class men tasting the leisure reserved for the non-laboring classes suggested the democratic spread of privilege, so too did the very entry of a black male body into a formerly segregated white field of sports indicate a signal social change. The transgression did not always take masculine form; mid-twentieth-century female athletes such as Wilma Rudolph and Babe Henson carved off some of the privileges of masculinity by succeeding at sport. However, the black savior during the twentieth century was almost invariably cast as male.

The symbolic value of the single hero overcoming larger social problems helped define Tiger Woods as a black male. This myth of the individual triumphant over the legacies of the past has had mixed political uses--sometimes helping mobilize for political purposes historical memories of anti-black oppression, sometimes justifying public policies that ignored group-based solutions to historical inequity. In the case of Jackie Robinson, actions on the athletic field translated into popular acceptance of political movements such as Civil Rights. Paradoxically, however, the increasing centrality of sports figures in the economic and cultural life of the nation has led to a seeming decrease in their political impact.<sup>26</sup> Muhammad Ali shook the nation when he resisted the Vietnam War draft. In contrast, Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods seemed studiously apolitical in their loyalty to their corporate branding. However, this paradox disappears when we place racial politics into the larger context of an American politics focused upon corporate rather than racial identity. This does not mean that racial politics have disappeared, rather that race has come to have new meanings in popular politics. The value of Tiger Woods as a racial hero extended beyond the political and

into a larger world of mass consumption and communication that could capitalize on the popular hopes and dreams invested in him.

### **Tiger Woods as National Hero: Using the Rise of Sports and Entertainment Industries to Understand How American Life Became Dominated by Mass Consumption and the Global Spread of Capitalism**

The chances are that the first non-white President will be a male athletic hero, rather than a military man such as Gen. Colin Powell. Why? Because of the increasing importance of sports and entertainment industries in the economic and cultural life of the U.S. through the twentieth century, racial politics have consistently marked the rise of these multibillion dollar industries. Developments in communications media have also steadily decreased the importance of military heroes in American political culture, and how sports and entertainment celebrity has gradually replaced military heroism in popular definitions of moral character.

Sports as a social and institutional practice, originally created at the end of the 19th century as the proving ground for young boys who would someday be soldiers, is now an end in itself. What began as a one-way metaphor, that sports competition was a playful representation of battlefield conflict, has reversed directions. Athletic team play, and character traits such as self-sacrifice, acceptance of one's role, and courage in the face of adversity, are no longer coded behavior that predicted success on the battlefield, but the cliché tropes of television sports programs that have conquered American life.

By the end of the 1990s, media mavens were decrying the declining moral character of American professional athletes. The murder and rape trials of football players, the sexual exploits of basketball stars, the boorish behavior of child superstars, all became symbols of the moral declension of athletics. But what such critics missed was the long-term historical trend: the virtue (or lack of it) among athletes was not the subject of intense media scrutiny it would eventually become. What the spotlight's glare on athletics revealed was not just the moral defects of sports stars, but also the fact that Americans wanted them to be heroes in ways that were not required fifty years before. Nobody would have accused baseball legend Ty Cobb, a noted bigot and bully, of

being a paragon of virtue. For most of the twentieth century, the criteria for sportsmanship on the field did not extend to behavior off of it, and as in the sexual peccadilloes of presidents, journalists and ordinary people alike turned a blind eye to questionable private behavior among public heroes.

By the end of the twentieth century, however, in the popular imagination, moral character in a heroic sense was almost monopolized by sports figures. This trend was a product of a mass media geared around the commodity of celebrity. In 1980, when Ronald Reagan (still one of the most popular presidents in American history), entered the White House, many political pundits and public intellectuals derided his motion picture background as unfit for the leader of the nation. Reagan's popularity, however, and his "teflon" like ability to be untainted by political scandal, were both derived from his practiced ability as an entertainer to deliver simple moral messages in front of television cameras. If television as a medium was now scrutinizing celebrities for moral failings, the hunger of viewers for positive signs of moral character was just as intense.

There has been a long tradition of American sports heroes turned politicians. Gerald Ford was a college football quarterback at Michigan long before becoming President; presidential hopefuls such Jack Kemp, a former NFL quarterback, and Bill Bradley, a college basketball hero at Princeton and a professional star with the New York Knicks, were both former athletes. These men used their athletic notoriety as launching pads for political careers, a celebrity which gave them the initial investment capital of fame so helpful to starting a political life. When they each began political careers, they needed to also provide an antidote to the perceived frivolous nature of their athletic past with healthy doses of seriousness. By the 1990s, several congressional representatives such as J.C. Watts and Steve Largent of Oklahoma, both former professional football players, seemed to make seamless transitions from athletics to politics. As Reagan marked the triumph of celebrity as a forum for morality, political hopefuls with athletic backgrounds increasingly found that their character, forged on Soldier's Field in Chicago playing professional football, was no less valuable than a baptism of fire on a soldier's field in Normandy.

In an age of explosive rapidity in the production of celebrity, the realms where character and sociability were constructed changed. Increasingly, combat heroism found less and less purchase. For over two centuries, the battlefields of U.S. wars had

been the place where great leaders were made, but the end of the twentieth century saw a withering of this trend. Colin Powell, Norman Schwarzkopf, and John McCain had much less popular appeal as war heroes than Dwight Eisenhower, Ulysses Grant, and Andrew Jackson. Wars were by the end of the century consciously made for TV events that were not the arena for the production of heroes, but highly crafted representations enlisted to persuade public opinion.

Changes in the actual medium of communication were crucial in determining the heights to which popular apotheosis could be achieved. For Andrew Jackson and Zachary Taylor over 150 years ago, newspaper stories detailed their heroic triumphs. For Dwight Eisenhower it was newsreels flashing in the dark of movie theaters. The journalistic, hand-held frenzy that has marked combat photography since the Vietnam War, however, has not been conducive to epic narratives of heroism.<sup>27</sup> The transient nature of television imagery and the jarring, incoherent stories that come out of televised combat are not ideal ways to tell the tale of heroes.

Sports began as the metaphor for war, but by the end of the twentieth century, modern combat no longer compared in the popular imagination. Partly this was because representations of war had failed to seem like sport. With television dominating their consciousness, Americans needed slow motion, instant replay to transform their warriors into secular saints, just as endless slow-mo highlights of Michael Jordan's dunks and Tiger Woods's approach shots on ESPN Sportscenter deified them as athletic gods. Because television was used so often in Vietnam to capture the brutality of war, military censors have seldom since allowed television crews to get close enough to the action to portray the heroism of fighting soldiers. War has failed to be a metaphor for sports.

The cult of celebrity created a wholly new way of practicing mass politics, and a burgeoning global sports and entertainment industry began to transform popular understandings of public morality and social virtue. Character as a TV event had to be quick drama, fit into the spaces between commercial breaks. Best of all were scripted contests such as professional wrestling. Minnesota's election in 1998 of former professional wrestler Jesse Ventura as its governor is perhaps the best example of the value provided by the dramatic consistency of a choreographed sport. Ventura's unimpeachable virtue had been built upon the weekly story lines that had built him into

a wrestling hero (the uncertain outcomes of real sports can in comparison--after all, there is always the danger of a boring game).

In a similar manner to how Reagan signaled the triumph of celebrity, Ventura's election showed how celebrity in sports was even more powerful than in the movies. The morality displayed in the alternative world of sports is clear cut. We know who the good guys are, and we can root for them with hands full of popcorn and team jerseys decorating our bodies. In wrestling, Ronald Reagan's 1980 caricature of the Soviet Union as a cartoon evil empire threatening America had a popular life long after the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union itself had fallen.<sup>28</sup>

Just as the ever increasing importance of motion pictures and the entertainment industry marked the mid-twentieth century, the late twentieth-century saw sports occupy the center of public life. City and state governments granted massive taxpayer subsidies to professional sports teams, just so they would represent their cities in the national media. Nike and other sports equipment companies paid athletes such as Tiger Woods millions of dollars to endorse their products. At the end of the nineteenth century, college athletic programs were the haven for elite gentlemen to test their valor against each other in contests such as football, baseball, and rowing. By the end of the twentieth, they had become money making machines. In the year 2000, the NCAA, representing most of the colleges and universities in the United States, received an astounding \$6 billion, seven year contract from a television network to televise college basketball games during the "March Madness" national championship tournament. Ironically, a century after the elite amateurism that originally defined athletics had been steadily whittled away by the professionalization of sports, college athletes are still forbidden to receive a single penny of this money.

The astronomical sums of money involved point to the centrality of the entertainment industry in modern American society, but what is often missed is that most Americans gladly paid huge amounts of money to see their heroes in action, to wear the same clothing they did, and ultimately, to fantasize that they and their children might turn out to be just as good. "I am Tiger Woods," was the mantra which a litany of children--white and non-white--chanted in Nike's television and print advertisements in 1996. When young children all over the world heard and learned the phrase "I want to be like Mike," as basketball player Michael Jordan conquered the

world during the 1992 Olympics, the heroicization of professional athletes eclipsed the celebration of motion picture stars that had helped carry Ronald Reagan to the White House. The morality of actors may have been so-well acted that it was convincing, but play-acting paled in comparison to the moral drama of sports play.

### **Conclusion: Branding the Body versus Bodies Wearing a Brand**

Soon after signing Tiger Woods to an endorsement contract unprecedented in largesse, Nike ran an initial advertising campaign featuring Woods. The television and print ads emphasized the racial exclusivity that had marked golf in America. In one, Woods stated: "There are still courses in the United States that I am not allowed to play because of the color of my skin." A Tiger burning bright would change all of that, of course, with a blend of power, grace, skill, and sheer confidence that could not be denied. "Hello World," Tiger Woods announced in T.V. and print ads, asking America and the world whether they were ready for the new partnership of Tiger and Nike. The answer to the challenge seemed to be a resounding yes. A year later, in October 1997, a poll published in *USA Today* reported that Nike's campaign featuring Tiger Woods was by far the most popular advertising campaign of the year.<sup>29</sup>

In 1997, a month after journalist John Feinstein described the previously racist Augusta National Golf Club welcoming a non-white Tiger Woods into its ranks, Feinstein continued to report on the racial politics of Woods existence. Following an incident in which golfer Fuzzy Zoeller's made some racially inflammatory remarks, Feinstein detailed how Nike chairman Phil Knight was upset at Woods for not attending a tribute to Jackie Robinson. "Nike spent a lot of money on a series of ads paying tribute to Robinson...and, given that one of the reasons for Woods's multimillion dollar deal with the company was to reach new African-American customers, Knight apparently felt Woods should have attended."<sup>30</sup> The moral drama of Tiger's racial identity played out on a very expensive stage.

Phil Knight felt that Nike deserved a form of return for its massive investment that went beyond increased sales and revenue. When Nike signed its initial five-year endorsement contract with Woods in 1996, the corporation had a strong stock price, and its future possibilities for increased revenue and expansion of sales globally were



spectacular.<sup>31</sup> Standard & Poor's, the stock rating company, reported in the summer before Wood's endorsement deal, that Nike was in a good position for growth.<sup>32</sup> Nike's stock price was climbing as its revenues grew, and Wood's signing made the news in business publications.<sup>33</sup> Standard & Poor's also forecast that Nike's "business outside the United States" would be the "engine for future growth." The growth of its international sales was "testament to the emerging power of its brand globally."<sup>34</sup>

The importance of Nike's "brand power" lay behind Knight's insistence that Woods do more than merely endorse Nike products. The power of a corporate brand was as a commodity in itself, so that consumers would pay more for a t-shirt that was otherwise identical, merely because of the brand label that distinguished it from the other. Tiger Woods and other celebrity sports stars created the premium value that such brands could command, and a widespread desire for Woods to be a racial savior further contributed to his ability to increase the value of Nike's brand.<sup>35</sup>

The ways in which "branding" itself as a practice changed from the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth century reflected a major shift in the way race as a property functioned in the United States. For much of the nineteenth century, the legal enslavement of African Americans through their matrilineal inheritance meant that race was also a legal status passed on biologically (an enslaved mother's children were by birth also enslaved). Race was metaphorically a way of branding the human body, so that some bodies had more value than others--blackness became equated to being legal property owned by others, and whiteness on the whole as the power to treat others as property or potential property, and the right to a number of other legal protections denied those branded as black.<sup>36</sup> Race was an indication of property relations, of the body's social, legal, economic relations within a larger society. Race was a categorization that both reflected and shaped market relations.

Tiger Wood's racial identity, in contrast, reflected a world where corporate brands themselves were commodities, and the acquisition and display of such brands on the human body gave social value to certain human bodies above others.<sup>37</sup> Mass production and mass consumption had transformed the United States from a society in which the majority labored to produce luxury goods for a few, to one in which everyone labored to produce goods (objects, services, bodily performances such as sports and entertainment) in the anticipation of participating in a shared consumption

of these same goods. Distinctions in products consumed (some products branded as superior) became more important in many ways than the distinguishing categories of race that had branded bodies a century before. Before, legally enforced racial categories had relegated different bodies to strictly inferior positions in relation to other bodies; now, racial identity was itself increasingly a commodity which might or might not have value in relation to other commodities that marked the body.

It was in this way that Tiger Woods's racial categorization became secondary to the ways that his body could be branded by corporate affiliations. His relationship to Nike was literally more important than his category of racial belonging. This explains the ways in which Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods have approached racial politics, always with an eye to possible effects on the value of Nike's brand name. When Phil Knight signed Tiger Woods, he believed that the value of Nike's brand would be increased by the deep desire Americans had for a black hero. His support for Tiger Woods reflected the commercial value of Woods's blackness for Nike.<sup>38</sup>

When Tiger Woods turned professional in 1996, he stood at the coincidence of a number of large scale trends in twentieth-century U.S. history. Changing racial politics, the spread of celebrity in definitions of morality, the rise of corporations in marketing leisure and entertainment--it was a world unlike that of a hundred years before, and it would have been impossible to even imagine the phenomena of Tiger Woods in 1896. Just as in the Horatio Algiers tales of a century before, the idealization of an individual overcoming the hierarchical social order functioned, in the end, to reinforce another hierarchical social order--that of capitalism. Ideologies of individual merit helped justify a social order in which a select number of individuals own the lion's share of a society's collective property. The escape from hierarchical social structures in the United States has almost invariably been described as the result of almost superhuman individual transcendence, and whether that individual is Tiger Woods or Bill Gates, the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few must seem deserved. The historical contexts for Tiger Woods's racial transcendence--and of the heroicization of all well-paid individual athletes--must be seen in this light, rather than as some small glimmer of hope that he actually might solve racial and class inequalities that have been systemic in U.S. society.

### Afterword Written for German Translation

Two years ago, right at the end of the summer that this essay was first written, planeloads of people became projectiles aimed at taking down the strength of America and the global commercial empire symbolized by the aptly named “World Trade Center.” The sympathies of a shocked world rallied behind the United States. The military might of the United States, deployed in Afganistan against the Taliban, was the vengeful arm of the wronged in search of justice. The U.S. military was suddenly all over the news and one of the theses of my essay, that somehow the heroism of military warriors had been eclipsed by media obsession for sports, seemed to be an observation from a world forever changed by 9/11.

Or was it? It has struck me more than once, in fact, almost continually, that in this post-9/11 world of absurd contradictions--of constant terrorist alerts alongside happy business as usual, of never ending war and perpetual product promotion, of massive troop deployments and mass audiences for television shows such as *American Idol* and *Joe Millionaire*—that in this absurd world of militant patriotism combined with presidential exhortations to buy more stuff for the good of the country, that somehow the megalomania of Earl Woods about his golf playing son seems rather harmless. The ludicrous vendettas of another son, Bush the Younger, to avenge his father’s failures in the oil fields of Iraq, seem much more dangerous, and somehow to me the claims to greatness for Tiger Woods made by Earl Woods now seem rather quaint, almost sane.

I wondered if my essay had become obsolete when those planes hit the World Trade Center, as I imagine many people wondered if their understandings of the world were obsolete as they took notice of a world that suddenly seemed different. But as the outlines of a New World Order have become increasingly clear under the guidance of George W. Bush, it has also become ever more clear that the world has not changed as much as I thought.

The compelling power of sports in the contemporary world did not end when the “War on Terror” began. The narcotic haze of late night televised sports and half a million dollar product promotions during the Super Bowl still promises to fix all our ills, and Americans continue to buy it all, to spend on credit for SUV’s that look like tanks while camouflaged versions built by the same corporations defend our access to the oil

that fuels our fantasies. It would seem like the world has not changed that much since 9/11, only that the rather invisible violence that held that previous world together became a little more visible, that the covert operations that girded the prior New World Order have been joined with the overt activities of Bush the Second.

Where then, does sports fit into this world? This is an interesting question that I must admit I do not have all the answers for, although it has occupied my attention these last years. If mass consumption before 9/11 was somehow narcotic, and sports as an industry was the most powerful opiate of the masses, then the dulling effects of double dribbles and daring dunks that continue to fill our 36 inch flat screen Sony Vega TVs equipped with surround sound have become even more effective in drowning out the sounds of military battle. In a world rife with injustice and inequity, sports had always been able to somehow soothe our conscience, but with an American administration that vows to fight an unending war on an ever-expanding "Axis of Evil," sports is a drug that promises to take us away in an ever more powerful way, to give us a world where people meet in fair fights and where winners and losers are not determined in the asymmetrical battles of overwhelming American firepower. Is it not understandable that a dependency on sports might serve as an escape? I have to admit that late at night when I watch sports highlights on TV in the dark of my living room, my mind reeling to escape from the three solid hours of programming on the Discovery Channel describing the "Weapons of the War with Iraq," detailing how the sleek F-117 Stealth Fighters and multi-billion dollar B-2 bombers exorcised the Satanic demon of Saddam Hussein, I sometimes wonder if it's not such a bad thing to switch the channel and cheer instead for my favorite team.

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, the heroic character that had been almost monopolized by sports figures seemed to revert back to those more deserving. The firemen and police officers who were killed trying to rescue people trapped in burning buildings were the true heroes, it seemed, and the popular media exploded in a patriotic embrace of their sacrifice. It was notable, however, how football and basketball stars needed to continually remind viewers after September 11 that they were in fact not the true heroes, and that somehow wearing the caps and jerseys festooned with the letters NYPD or NYFD was enough to remind avid fans that they understood the difference between true heroism and the packaged

highlights they produced. But I suspect that they protested too much, and if the amount of money that professional athletes continue to be paid is any indication, Americans still treasure the heroic acts of football stars, even as they shed tears for the sacrifices of the firefighters relatively underpaid in comparison.

Americans thought of heroism on the battlefields of Afghanistan in the most abstract sense, of men and women somehow categorically being heroic, but with none of the aesthetic narratives and descriptions that would provide a more moving picture. The Pentagon responded in the invasion of Iraq by “embedding” reporters into military units, hoping that by putting the news media at the front line with troops, that they would provide the heroic narration that would help reinforce patriotic support for the war. In some ways, this strategy succeeded, with polls indicating strong backing for the invasion. However, the descriptions that emerged from the television crews and newspaper reporters remained circumscribed and distinctly unheroic. Soldiers trying at checkpoints to distinguish suicide bombers from women and children approaching innocently in a car, with errors in either direction deadly and horrifying.

In contrast, the morality displayed in the alternative world of sports is still more clear cut. We know who the good guys are and who the bad guys are. Not only that, both sides do wonderful things worthy of being replayed endlessly on television, whereas the ugly reality of warfare in Iraq gets hidden in the dark recesses of abstraction. Americans want highlights of Tiger Woods shooting an eagle on the 18<sup>th</sup> hole with men, women and children cheering in the background, not a replay of F-15 Screaming Eagle fighter jets shooting million dollar missiles and leaving burnt bodies and holes in the ground where once played men, women and children.

Even the Pentagon’s attempt (with the complicity of the U.S. media) to create a hero out of Private Jessica Lynch, the young, thin, blond-haired female American prisoner who was supposedly rescued from her Iraqi captors in a daring raid, smacked of artifice. Lynch became a media darling after she was captured along with most of her supply unit, which had made a wrong turn and ended up on the front lines where they were not supposed to be. Her picture, and images of the small town in West Virginia from where she hailed, were splashed across the front pages of almost every newspaper in the United States, a pretty home-grown face for the military that could symbolize the sacrifices being made by Americans for Operation “Iraqi Freedom.” The

other American captives, including a not-as-thin and not-blond African American woman from Los Angeles, received much less media coverage. The story of Lynch's rescue from the Iraqi hospital where she was being treated became perhaps the singular news event of the invasion, complete with video coverage from a hand held movie camera shot by one of the elite special forces that raided the hospital and snatched her away by helicopter. It was only after the fall of Baghdad to U.S. forces, after Private Lynch had been shown re-uniting with her parents and coming home to great fanfare, that questions were raised about whether the whole rescue had been staged. Perhaps the rescue had not been quite as dangerous as claimed, given that the Iraqi informant who had reported Lynch's whereabouts to the Americans had also indicated that there were no Iraqi troops guarding her. Whether her rescue was consciously a made-for-television event, it became an event because it was TV-friendly.<sup>39</sup>

And so perhaps things have not changed so much after 9/11. As the U.S. military fights a largely clandestine war around the globe, with special forces operating covertly, abetted by the most expensive and technologically advanced military machinery in human history, the need for heroic narratives to inspire the populace seems even more acute. But killing from afar with the cold precision of smart bombs and robotic drones is not the stuff that will create the heroic characters for nightly television highlights. The heroics of sports is still much cleaner, with close-ups and endless slow-motion replays. In a post-9/11 world, sports might be even more dangerous than it has ever been as a narcotic. As spectacle, we have elevated sports to that most vulgar of functions, of something competing with the unpleasant sights of military brutality, a pleasant diversion from the horrors of warfare.

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<sup>1</sup>Gary Smith, "The Chosen One," *Sports Illustrated*, December 23, 1996, p31-33..

<sup>2</sup>For pioneering work on sports in American society, see the following books by Allen Guttman, *A Whole New Ball Game: An Interpretation of American Sports* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1988); *Games and Empires: Modern Sports and Cultural Imperialism* (New York: Columbia University Sports, 1994); *The Erotic in Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), and Guttman, et. al, editors, *Essays on Sport History and Sport Mythology* (Arlington, Tx: Texas A&M University Press, 1990).

<sup>3</sup>Allen Guttman, *The Games Must Go On: Avery Brundage and the Olympic Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); *The Olympics, A History of the Modern Games* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992). Douglas Hartmann, "Golden Ghettos:

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The Cultural Politics of Race, Sport, and Civil Rights in the United States 1968 and Beyond” (PhD, UC-San Diego, 1997).

<sup>4</sup>Activities that were accessible to all, for example track events that simply involved running fast, still began as the domain of those privileged elites who could take the time to run in races. Industrial workers and others whose time and daily exertion had been sold as labor might have been able to run like the wind, but working 12 hours a day left no leisure time to play in the Olympics. As another example of sports that began as the domain of the elite, football began as the exclusive activity of Ivy League gentleman. John M. Murrin describes how football began as a rite of domination between the "Big Three" of Harvard, Princeton, and Yale, only spreading much later to the Midwestern giants such as Notre Dame, Michigan, and Ohio State, and eventually to the widely played and beloved sport of today. Unpublished paper, "Rites of Domination: Princeton, the Big Three, and the Rise of Intercollegiate Athletics," delivered at the Princeton 250th Anniversary Lecture, October 10, 1996.

<sup>5</sup>Standard & Poor's report that Nike total annual revenues since 1997 have been in the 8 or 9 billion dollar range.

<sup>6</sup>For a collection of interesting documents about Jackie Robinson's career, see Jules Tygiel, editor, *The Jackie Robinson Reader: Perspectives on an American Hero* (New York: Dutton, 1997).

<sup>7</sup>Virginia Domínguez, *White By Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana* (New Brunswick, N.J. : Rutgers University Press, 1986).

<sup>8</sup>Somewhat in jest, but further revealing the absurdity of such calculations, this is not even counting as Asian American the one eighth American Indian coursing through his veins, a legacy of the original immigrants from Asia crossing over the Bering land bridge.

<sup>9</sup>There has been a good amount of interesting literature already on transnational movements of labor, and how these diasporic movements have been at the heart of ethnic identity within the nation-states which arose at the same time, The United States was like many nations in the nineteenth-century that derived part of their sense of national homogeneity on the basis of racializing and excluding diasporic labor from definitions of the national body. See for example, Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners and the History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

<sup>10</sup>Ashley Montagu, *Man's most dangerous myth: the fallacy of race*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

<sup>11</sup>If you are a descendent of Asian immigrants to this country, for instance, you are forever being asked where you are originally from, regardless of whether you were born in Los Angeles or Denver or New York. The confusion is not over whether an individual is American-born or not, since the askers are inevitably not satisfied with the answer of Los Angeles or Denver or New York. What they are looking for is national origin, and therefore biological origin, even if the moment of origination is an act of migration undertaken by a grandparent. What they want to know is whether you are Japanese or Korean or Chinese or Vietnamese (I suppose that they believe they can tell if you are from the Philipines or Polynesia or India, and therefore do not have to ask). If a shared Asian American identity is formed for the most part from the experience of being treated as "Orientals" in a similar manner by other Americans, including being mistaken for each other, perhaps one of the largest reasons for the continued practice of excluding South Asians and most Filipinos and Pacific Islanders from a sense of

identity with Asian Americans is that they are not mistaken for migrants from East Asia.

<sup>12</sup>One of the other solutions to the problem of multiple boxes for racial, cultural or ethnic heritage has been to count each box as a whole person for that category. For instance, if someone checks African American, Asian American, and Hispanic on the census, then he or she would be counted once in the category African American, once for Asian American, and once for Hispanic, leading to the problem that the total numbers for all the categories might be greater than the total population of the United States.

<sup>13</sup>See Gary Nash, "Mestizo America," in *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History*, edited by Martha Hodes (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

<sup>14</sup>See Stephen Masami Ropp, "Do Multiracial Subjects Really Challenge Race? Mixed-Race Asians in the United States and the Caribbean," *Amerasia Journal* 23:1 (1997), for an accessible explication of this process in Latin America.

<sup>15</sup>For how social scientists, missionaries, and liberal theorists in the twentieth century hoped for intermarriage and race mixing as the solution to problems of racial conflict, see Henry Yu, "Mixing Bodies and Cultures: The Meaning of America's Fascination With Sex Between 'Orientals' and Whites," in *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History*.

<sup>16</sup>Leigh Montville, *Sports Illustrated*, "On the Job Training," September 9, 1996. Quote also in *Tiger Woods: The Making of a Champion* (New York: Fireside Books, 1997), 74.

<sup>17</sup>Quote from *Tiger Woods: The Making of a Champion*, 97.

<sup>18</sup>John Feinstein, "Master of All He Surveys," *Golf Magazine* (June 1997): 114-118, 118. On Robinson's meaning for desegregation, see Joseph Dorinson, Joram Warmund, editors, *Jackie Robinson: Race, Sports and the American Dream* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1998) and Jules Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Also, on Joe Louis, Richard Bak, *Joe Louis: The Great Black Hope* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998). On African Americans in sports, Arthur Ashe, Jr., *A Hard Road to Glory: A History of the African-American Athlete, 1619-1918*, three volumes, reprint of original from Warner Books, 1998 (New York, Amistad Press, 1993). On sports and race in the U.S., see the pathbreaking work of sports sociologist Harry Edwards; also Jeffrey Sammons, *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); and more recently, Kenneth Shropshire, forward by Kellen Winslow, *In Black and White: Race and Sports in America* (New York: NYU Press, 1998). A recent book has ignited debates about biological race theories and sports, Jon Entine, *Why Black Athletes Dominate Sports and Why We Are Afraid to Talk About It* (New York: Public Affairs, 2000).

<sup>19</sup>Reilly, "Strokes of Genius," April 21, 1997, *Sports Illustrated*. Quote also from *Tiger Woods: The Making of a Champion*, 103. On African Americans in golf, Calvin H. Sinnenette, *Forbidden Fairways: African Americans and the Game of Golf* (New York: Sleeping Bear Press, 1998), and Pete McDaniel, forward by Tiger Woods, *Uneven Lies: The Heroic Story of African-Americans in Golf* (New York: The American Golfer, 2000).

<sup>20</sup>Feinstein, 114.

<sup>21</sup>Thanks to Hazel Carby and Michael Denning for suggesting the importance of Tiger Wood's father as military hero, and the connections between such "safe" black male bodies and the dangerous criminalized black male in popular culture. See Hazel Carby, *Racemen* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).



<sup>22</sup>Earl Woods, with Pete McDaniel, *Training a Tiger: A Father's Guide to Raising a Winner in Both Golf and Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997) and Earl Woods, with Fred Mitchell, *Playing Through: Straight Talk on Hard Work, Big Dreams and Adventures With Tiger* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998)

<sup>23</sup>Gary Smith, "The Chosen One," *Sports Illustrated*, December 23, 1996, p31-33..

<sup>24</sup>Smith, 33.

<sup>25</sup>For paeans to Muhammad Ali's political impact, see Mike Marqusee's *Redemption Song: Muhammad Ali and the Spirit of the Sixties* (New York: Verso, 1999), and the 1996 Academy Award-winning documentary "When We Were Kings," directed by Leon Gast. David Owen, "The Chosen One," *The New Yorker* (August 21 & 28, 2000), pp106-119.

<sup>26</sup>See Leonard Steinhorn and Barbara Diggs-Brown, *By the Color of Our Skin: The Illusion of Integration and the Reality of Race* (New York: Dutton, 1999).

<sup>27</sup>See Neal Gabler's *Life The Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality Starring Everyone* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998) for an interesting view on the phenomenon of entertainment media coming to dominate narrations of experience.

<sup>28</sup>Since the U.S. political system has favored men to the extent that every single president has so far been male, chances are that the first non-white president will also be male. If this person is an athlete, there is even less chance it will be a woman, given the male-oriented bias of professional sports. Contrast for instance the heroicization of male athletes with the very different ways in which female figure skaters are considered. Is there any chance that Kristi Yamaguchi or Michelle Kwan will translate the celebrity and moral character developed in ice rinks into a popular understanding of them as political leaders? It is highly doubtful. Ice skating, the most popular spectator sport in the United States, idealizes a delicate femininity at odds with the vicious, win-at-all costs conflict of war and of team sports. There was high moral drama surrounding Tonya Harding's famous application of baseball technique to Nancy Kerrigan's knee, but Kerrigan's suffering inspired little adulation. Perhaps the first woman to control the White House will come from a team sport such as volleyball or soccer. Let us hope. But the hyper-masculine world of politics and of sports still needs a great deal of change. Tonya Harding was probably closer in moral outlook to a successful politician than any other female athlete then or since.

<sup>29</sup>"Money" section report on popularity of Tiger Woods advertising campaign, *USA Today* (October 20, 1997); James K. Glassman, "A dishonest ad campaign. (Nike ad portraying golfer Tiger Woods as a victim of racism)," *Washington Post* v119, n287 (Tue, Sept 17, 1996); Larry Dorman, "We'll be right back, after this hip and distorted commercial break (hype surrounding entrance into professional golfing world of 20 year-old Tiger Woods)," *New York Times* v145, sec8 (Sun, Sept 1, 1996); Robert Lipsyte, "Woods suits golf's needs perfectly," *New York Times* v145, sec1 (Sun, Sept 8, 1996); David Segal, "Golf's \$60 million question; can Tiger Woods bring riches to sponsors, minorities to game?" *Washington Post* v119, n270 (Sat, August 31, 1996); Ellen Goodman, "Black (and white, Asian, Indian) like me. (golfer Tiger Woods is multiracial)," *Washington Post* v118 (Sat, April 15, 1995); Ellen Goodman, "Being more than the sum of parts; when Tiger Woods speaks of his background as multiracial, he speaks for a generation that shuns labels," *Los Angeles Times* v114 (Fri, April 14, 1995); Tiger, Tiger, burning bright. (Tiger Woods wins U.S. Amateur Golf Championship," *Los Angeles Times* v113 (Thu, Sept 1, 1994). Tiger's color also made news internationally.. In a short 200 word *Agence France Presse* story on December 5, 1996 entitled "L'Annee du

Tigre (The Year of the Tiger)," the focus was on Nike's advertising slogan about Tiger potentially being kept off of golf courses because of his skin. The paper quoted in French Tiger's Nike sponsored charge of American racism: "il y a encore des golfs aux Etats Unis ou on ne m'autorise pas a jouer a cause de la couleur de ma peau."

<sup>30</sup>John Feinstein, *Golf Magazine* (July 1997), 24. Feinstein criticized Woods and his seeming lack of political awareness, attributing this failing to his corporate sponsorships. Feinstein, *The First Coming: Tiger Woods, Master or Martyr* (New York: Ballantyne Books, 1998).

<sup>31</sup>In the quarter before Tiger Woods signed his endorsement deal, Nike's the quarterly revenues were 1.49 billion; in the quarter in which he signed with Nike total revenues were 1.9 billion, and spiked at 2.76 billion in the spring quarter of 1997 before dropping back to about 2.3 billion a quarter for the next year. Standard & Poor's report for the year ended 5/31/96, 5/31/97, and 5/31/98.

<sup>32</sup>"Through its aggressive worldwide marketing efforts and global infrastructure spending, the Company is positioning itself to continue to expand markets and gain market share on a worldwide basis. Outside the U.S., the markets in which the company operates are less mature and offer tremendous potential for growth. The strength of its brand continues with advance and futures orders scheduled for delivery over the next six months up a record 55.0%. The company's financial condition is excellent." Standard & Poor's report for the year ended 5/31/96.

<sup>33</sup>"Nike Climbs 1 3/8 as Shoe Stocks Perform Well," Nike Inc. zipped ahead 1/3/8 to 109/3/4. It signed a multimillion-dollar contract to have golfer Tiger Woods promote its products. Woods won three amateur titles and just turned pro." Leo Fasciocco, *Investor's Business Daily*, 8/19/1996, page A11.

<sup>34</sup>Standard & Poor's report for year ended 5/31/97. The perception of so many people that Tiger Woods had the potential for foreign marketing involved their connection of international sales with an American-born mixed race/culture body, and the narrative that allowed that connection was a cultural theory that fixed his ethnic fractions with origins in foreign nations. The potential of developing Asian markets for golf wear and athletic products was tied to the international appeal of Tiger's partial Asian heritage. Lost in the blackness of America's perception of Tiger, his Asian stripes could be earned on the global market, parlayed into increased sales for Nike in Southeast Asia and other growth markets for Nike's leisure products. If Michael Jordan has been the best ambassador for the international growth of basketball as a marketing vehicle, then Tiger Woods can be golf's equivalent, instantiating such global possibilities in his body. The image of Woods also serves to hide the idealization in golf of white male hierarchy by providing a non-white, multi-racial body as a fantasy pinnacle.

There is the perverse irony of selling products back to the places where capital has gone to find cheap labor. Marketing golf in Thailand, Indonesia, and other Southeast Asian nations such as Vietnam evokes the ultimate capitalist dream, to pour relatively little capital into a location in order to produce products for export to places that will pay a healthy mark-up on production costs, but also to recoup as much as possible from even those sites of production. Of course, it's not the women and children being paid thirteen cents an hour in Indonesia who will be able to play golf and buy Nike shoes. But even if it is local elites who make their portion of the profit from managing the cheap labor and creating the professional services and infrastructure for production, the dream remains of new markets springing up alongside labor sites. story of capitalism since the 18th century has been displacement of people from agricultural forms of

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subsistence "The Golf War: A Story of Land, Golf, and Revolution in the Philippines," a film by Jen Schradie and Matt DeVries (1999 Anthill Productions) [www.golfwar.org](http://www.golfwar.org)

<sup>35</sup>For how Nike marketed celebrity to establish brand identity, see Donald Katz, *Just Do It: The Nike Spirit in the Corporate World* (New York: Random House, 1994). Also see Dan Wetzel and Don Yeager, *Sole Influence: Basketball, Corporate Greed, and the Corruption of America's Youth* ((New York: Warner Books, 2000).

<sup>36</sup>See Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review*, v106, n8 (June 1993):1709-1791

<sup>37</sup>Thanks to Walter Johnson for the alluring imagery of branding to explicate this point.

<sup>38</sup>On the economics of sports and entertainment industries for African Americans, as well as a compelling argument about how social science has racialized economic injustice, see Robin Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997).

<sup>39</sup> For press coverage of the Jessica Lynch story, see for example: Stephanie Simon, "A Town's Military Conflict," *Los Angeles Times* (March 29, 2003); Jean Tarbett, "Plucky Private Product of Small Town's Values," *USA Today* (April 13, 2003); Mitch Potter, "The Real 'Saving Pte. Lynch,'" *Toronto Star* (May 4, 2003); John Kampfner, "The truth about Jessica," *London Guardian* (May 15, 2003); Don Melvin, "BBC Questions U.S. Version of Lynch Rescue," *Toronto Star* (May 17, 2003); David Jones, "So Was Saving Private Jessica a Sham?" *London Daily Mail* (May 24, 2003); Scheherezade Faramarzi, "Some Say Force Not Needed in Lynch Rescue" *Associated Press Online* (May 28, 2003); Malia Rulon, "Kucinich calls on Pentagon to release unedited tape, answer questions on Lynch's rescue," *Associated Press Online* (June 3, 2003); Hugh Dellios and E. A Torriero, "The reality behind the myth," *Chicago Tribune* (May 29, 2003); Johanna Neuman, "Lynch Now Networks' Objective," *Los Angeles Times* (June 22, 2003); Dana Priest, "A Broken Body, a Broken Story, Pieced Together," *Washington Post* (June 17, 2003); Marth Irvine and David Crary, "American Idol: How Did Jessica Lynch Become a National Hero?" *Associated Press Online* (June 22, 2003); Gethin Chamberlain, "The Truth and Private Lynch," *The Scotsman* (June 24, 2003); Howard Rosenberg, "History Rewritten to Make Us Feel Good," *Los Angeles Times* (June 30, 2003).

