



University of Guelph

Department of History

MA Thesis Defence

Student: Scott McVittie	Date: Thurs., May 5/16
Time: 10:00 am	Place: MacKinnon Rm. 132

Title

Nike and the Pigmentation Paradox: African American Representation in Popular Culture from
‘Sambo’ to ‘Air Jordan’

Abstract

Martin Luther King Jr. once remarked: “The economic highway to power has few entry lanes for Negroes.” This thesis investigates this limited-access highway in the context of American culture by analyzing the merger of sports celebrity branding and racial liberalism through a case study of Nike and the Air Jordan brand. As a spokesman for Nike, Michael Jordan was understood as both a symbol of “racial transcendence” and a figure of “racial displacement.” This dual identity spurred an important sociological debate concerning institutional racism in American society by unveiling the paradoxical narrative that governed discourse about black celebrities and, particularly, black athletes. Making use of archival research from the University of Oregon’s Special Collections Department, this study sheds light on the “Nike perspective” in furnishing an athletic meritocracy within a racially integrated community of consumers. Positioning this study within the field of African American cultural history, this thesis also interrogates representations of black culture and identity in advertising to illuminate the barriers to representational racial equality in the twentieth-century United States. Sports advertising offered up individual black success stories like Air Jordan and invited a mass of disenfranchised African Americans to buy into symbolic sites of transcendence while simultaneously denying the institutional barriers that kept the vast majority of young blacks from ever being, “Like Mike.” The case study of Nike and Air Jordan will further the emerging academic debate concerning racial liberalism in the US by charting its limits within the supposedly “color blind” cultural space of capitalism.

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