LEBRON JAMES AND THE CURSE OF PROSPERITY: BASKETBALL, AMERICAN CULTURE AND NATIONAL IDEOLOGY IN THE GLOBAL DIGITAL AGE

By

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A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF MASS COMMUNICATION

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2011
To my mom and dad, who taught me to learn and to love
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank my family for everything, as their love and support is the most vital component of my life. The University of Florida is where I always wanted to go to school, and I would be remiss if I did not thank the professors who have shaped my academic life: Richard Buckner (@ Santa Fe College), Kurt Kent, Ron Rodgers, Willie Baber, Abe Goldman, Peter Bergmann and the members of my esteemed committee, Johanna Cleary and Belio Martinez. Special mention must be made for committee chairman Michael Leslie, a great man and good friend who I am proud to call my mentor.
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Basketball and semiotics, both American inventions from the 1890s crafted to help order society along structural lines, are engaged in an ideological analysis of national identity and the political economy of sports commercials. Michael Jordan's unparalleled ability to win championships and influence people contrasts sharply with Charles Barkley's rough yet pointed ideology, but both men worked in concert to shape American identity in the post-Communist age. LeBron James stepped into their spotlight in 2010 and incurred the wrath of a country raised on potent commercial images of these basketball stars. How LeBron positioned himself as a globalized market mercenary in a time of great economic tumult defined his place in American culture and poisoned the national sentiment for a sublimely talented athlete guilty of nothing more than the free exercise of rights related to his labor.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Basketball is a sport, a cultural touchstone and a global media product – but it was always more than just a game. Basketball began as a Protestant social experiment in 1891 at a Young Men’s Christian Association in Massachusetts, and the polished product beamed via satellite to Shanghai today seems in many important ways to be an entirely different entity than James Naismith’s comparatively pedestrian creation. Unpacking this dual nature of basketball is essential for understanding how the sport has existed from inception as a host site for representations of American nationalism and conceptions of modernity. From being present at the birth of sporting nationalism to hatching the soaring corporate notion of a global sports icon, basketball is a way that Western values and ideas have always been able to shape the powerful “imagined communities” that have dominated the last hundred years of world development.

Western values have always been transmitted through cultural products much more pervasively than via political channels, and American professional basketball players’ inaugural foray into international competition using a “Dream Team” of all-time greats in the 1992 Summer Olympics sparked a global cultural revolution right as Communism crumbled in Europe and Tianmen Square shook with revolt. Billions of dollars poured into the companies who bankrolled commercials with basketball’s brightest stars, and the global stage afforded the 1992 Olympic Dream Team provided an unprecedented opportunity for message promotion.

Basketball stars have functioned as bellwethers of American identity for much of the last twenty-five years, communicating certain dominant and latent messages about sport and society. Advertisements effectively outline the public personalities of our
sporting heroes and shape the common cultural mores that each basketball star represents. The television commercial situated within sport is “the ideal ambiance for the penetration of consciousness by a wide variety of ideological messages” because it captures an audience “in its most vulnerable condition, relaxed yet fully receptive to the physical action and the inserted sales pitch” (Schiller, 1989, p. 130).

In commercials, Michael Jordan jumped from being a championship-caliber basketball player into a symbol specifically engineered to sell products (Kellner, 2001). Never fully human yet wholesome as Wonderbread, Michael Jordan could not be allowed the flaws and frailties of a vulnerable living organism. The illusory archetype for the modern sports megastar seems to have been birthed fully formed during this era, a blueprint that reaches across cultures and forms a powerful collective memory (Anderson, 1983) in the era of common capitalist cultures and global communications platforms.

Diametrically opposite Michael Jordan on the court and in commercials was his Olympic teammate Charles Barkley. Barkley, in basic terms, signified everything that Jordan could not. Barkley was rough, ideological and ultimately a much more sympathetic figure because he was allowed to be human. Barkley never won an National Basketball Association championship, whereas Jordan was the epitome of championship athletic endeavor. Barkley occupied a specific role in the early 1990s global cultural dissemination of American cultural identity, one that negotiated the universal relations of power using the hegemonic commercial hijacking of differentiation and marginality.
Jordan was the greatest basketball player ever, and he was the perfect silent partner to corporate America (Andrews 1998; 2001; 2006; Kellner, 2001; LaFeber, 2002). Barkley was also a world-class basketball player, but his greatness on the court stood secondary to his legendarily flagrant personality (Goldman & Papson, 1998). These cultural constructions stood for two decades until LeBron James turned the 2010/2011 NBA season into a rousing national dialogue on race, culture and American identity through a combination of his electrifying on-court actions and the virtually unprecedented scope of media and fan backlash to his career-related decisions throughout the year. From the June 2010 decision by James to play at least a portion of his basketball career with the Miami Heat to the penultimate game of the NBA Finals in June 2011, America was transfixed by the public image that LeBron James cultivated – and how that image contrasted and clashed with past commercial images of basketball stars, the conventions of the basketball star-making apparatus and American conceptions of self and nation within the dominant sport and corporate nationalisms (Andrews & Silk, 2005).

Modern basketball stars are the American face of a world game that has consistently been a marker of modernity just as many obvious dysfunctions of unregulated worldwide market interdependence (global economic upheaval, overconsumption, unemployment, pollution and unsustainable standards of living) seem increasingly like a false bill of goods. Whereas Michael Jordan and Charles Barkley continue to represent the halcyon days of American post-communist expansion during the economically explosive 1990s, LeBron has been tethered to the listing economy of
today through his word and deed. How American national identity is ultimately tied up with these three individuals is a main focus of this work.

Analyzing global basketball icons in advertising provides a way of reflecting on the role of advertising in defining cultural discourse. Through the use of a Piercean discourse analysis in semiotics, this research decodes three of the most commercially popular and broadly famous advertising spots featuring Michael Jordan, Charles Barkley and LeBron James, as a means of investigating the political and economic roles of sports media messages in contemporary American and global culture. Specifically, this work seeks to place the widespread animus washing over the world’s best basketball player as a decidedly American reaction to the global market economy and market capitalism as it is currently fashioned by establishing a semiotic analysis of the political and cultural economy of LeBron James.

Basketball and semiotics were both American inventions created around the dawn of the 20th century that served to help order society in a rapidly changing world. Basketball, born in Springfield, Massachusetts, sprang forth fully formed from the religious values of Protestant America and immediately traveled the world to affect cultural change in China. American semiotics, created by Charles Pierce only 90 miles from basketball’s birthplace in nearby Cambridge, Massachusetts, incubated for a far longer period than basketball but eventually became a structure which served to help organize social thought. Both basketball and semiotics were American solutions for the perceived problems of modern society and both are human attempts to understand the challenges of the increasingly fractured livelihoods and guide society towards a greater understanding of self within the context of our shared reality. This work is an attempt to
resurrect the original distillation of Piercean American semiotics through an examination of America’s most compellingly global game and analysis of America’s sporting icons using basketball stars and basketball commercials.

While media and communication scholars (Moriarty, 1996; Iedema, 2003; Aiello, 2006; Gaines, 2008) and anthropologists (Fischer, 1991; Mazzarella, 2004; Torop, 2006) point to the fertile potential of using semiotic analysis to examine the ideology driving modern mass culture, this work is a concrete effort to establish a reproducible blueprint for this American semiotic cultural analysis. Ideological analysis is vital for the deconstruction of commercial messages (Makus, 1990; Domzal & Kernan, 1993; Stern, 1996) into markers of national identity (Epner, 2005), and basketball in America has proven to be a site where diverse studies of American identity and cultural conflict are explored fruitfully (Page, 1997; Burstyn, 1998; Cole & King, 1998; Shehid, 2003; Falcous & Maguire, 2005; McKay, 2005; Ohl, 2005; Wilson, 2005; Ebanda de B’beri & Hogarth, 2009; McDonald & Toglia, 2010; Buffington & Fraley, 2011). By placing basketball within an ideological frame of American national identity throughout the 1990s and into the second decade of the 21st century, this work is a cultural examination of commercial ads that merely provides a single viewpoint in what is a staggeringly large potential canon of individual perspectives and experiences – embodying the essential value of Piercean semiotics through the adoption of strong individual perspective in order to inform the larger body of necessarily subjective knowledge (Sebeok, 1976; Danesi, 1995; Sebeok & Danesi, 2000).
The Invention of Basketball

James Naismith, first and foremost, wanted to find a game he could get his students to enjoy playing. Various experimentations by Naismith and other teachers at the Springfield School for Christian Workers – under the direction of Luther Gulick - proved fruitless in this simple task. The main problem with their approach was that they all tried to adapt existing games to fit their needs. As the leader of the YMCA-affiliated teacher’s college, Gulick was pushing his men to create a game that could be played in the winter months and that promoted values concurrent with the religious organization. A completely new approach was necessary, and Naismith – with a degree in theology and the energy of a first-year teacher – intended first and foremost to promote some specific morals with his new game. “Games have been called the laboratory for the development of moral attributes; but they will not, of themselves, accomplish this purpose. They must be properly conducted by competent individuals” (Naismith, 1941, p. 184).

There were thirteen basic rules for the game of basketball when James Naismith put the finishing touches on his invention directly before a class session in 1891, but these original rules have been so diluted that they are not of much critical use today. However, basketball as Naismith saw it could inculcate a dozen values that would come to define the ideals of a “Muscular Christianity” movement that would be adopted by and adapted to some of the most influential political and social movements in the United States. The attributes of speed, agility, alertness, skill, reflex judgment and cooperation are all endemic to team sports in general and need not be singled out for emphasis.
However, half of Naismith’s twelve moral attributes are notable in their overtly progressive nature – and the way that Naismith chose to enunciate each individual skill in a manner freighted with meaning.

“Self-sacrifice, a willingness to place the good of the team above one’s personal ambitions. The unit in basketball is the team rather than the individual player” (p. 187)

“Self-control, the subordination of one’s feelings for a purpose. The player who permits his feelings to interfere with his reflexes is not only a hindrance to his team, but he is also occupying a place that might be better filled by another player” (p. 187).

“Initiative, the ability to meet new conditions with efficiency. When he meets an entirely new condition, he cannot depend on the coach, but must face the emergency himself” (p. 184).

“Accuracy, the ability to do the exact thing that is attempted. It is the accuracy with which the acts are done that determines basketball games” (p. 185).

“Sportsmanship, the player’s insistence on his own rights and his observance of the rights of others. It is playing the game vigorously, observing the rules definitely, accepting defeat gracefully, and winning courteously” (p. 187).

“Self-confidence, the consciousness of ability to do things. There are times when he cannot depend on his teammates to do things, even though they are better qualified than he is” (p. 186).

**Basketball’s Initial Ideological Deployment**

The historical setting of basketball in America is that of a sport created in the bloom of the progressive republicanism personified by Teddy Roosevelt. The “sporting republic” flourishing by the beginning of 20th century America aimed to guarantee “self-improvement and national survival in a changing world” (Dyreson, 1998, p. 22). “The sporting republicans hoped that sport was the secret for transporting the imagined solidarity of the small town to the greater national community” (p. 24). This imagined community, based on a stilted view of Athenian history and the role of sport in the democratic process of ancient Greece, pushed an aggressive Americanism to the
forefront of political and social thought. Presidents Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson are often considered to be the two most outspoken and visible proponents of this particular line of rational progressive thinking, and many of their speeches are dotted with overt references to sport as a training ground for national identity. Along with the burgeoning mass media of the age, the two Presidents pushed “organized athletics as an essential social force in their struggle to shape modernity” (p. 122). Dyreson (1998) explicitly links the successful presidential campaigns of Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson and William Howard Taft to “the American fascination with the political manifestations of sport reflect(ing) the analogical reasoning that that related regulation of the body with the regulation of the body politic, the rules and structures of the modern athletic contests with the constitutionalism that underlay(s) the American republican tradition” (p. 186). The politics of the age reinforced burgeoning capitalist and individualist movements, and the language of politics successfully borrowed from the new sports ideology. Roosevelt has been captured in history as a jocular and masculine figure that spearheaded an era of aggressive Americanism - crystallized in his beliefs outlining “The Strenuous Life,” often credited to a speech in 1899 at The Hamilton Club of Chicago.

“We do not admire the man of timid peace. We admire the man who embodies victorious effort; the man who never wrongs his neighbor, who is prompt to help a friend, but who has those virile qualities necessary to win in the stern strife of actual life. It is hard to fail, but it is worse never to have tried to succeed” (p. 214).

This ideal of strenuous exertion in the pursuit of a greater good fit hand in glove with the tenets of what came to be known as “Muscular Christianity.” Introduced to the lexicon of Western thought by English theologians in the mid-19th century, Muscular Christianity sought to promote sports and the sporting life as the most direct and
efficient way to build virtuous and value-based young men (Putney, 2001). Proponents of Muscular Christianity found their most successful tool to be the new sport of basketball. A new team game that carried none of the colonial ties of soccer or the brutality of lacrosse or American football, basketball also required little in the way of equipment - thereby making it a more accessible sport than baseball or ice hockey. Theodore Roosevelt had close ties with the YMCA and often spoke highly of the organization in speeches (Putney, 2001). Roosevelt cultivated a close relationship with YMCA chief Luther Gulick, and Gulick dedicated one of his five books to the President (Putney, 2001). James Naismith, the inventor of basketball, worked directly under Luther Gulick at the time of the sport’s creation -- and Gulick used basketball to try and blanket the world in a specific set of cultural values.

The interconnectedness of the leaders of the YMCA and President Roosevelt, while each separately propagating the pervasive ideals of virtue through fair play and strenuous exercise for social uplift, had a definite impact on American culture in the beginning of the 20th century. Zealous leaders with forceful ideas about the momentum of market capitalism and the sanctity of the American system sought new frontiers for American men to prove their mettle, and a growing world market began to take shape as the 20th century began. The expansion of Western-style capitalism became the unspoken context behind the explicit basketball tenets of strong individual achievement for the benefit of the system within the competitive framework of free and fair play of both markets and team sports. From its very inception, the game of basketball would be exported to Asia in order to sow the seeds of progress and modernity -- initially cloaked in the soft gospel of the YMCA.
Basketball’s Global Incubation

Even before the invention of basketball in 1891, over a thousand missionaries were stationed solely in China (Gems, 2006). In 1896, the Tianjin YMCA first introduced basketball to the network of existing Christian missionaries (Gems, 2006) and by 1900 competitions among schools and organizations was becoming a regular part of the social landscape. Government reforms of curriculum in 1905 pushed China toward sports, but away from the Christianity espoused by the YMCA (Gems, 2006). The ideal of *tiyu* – defined loosely as body cultivation or physical culture and central to the Chinese ideal of sporting nationalism – was invoked to transform “effete self-serving subjects into manly citizens with a single, common purpose” (Morris, 2004, p. 3). The first Chinese physical culture periodical, *Physical Education World (Tiyujie)*, was established in 1909 and explicitly set up the “ancient” ideas of *tiyu* expressed in archery, polo, martial arts and golf against a “modern” set of values espoused foremost by basketball (Morris, 2004). Xu Yibing, publisher of *Tiyujie* and an early leader of athletic and social reform in China, succinctly states the problem with existing Chinese physical and political culture:

“The people of our nation are weary and spiritless, our bodies emaciated by disease. We trudge on towards death, and if we bother to find out why, we see that it is nothing but the harm from our abandonment of *tiyu*….Alas! These deficient, weak, exhausted bodies – what in the world would happen if they were pushed into the unforgiving competition of men in this evolutionary world of strong countries and strong physiques?” (Morris, 2004, p. 2)

Yibing returned to China after an expulsion to Japan for being hostile to the ruling Qing elites, and his hostility toward the symbols of Qing culture manifested itself in a strong voice for the new idea of Westernized athletic *tiyu*. The push for modernity and progress inherent in nation-state construction during the early 20th century is in sync
with modern physical culture, and basketball – due to an immediate global dispersion and carefully crafted value system – became a bellwether of modernity in Asia. The refocusing of tiyu toward Western sports culture worked in concert with market capitalism in early 20th century China to provide an ideological repositioning of the nation and Chinese nationality. Japan and the West was the model toward which China hoped to modernize, and for Morris (2004) basketball in particular provided “a space to enter into competition as equals, exceeding one’s limits and pushing one’s opponents to exceed theirs” (p. 71). The “fair competition and friendly struggle” on a basketball court mirrored the global expansion of free markets that China eagerly cultivated during this era. Another product of the Western competitive modernity structure – the international competition organized around the Olympic ideal – provided more fuel to the twin fires of nationalism and basketball in Asia. “Without the international context there would be no need to create a modern Chinese nation, and without the nation and its need to impress itself on the minds of all modern citizens, no one would ever have thought to organize, participate in, or pay to view institutions like the Olympics or the Far Eastern Games” (Morris, 2004, p. 77). Both China and America, than, used basketball as a measuring stick for the way their respective counties manufactured vigorous men ready for the challenges of modernity. While it would be nearly impossible to see the profound way that China would change under Communist rule or the mediated role ideology now plays in China’s future of selective capitalism, it is interesting to note that basketball has always existed as a site for the construction of Chinese identity – and that it took the country the better part of the last century to overcome Japan both on the basketball court and in the global business arena.
The transnational organizational networks that undergird massive spectacles like international games were brought to Asia by the same transnational organization that brought basketball – the YMCA. The Far Eastern Championship Games were held ten times between 1913 and 1934 and were the first time Chinese athletes competed in international sport (Morris, 1994). The Japanese athletes dominated their Chinese competitors during the inaugural games in 1913. As the name suggests, this was a localized precursor to the Olympic format that pitted a few Asian nation-states against each other in a series of athletic contests. One of the few team sports involved from the beginning was basketball. While the officially stated goals of simply participating in the games and spreading Chinese interest in sports and fitness may have been met, losing in such a resounding manner to the Japanese was not good for tiyu. A Chinese journalist of the era demanded to know how “the republic of China, with its three thousand years of culture and history, 34, 403, 740 square miles of fertile land, and population of 474 million, could be defeated, sent away crying, by a tiny nation of three islands! This is not only a shame – it is pathetic!” (Morris, 1994, p. 162). Almost immediately, the regional games had shed their veneer of sportsmanship and brotherhood for Chinese citizens and become a site of intensely nationalistic rage.

Basketball was one of the few areas where the Chinese nation was competitive with other nations in the region, and as such was a culturally valuable asset to the nation. Before virtually any other team sport could take hold in China, basketball was a site of identity formation and competition against rival nations and cultures. Basketball was appropriated almost immediately from the YMCA missionaries in China and now has a long and storied history as a “traditional sport” taught in secondary schools.
(Mangum, 2001) and as a site for vigorously defending their cultural and political values against the rest of the world. That the Chinese, wary as they are of foreign influences on their culture and insulated by geography and ideology from overwhelming Western values, have adopted basketball and ingrained it so deeply into their culture is more than just a quirk of history.

The history of basketball in the United States and in China is really a story about the social constructs that sport represents in individual national contexts. Americans invented a game, imbued it with their interpretation of social order and almost immediately exported it to China. Both countries found that basketball was extremely useful for advancing conceptions of nation and of nationhood, and in many ways basketball has always been a site of globalization as it was the only team sport to have always had a prominent place in the transnational organizational structure of the Olympic games. Understanding how basketball was redeployed at the end of the next century requires the construction of a different set of social facts, and in order to undertake this task the assistance of figurational sociology is necessary.

**Perspectives From Sociology**

Figurational sociology, spearheaded by Emile Durkheim and utilized to a great extent in sports sociology to uncover “the impact that large scale structures of society have on the thoughts and actions of individuals,” balances on finding “social facts,” which are “both cultural norms and social structures that are external to and constrain and regulate social actors” (Jarvie & Maguire, 1994, p. 5). If society is to be understood as “less the product of collective human action and more a constraining abstraction” (p. 6), than figurational sociologists in the vein of Durkheim uncover the precise cultural and
social forces that serve as constraining abstractions in the inexorable drive toward modernity.

Durkheim, writing in roughly the same historical period that birthed basketball, focused his studies on the way societies evolved through the construction of solidarity and found two avenues of development that corresponded to the binary political environment of the early 20th century. Concerned with “the changing nature of order” over all else, Durkheim posited that societies developed solidarity in either a “mechanical” or an “organic” manner (p. 11). The push from mechanical to organic societies is an articulation of the idea that traditional societies have developed similarly across the globe into modern societies, and as such can be aligned with modernization theory. Where Durkheim focuses his efforts, though, is on the communication of values that serve to bind together people through efforts at social cohesion that range from mechanical and overt to organic and covert.

**Manufacturing Consent**

“In one [society], marked by mechanical solidarity, there was a relatively undifferentiated social structure and little or no divisions of labor. Unity was maintained because all people are generalists: the individual was so directly and harmoniously linked with society that their individual action was always spontaneous, unreflexive and collective” (Jarvie & Maguire, 1994, p. 11). Mechanical solidarity has a declining rate of efficacy such that, as societies evolve and personal freedoms grow alongside the increased specialization of tasks and responsibilities inherent in capitalist and market economies, social unity is no longer overtly programmable along traditional party lines but instead must be transmitted “by a consensus or moral belief” ingrained in “the collective conscience and collective representations” in an organic manner (p. 11).
Organic solidarity, than, is a stage of development concerning the communication of moral and social values within a society as it gradually deals with the pull of modernity and the diffusion of market capitalism. As a “moral element of social life” that is rife with social facts, modern sports have been the focus of figurational sociologists for more than four decades (Jarvie & Maguire, 1994, p. 12). Organic solidarity is the chief means of value production in modern societies, especially as value production pertains to mass communications. As societies evolved and patterns of development began to mirror patterns of global mass communications, broad social changes were evident in few public spaces more clearly than in the development of modern sports.

**Sport Figurations in Society**

For Elias and Dunning, the fathers of figurational sports sociology, “the term figuration refers to a web of interdependent human beings and, like all other aspects of known reality human figurations are inherently processural” (Dunning, 1993, p. 43).

“Life itself is a process and the living human beings who form figurations are not only interdependent with each other but have to act and interact – both with each other and the rest of nature – to secure the production and reproduction of their lives...Human beings always live together, and the pattern of their interdependence, the ways in which their actions interweave as they attempt to secure their shared and conflicting ends, is the structure of the figuration that they form” (p. 44).

The process of our social interactions, than, comprise the figurations that bind us to each other and to societies ranging from local to global. Sports, in the latter half of the twentieth century, were a central transmission point for the “cornerstone” or “central theory” of figurational sociology – “a more or less continuous elaboration and refinement of manners and social standards (that) can be shown to have taken place, together with an increase in the social pressure on people to exercise stricter and more even self-
control over their feelings in more and more fields of social reform,” or what also can be termed “the civilizing process” (Dunning, 1993, p. 46).

Figurational sociology is predicated on how societies have dealt with modernity and other processes that seem like one-way streets to what many critics call an “Americanization” of the globe. Dunning is quick to point out that this civilizing process can indeed reverse itself, but that focus on the process itself is what is important. The movement of society toward a civilizing ethos is a shift that “has not involved a simple, unilinear, and continuously progressive increase in self-controls but, rather, a shift toward a dominant type of personality” expected to “exercise more regular, stable, even, and comprehensive control over their behavior and their feelings” (p. 46). The boundaries that our sports draw into our lives are often the very boundaries that keep us actively and nonviolently participating in society, and channeling natural human urges of violence and tension is often one of the most important and primary functions of any organized society. The communication of values through sports images and structures often provide an alternative way to express core characteristics that oftentimes run afoul of legal or interpersonal boundaries when given no alternate outlet. In this way, sports save us from ourselves. In spite of this figuration clearly outlined by Dunning, sports remain an overlooked aspect of human society in academic circles and are continually dismissed as an unimportant factor in the unprecedented drop in violent behavior that marks the last century (Pinker, 2011). While this paper cannot adequately refute these claims, further work from the history of basketball in the realm of sports sociology can help establish sport as a site of concrete social meaning and import.
Global Sport Development

Maguire writes from a figurational sociological perspective about what he calls the five stages or phases of global sportization. The five stages of global sportization focus Maguire (1999) on the “connections between sport, nostalgia and identity politics” (p. 391). Maguire sees basketball as a product of the “third sportization phase during the late 19th and early 20th centuries overlapping with a fourth phase that lasted from the 1920s to the 1960s,” where sports diffusion was bound to both nationalism and globalization processes that resulted in a sporting landscape featuring the “intensification of national sentiment, the emergence of nation-states, and the invention of traditions” (p. 393).

Basketball connects to the “take-off phase” of globalization from the 1870s to 1920s and the “increase in the number of international agencies, the growth of increasingly global forms of communication, the development of global competitions and prizes, and the development of standard notions of rights, citizenship, and humanity that are increasingly standardized internationally” (Maguire, 1999, p. 394). This line of thought traces the development of sports as a process for identifying the development of world systems and indeed even the very conceptions of nation and self that would become building blocks of the 20th century.

Maguire’s fourth phase of global sportization continued many of the narrative threads of early globalization from the 1920s into the 1960s, but this evolving development of sports and signification began to take on a decidedly American tone. Western domination of the sporting processes were most evident in this time period, and the fourth phase of global sportization also coincides with the time in history when America was most dominant politically and ideologically as the world slowly developed.
into a binary system of power and influence that was split between Communism and the West. For Maguire, the fourth phase mainly resulted in a hegemonic establishment of explicitly American political economic values in sport as a marker for what it meant to be “Western” in the binary structure of East vs. West (1999).

As Maguire’s fifth phase of global sportization began in the late 1960s, the process of differentiation and challenges to the sporting hegemony of the West began to take shape. The Cold War heated up, resulting in Olympic matches pitting the United States and the United Soviet Socialist Republic that oftentimes took the tone of actual international battles where the stakes were the very survival of one’s way of life. Maguire (1999) gently transitioned his fifth phase into what he termed the “Global Sports Figuration” or “Global Sports Process,” and this is marked by a “decentering of the West” and a “globalization of sports and an increase in the diversity of global sports cultures” (p. 93).

This soft paean to early globalization theory does not effectively interpret the scope and breadth of global advertising campaigns based around sport, and it unnecessarily (and wrongly) discards what should be a critical examination of the continuing power of nationalism which rightly held a prominent place in the earlier phases of global sportization. Maguire should not be held entirely at fault for this lapse, as his five phases of global sportization were the product of a time period (the 1990s) where America predominantly experienced the best outcomes of a globalized economic landscape (cheap manufactured goods from China, new technological and communications products, new markets for American goods). Maguire and other traditional sports sociologists did not forsee the potential downside to a fully global
economy, most notably American manufacturing’s ability to move worldwide for the lowest labor costs and a propensity for global boom and bust cycles that magnify the regular perils of public stock markets. Sports sociology hit something of an ideological wall as the twentieth century ended, exemplified by Maguire’s five phases and their inability to produce valuable research in the shadow of how sports reflect national insecurity with economic globalization. “By overemphasizing the cultural and political integrity of the average suburban living room [social sciences] ran the risk of turning the ethnography of media into a celebration of banal differences and pyrrhic insurrectionary acts...divert[ing] critical attention away from the complex of institutions, mediations and interests that used to be known as the culture industries” (Mazzarella, 2004, p. 350).

Sports Studies and Cultural Theory

Where figurational sociologists get it right is in “viewing the emergence of new forms of regulation and control as a complex series of responses to the perceived condition of modernity, including its apparent problems and changing relations of power” (Gruneau, 1993, p. 87). As Gruneau (1993) points out, it is important to discard the “tendency to see the modernization of sport as an abstract evolutionary process rather than a more open-ended set of limits, pressures and struggles” (p. 87). The space carved out by Gruneau as he links the ideology of hegemony and communication to more traditional figurational sports sociology is vital for decoding basketball as cultural text. Gruneau (1993) visits the Marxism of Adorno and Gramsci when he “expects the wide range of structures, beliefs, styles and bodily practices emergent in sport to continue to be incorporated into marketing and commerce in the manner that poses little threat to the new bloc of interests that will define global capitalism in the twenty-first century...in an increasingly international consumer culture, the sphere of ‘the popular’ –
which centrally includes sport and the body – will be more important than ever before in the formation of social and political identities” (p. 99). Overt ideology must be a part of the equation, as to erase ideology from the picture is to compose an intricate portrait of the night sky and purposely refrain from using black paint. Tiptoeing around ideology – especially as the global economy teeters on wobbly legs and gives so many of the basic tenets of Marx new life and even a renewed spirit of purpose – would not reflect reality as it is currently comprised. “The old distinction which classical Marxism used to make between the economic ‘base’ and the ideological ‘superstructure’ is difficult to sustain in circumstances where the media both form a critical part of the material infrastructure of modern societies and are the principal means by which ideas and images are circulated (Hall, 1980, p. 209).

Large-Scale Focus and Small-Scale Analysis

For the sake of creating an academic blueprint that is vigorous enough to deal with reality, theoretical constructs like hegemony must be fused with the best work in figurational sports sociology in order to decode the new global ideology injected into the world communications structure via basketball. The bridge between figurational sports sociology and Marxism consists of the work of (and research inspired by) Richard Gruneau, John Hargreaves and David Andrews. These sports sociologists retain enough of the skepticism toward too-narrow interpretations of Marxism to accept many of the core concepts that Marx and like-minded scholars laid out while also looking for structural and figurational webs that end up shaping society. In the work of Gruneau and Hargreaves, Stuart Hall and Neo-Marxists like Adorno and Gramsci are often cited. Only through this broad sociological base can we attempt to explore the work of
communications scholars like Stuart Hall and Douglas Kellner and the vibrant scholarship directed by David Andrews on the cultural economy of basketball.

It should be noted that Gruneau became disillusioned with the bleak outlook many ascribe from their readings of Marxism and found hope in the Neo-Marxist ideal that hegemony and domination can be reversed through "emancipatory social transformation" (Gruneau, 1993, p. 101). For Gruneau (1993), Gramsci pointed to just how the “ideas and values found in the language and outlook of their time and culture” in popular cultural transmissions “were decisively implicated in the formation of active political agents and any alliance of ‘collective wills’ that could be forged into a hegemonic historical bloc”- making “struggles over the sphere of the popular” the most important place to look in order to investigate culture and societies (p. 100).

The Nexus of Basketball and Postmodern Cultural Studies

Perhaps the fact that basketball is the only globally-significant game on the world scene that was invented from whole cloth is due in no small part to the idea that the structure of the modern game is itself inextricably tied to several key tenets of both post-industrial society and the unending human quest for modernity – and the similarly inexhaustible propensity of Westerners to shape the globe in our image. Several authors have explored these ties that bind the structure of basketball to the structure of modern society, most notably Mandelbaum and Forney.

Mandelbaum sees basketball as the ultimate post-industrial expression of sport. The lack of equipment and obtrusive uniform elements necessarily worn by basketball players – a key point that factors into analysis of the sport’s televised impact – help Mandelbaum (2004) connect a basketball player to “the knowledge worker of post-industrial society” who brings little more than “his own skill” to work everyday (p. 200).
The indoor arenas and artificial courts that support basketball games are a sporting representation of man’s post-industrial removal from nature (p. 201) and the relative gender equality of basketball mirrors society’s drive against the inherent sexism of industrialized and agrarian societies (p. 207).

Perhaps the place where Mandelbaum makes best use of his theory of post-industrialist basketball identity is when he deals with the systematic innovation, the lack of specialization and the network structure inherent to the sport (2004, p. 201). Mandelbaum (2004) is precisely correct when he states that basketball was birthed by design, the “deliberate pursuit of new products and new technologies to fulfill pre-existing needs” (p. 201). The way each player on a basketball court is asked to be competent in every skill used in the game does indeed fit quite nicely into the post-industrial paradigm of skilled workers competent in a broad range of tasks, transposed against the specialization of factory work (p. 202). For Mandelbaum (2004), basketball asks its players to hold at least partial responsibility for authority, as a basketball coach is more of a manager than a disciplinarian and power flows horizontally on the basketball court between individual players as well as vertically downward from the coach to the players (p. 202). This collective power structure most resembles a network, where “the component units interact directly with one another and each has greater scope for independent action than is the case in industrial enterprises” (p. 203).

Basketball flows forward with infrequent stops in the action and at a breakneck pace that allows for scoring to potentially reach up into several hundred combined points, a characteristic that both Mandelbaum and Forney point to as a signpost of the quest for modernity. Forney (2007) goes so far as to signal this as a portrayal of “the
American story of irreversible progress to an ideal life” from the “perception of dramatic advancement” of humanity (p. 85). Mandelbaum cites the way this action flows as a chance to showcase teamwork and team chemistry more than any other sport, “where the whole is most often greater than the sum of its parts” (2004, p. 205). Forney sees this quickened pace and combines it with the use of a perfectly round ball to make basketball the only sport that “enables the use of anticipatory powers,” which “conveys the understanding in the United States of well-developed people who follow strong intuition to accomplishments in pursuit of perfection” (2007, p. 87).

Mandelbaum and Forney, by imbuing the physical act of sport with value production, are updating the “ludic diffusion” of Guttman (1993) in figurational sports sociology with postmodern cultural critique and evaluative analysis steeped in the political economy of American culture. Where sports sociologists work most effectively in the cultural aspects of basketball (Andrews, 1998, 2001, 2006; Silk, 2005; Cole, 2005; Kellner, 2001) is analyzing media representations of basketball stars acting as cultural and commercial ambassadors with semiotics, or the study of how images communicate.

**Semiotics and Cultural Studies**

As an interpretative theory of visual communication, semiotics developed according to two interconnected schools of thought. Ferdinand de Saussure spearheaded a metaphysically minded semiotics originating from Europe, and Charles S. Pierce wrote what would become the foundations of a more pragmatic semiotics credited to America. Saussure’s French semiotics tends to be quite slippery, especially in light of his guiding principle of nominalism, where “concepts are reduced to ‘acoustic images’” (Deledalle, 2000, p. 107). Pierce, on the other hand, anchored his semiotics to
the cultures that produce the images and how communication is interpreted within societal contexts with sets of three typologies of analysis. The use of categories of three in order to understand semiotics is where Pierce diverges from de Saussure most evidently. De Saussure used a binary system to explain his semiotics, and Pierce depended always on structures of threes. This is primarily because the third level of analysis predominantly deals with socio-cultural impacts in Piercean semiotics.

**Theories of Three**

The essay “A Guess at the Riddle,” where Pierce makes his core triad blueprint the most accessible, is a part of the widely-accepted body of knowledge in media theory and is included in *The Communication Theory Reader*. His work utilizes three units of analysis in order to answer “the very essence of things, and if we are to make one single threefold philosophical distinction, it behooves us to ask beforehand what are the kinds of objects that are first, second and third, not in being so counted, but in their own true characters” (Cobley, 1996, p. 48). This “trichotomy” or “triad,” to Pierce, is as natural as the morning, noon and night or praying to the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. Pierce speaks of “firstness” and “secondness” as if they are self-evident subjects, not difficult socio-cultural observational concepts.

> “The first is that whose being is simply in itself, not referring to anything nor lying behind anything. The second is that which is what it is by force of something to which it is second. The third is that which is what it is owing to things between which it mediates and which it brings into relation to each other” (Cobley, 1996, p. 48).

First an object exists as it is, then it exists in accordance with the things surrounding it, and finally it exists within the context of more broad cultural and social forces. This heuristic construct is a definition of the iconic triad or triad typology of signs, the most utilized Piercean triad in communications research. The iconic triad is “part of
the standard lexicon of semiotic theory and practice” (Danesi, 1995, p. 28) and lends semiotics neatly to cultural analysis (Berger, 2000). The iconic triad has been fitted to work in visual analysis for a number of different purposes, and it is resilient as well as dynamic.

**The Iconic Triad of Analysis**

In entry-level portals intended to familiarize students of marketing as well as working advertisers with some of the key concepts of semiotics, the iconic triad filters images through three different stages of analysis. The first level, iconic analysis, is “immediate interpretation” of “elements that are directly identifiable and accepted by all” (Nadin & Zakia, 1994, p. 41). The next level, indexic analysis, is a “mediated interpretation” of a “second level of meaning” inherent to symbolism and the level where the viewer of an advertisement usually stops their conscious thought process (p. 42). Finally, images are analyzed symbolically on a level of “specialized interpretation” that “stimulate projections and elaborations” (p. 42). This same triad is also used by Olier and Giardetti (1999) and in the work of Sebeok (1976, 2000, 2001) and Danesi (1995, 1999, 2000). Danesi proposes utilizing a distillation of the original “iconic triad” that has become the most resilient of the Piercean traditions. Danesi (1995) plots out a triad chart that allows for the injection of semiotic analysis into advertising research. The three levels of the triad that Danesi uses – the index, the icon and the symbol – correspond to increasingly nuanced levels of analysis.

The first level, or the index, is a sign “with a direct existential connection to its referent; smoke is an index of fire, a cough is an index of a cold, and so on” (Danesi, 1995, p. 28). The icon is a secondary level of analysis that signals “a narrative format that is implied or suggested by the visual features of an ad text” (p. 57). The
connections made at the level of iconic signification are what are most commonly associated with semiotics and can be easily dismissed if not anchored to the third level of analysis, the symbolic level. A symbolic interpretation takes place through "convention" because "the relation to the referent must be learned in a cultural context" (p. 29).

For purposes of clarity, in this analysis these levels are called first, second and third. The first level carries many of the same characteristics of Danesi's (1995) index level of analysis, the second level is iconic narrative implied by the commercial as in Danesi, and the third level is cultural analysis that in many ways mirrors the symbolic level of analysis (1995). As these three levels in this analysis are also influenced by Moriarty (1996) and Gaines (2008), some separation from Danesi is necessarily achieved through a more simple numerical description of the three levels of analysis.

One of the most important principles that Danesi advances is the idea that a semiotic researcher must not determine the "degree to which an ad, a commercial, an ad campaign or other strategy will induce consumers to buy the manufacturer's product" because "it is not the goal of semiotics to criticize advertisers" (Beasley & Danesi, 2002, p. 31)

"On the contrary, semioticians should, in theory, approach an ad or commercial like they would a work of literature or art. The same questions that art and literary critics ask about a painting or a novel are the ones that a semiotician should ask about an ad or a commercial. To the semiotician, advertising provides an opportunity to examine how varied aesthetic experiences, classical forms of expression, and modes of representation are realized in a contemporary medium" (Beasley & Danesi, 2002, pp. 31-32).

Pierce held that individual interpretation of meaning is subjective – forerunning much modern theoretical work in mass communications and sociology – but that an
image and a word can have meanings which in essence play off the individual, reflect society and then in turn create new (intentional and unintentional) meanings (Aiello, 2006; Idema, 2003) simultaneously. Because Pierce (and the subsequent Piercean scholars) do not use the word “meaning” in the same way most people do, for the purposes of this research the pursuit is toward an understanding of the signs and significations of an image rather than the meaning.

“The notion of meaning is best left undefined in semiotic theory. It is something of which everyone has an intuitive understanding, but which virtually no one can really explain. It is a given. On the other hand, the term signification, as used in semiotics, is much easier to define, even though meaning and signification are used interchangeably by many semioticians. Signification is a relational process – i.e. signs acquire their meaning not in isolation but in relation to other signs” (Danesi and Perron, 1999, p. 77).

American culture is rife with signs, and our most powerful exports have long been transmitted to the world not on ships or planes but via satellites and through visual media. Media and cultural studies have long been associated with semiotic theory, but the massive import of sports programming to conglomerated global media businesses means that media studies must recognize that sporting signs and significations are among the most vital cultural transmissions of the global digital age. Rupert Murdoch, one of the world leaders in image manufacturing, said in a 1996 News Corporation meeting that “Sport absolutely overpowers film and everything else in the entertainment genre…We have the long-term rights in most countries to major sporting events and we will be doing in Asia what we intend to do elsewhere in the world, that is, use sports as a ‘battering ram’ and a lead offering in all our pay television operations” (Andrews, 2008, p. 29).
While sports and sports studies may not have the academic cache in the United States that it has in Britain and the United Kingdom, the scholars working with sports and semiotics (Andrews, Silk, Maguire, Kellner) have found fertile ground with the examination of the one true “global” game that is wholly American and distinctly modern. This semiotic analysis hems more closely to the origins of American semiotics (Gaines, 2008; Moriarty, 1996), bringing sports studies into the nexus of cultural and mass communication studies and decoding some of the most expensive and important social messages that basketball has imparted upon American society over the last two decades.

Summary

Basketball’s invention and earliest ideological deployment globalized the game virtually from inception, and the history of the sport is truly a history of American sporting nationalism in service of global market capitalism. By inventing the sport from whole cloth and attaching such specific import to each of basketball’s on-court tasks, James Naismith created a game that was ideologically strong yet limber enough to fit into a host of world systems.

Basketball encountered very few geographic or social barriers when it introduced a new figuration to the world on the dawn of the twentieth century, and sociologists working with sports and sporting cultures have found that a study of basketball is necessarily a study of globalization. The most vital work blends the study of ideology with the study of the sport itself, as the two are inextricably intertwined on the hardwood. Basketball’s ideological nature, both through values attached to the game and through the ludic diffusion of values and traits inherent to the structure of the game itself, make the sport a site of intense nationalism and broad globalization simultaneously.
As the “old” nationalisms of the past were widely thought to be facing extinction in the newly globalized future of world cultures and world markets, it is important to investigate how the sport of basketball has remained a site of national identity formation even as the game functions as a marker of global competition and commercialization.

In a visual game like basketball, where the players wear a modicum of obfuscating padding and uniforms, there is a wealth of nonverbal communication directly between the players and the fans watching on television or attending the game in person. The intimacy of the indoor game with the fans seated mere feet from the action, combined with the bared flesh and raw emotions of a hectic sport, make basketball an appealing palette from which to draw colorful conclusions about American culture and society. As the ambassadors of an American sport with a legitimate claim to the only truly global competition in any sport, basketball stars are worthy sites for cultural analysis in sociology and media studies. In order to establish stronger ties in the study of mass communication and sports, it is worth attempting to anchor the original American semiotics of Charles Pierce to the original American sport of basketball.
Methodology

Analytical Approach

Both Gaines (2008) and Moriarty (1996) suggest a triad approach to semiotics and share a common definition of pragmatism as applied to media studies. Their three level semiotic analysis places the images and signs of the commercials within successive and interweaving contexts of reference. Semiotic examination of the images and icons referenced in global sports advertising campaigns will be used to uncover and expose the multiple layers of signification attached to Michael Jordan and Charles Barkley, the basketball stars who ideologically piloted the 1992 Olympic Dream Team. The same triad semiotic key will then be used to critically examine the media image of socially conflicted modern megastar LeBron James.

Triad Analysis

The first level of analysis is the straightforward identification of images and composition of scenes in the commercials, and the second level of analysis relates these images and scenes to the rest of the commercial and the preferred reading of the commercial text. In the third level of analysis, research by traditional sports sociologists (Maguire 1996; Dunning 2001) and cultural critics like Stuart Hall (1992) and David Andrews (2005, 2006) will be used to highlight the global and specific national ideological significance of basketball images in service of American commodity capitalism.

Studying the semiotics of advertising in a culturally relevant context creates a discursive space for analyzing and relating the media production, media content and media audiences. As globalization became a desirable business strategy for economically developed nations and global media corporations in the 1990s,
basketball’s Olympians represented the pinnacle of a globally diffused sport that was literally invented to transmit American values. Michael Jordan became an international “commodity sign” (McDonald & Andrews, 2001); Charles Barkley exploited cynicism and reflexivity through “the politics of irreverence” (Goldman & Papson, 2001); and their commercial images effectively shaped the American cultural landscape of the last twenty years that LeBron ran afoul of so spectacularly in 2011.

Critical analysis of commercials starring basketball players that attempts to relate thirty-second ads to global developmental trends and have relevance to the sociopolitical discourse of mass media has many pitfalls. One well-worn erroneous path in studying modern American basketball is a slide toward “Hoop Dreams anthropology” (Shehid, 2003) that falls just short of attributing some sort of magical power to economic and social disenfranchisement and willfully ignoring critical ideologies that lead to unflattering portraits of Western culture.

As a discussion of the power of modern sport that traces the ascension of individualism, the aim of this research ties sports and media studies to semiotics and advances a method of critical media analysis (Gaines, 2008) that is intuitive, uses common language and appeals to contemporary values of modern society. By layering the three levels of American semiotics, the goal is integrating commercials into a wider discussion of media studies and critical cultural discourse (Moriarty, 1996).

First Level

The first level of interpretation involves a simple description of the signs present and in the order they appear chronologically. The colors, settings and actions in each frame form the core of this primary level of semiotic analysis. More or less a straightforward reading of images and sounds, this first level of analysis concerns the
order and specific appearances of each frame of the individual commercials. The first level of analysis is similar to that which would appear in a commercial script. A researcher of media texts should, in this first step, outline the characters present in each scene and note the colors of clothing, actions and interactions of each individual character as well as how these factors contribute to the overall construction of the scene.

Facial expressions are especially salient in the first level of analysis, as commercials are carefully crafted and each second of screen time is chosen for a specific impact on the viewer. Failure to record aspects of the commercials in the first level leads to incomplete analysis on the corresponding second and third levels of analysis. While simply recording the text and musical accompaniment (if any) in each advertisement seems relatively straightforward, it is important to note how the scenes are pieced together and how the audio text interacts with the visual text.

Second Level

This secondary level of analysis considers the social and cultural context that shape the way images are interpreted. Secondary analysis can “conceive of a viable hypothesis” (Quiroz & Merrell, 2006) for functional interaction with other signs in the culture.

The second level is where the researcher begins to bring the full force of their own personal biases and background to the content, which is one of the main driving tenets of Piercean semiotic analysis. The second level of analysis details connections that advertisers intend to be the presumptive and most commonly understood meaning of the way the images and scenes interact together. For each individual researcher, this second level of analysis will be slightly different. Through the full embrace of personal
biases and the upfront acknowledgement of the impossibility of true objectivity by the aggressively subjective human mind, Piercean (or American) semiotics allows the full exposition of the individual perspective in order to build the full canon of experience and perspective up to academic standards and allow room for oppositional as well as complimentary viewpoints.

In my work, this level of analysis studies the customs, mythologies and ideologies aimed at a globally diffused youth culture birthed from the ashes of binary communist v. capitalist struggle and faced with a hybrid economic reality. The ideological nature of the visual text and signs that perform symbolic duties are considered here. Social customs evident through the editing and placement of scenes and their evocation or support Western commercial values is also considered.

The second level situates the context of these ads as a media product birthed from commercially-minded and stereotypically oriented Western ideas about social interaction, race and representation (Ebanda de B’beri & Hogarth 2009; Cole & King, 1998) and the Olympic narrative focused through a lens of gauzy commercialization of values held to be important to “American” identity (Hargreaves, 1992; VanWynsberghe & Ritchie, 1998).

**Third Level**

This third level of interpretation is where “media discourses can be reactivated outside the immediate context of reception as performative meaning that reorients the cognition and action of audience-publics in everyday contexts” (Jensen, 1995, p. 25).

The final level of interpretation in Piercean semiotics is a continuation of the second level, where many individual biases and perspectives have been brought to the forefront. However, the third level allows for a great deal of projection and assumption
as the intent of the advertisers themselves is often approached diametrically through the application of ideological text. As media researchers, it is our job to parse through intent with ideology. Assumptions about intent are the silent driving force behind post-modern media critique, and Piercean semiotics allow for these forces to be strengthened by the free application of bias and the full exploration of individual perspective buttressed by relevant ideology.

The third level of interpretation in this analysis applies useful aspects of ideological critique from Marx (Jarvie, 1994), Horkheimer & Adorno (2006), Gramsci (Gruneau, 1993) and more clearly the oppositional textual analysis of Stuart Hall (Makus, 1990; Moriarty, 1996) and David Andrews (1998; 2001; 2006; 2010) in rejecting the preferred meaning of the three basketball commercials and demonstrating how these ads can be interrogated and resisted, acquiesced to or negotiated by their audience in the formation of cultural and national identity.

**Ad Selection**

This study offers a semiotic evaluation of three commercials – the 1991 Gatorade “Be Like Mike” commercial starring Michael Jordan, the 1993 “I Am Not A Role Model” Nike commercial featuring Charles Barkley and LeBron James’ 2010 Nike commercial titled “LeBron:RISE.”

The three commercials to be analyzed are all hosted on YouTube, the predominant video arm of global digital giant Google. Searching individually for “Charles Barkley” and “LeBron James” on YouTube.com and filtering for number of views – the most common wealth generating tool in every YouTube video hosting pay structure – brings up the aforementioned videos within the first visible page of content for each player. Following the money by studying the YouTube videos with the most
income generation potential allows for replication using the most socially effective ads, measured in dollars and cents. For the Michael Jordan analysis, the abridged Gatorade “Be Like Mike” video is not among the top Michael Jordan videos in terms of view count but is the essential distillation of the Jordan mythology and was among the pioneering commercial keystones in his long and illustrious career as a corporate pitchman and championship athlete.

In totals accurate as of September 2011, the Michael Jordan Gatorade commercial is 29 seconds long, uploaded by the YouTube account JayMJ23 in 2006 and has just over 144,000 views (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=06dQSwnxBbM).

Charles Barkley’s thirty-second Nike commercial was uploaded by YouTube account DaniBoxx in 2007 and has 240,000 views (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nMzdAZ3TjCA).

Nike uploaded LeBron’s commercial in October 2010 and it is 1 minute 32 seconds long with 6.1 million views (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cdtejCR413c).

The two advertisements from the 1990s were analyzed in their abridged versions if a longer similar ad existed, because the dominant communicative medium of television ensured that only the shorter, 30-second ads would get the widest, most frequent airplay and have the broadest audiences. LeBron’s commercial, uploaded and wholly controlled by Nike itself, exists as a discursive space specifically engineered for audiences using a digital interface and as such must be examined in the original long form.
These commercials all are among the most popular videos on YouTube when searching for each star athlete and measuring the number of comments in the rousing discourse of the comments section.

The YouTube pages for the Jordan and LeBron commercials spark with new comments every day, while the Charles Barkley video tends toward a slower, more involved social discussion in a racially tinged comments section. All three of the chosen commercials are important to study because they continue to contribute to the social constructions each player represents in American culture. The commercials occupy a signifying position in American cultural life, quantitatively measured by the most statistically significant commercial video each player is represented by on YouTube measured in total views of the content as well as total number of comments.

The three commercials to be studied can help us deconstruct the social forces opposing LeBron James that stormed across America for much of late 2010 and early 2011 as well as American national sentiment over the last two decades. If nationalism can be described as an imagined community linked by language and communication (Anderson, 1983), than the national constructs forged by global basketball ambassadors in the era of Communist decline and rapid expansion of market economies should clearly inform the study of how LeBron James became the first American supervillain of the global digital age.
CHAPTER 3
MICHAEL JORDAN ANALYSIS

Gatorade – “Be Like Mike”

Michael Jordan was already positioned as Nike’s main commercial star when a huge American food company thrust him forth as a global icon worthy of unfettered adulation. Quaker Foods won a bidding war with Coca-Cola to utilize Jordan as the public face of their Gatorade brand of sports drinks, and after signing the basketball player to a ten-year, 13.5 million dollar contract the company immediately began planning their campaign.

Before any substantive discussions about the content of the ad itself, Quaker executives decided on what they termed the “Secretariat strategy,” where Jordan would be the “only horse” they ran in the race (Rovell, 2005). With this strategy, Quaker Foods sought to emphasize Michael Jordan as a singular presence. In removing him from the context of his team and presenting Jordan as singularly transcendent, Quaker needed to utilize a number of overt and less recognizable strategies.

One year after signing Jordan in 1991 and “encouraging consumers to ‘Be Like Mike,' Gatorade’s annual revenues climbed from $681 million to over $1 billion” (Andrews, 2001, p. 20). The company took such a breathtaking lead in the market share of the global sports nutritional-drink market – a market that the Gatorade brand virtually built out of thin air – that to this day the brand still enjoys a commanding lead over the rest of an increasingly crowded field of sports drinks.
Scene One - MJ’s Manifest Destiny

First Level

The original Gatorade “Be Like Mike” commercial opens with a five-second highlight of Jordan performing a spectacular layup during a game against the Los Angeles Lakers. The highlight occurred in the 1991 NBA Finals and was the singular visual moment of the penultimate basketball game of the previous year, anchoring the commercial in the 1991 sports landscape. As the highlight begins, halting whistles and drumbeats stutter across the aural plane and a rhythm starts to pulse out and provide an audio backdrop to the dynamic action shot of on-court action.

The next two seconds of screen time are taken up largely by Michael Jordan’s face. The camera fixes on Jordan as he sits on the bench presumably during a break in game action, as his face is shining with sweat and a towel is draped over his shoulders. Jordan looks to his left and flashes a wry smile, the knowing warmth of which is subsequently covered up by his hand. Through the placement of this clip directly after the first five-second highlight, Jordan seemingly admires his own on-court handiwork. Because of the way both segments work together, this pair of segments comprise the first 7 sec. scene of the commercial.

Second Level - American Individualism

The opening sequence of the first scene is taken directly from the 1991 NBA Finals, which seeks to anchor the action in real time and in reality. By using an iconic alternate-handed layup that to this day remains one of the most singular “Jordanesque” moments in a long and illustrious career, Gatorade was able to glean a sense of authenticity while also retaining a singularity of visual impact.
In 1991 the Chicago Bulls and Michael Jordan defeated the Los Angeles Lakers in the championship series and dethroned the longtime kings of basketball in the process. The Lakers are the most successful franchise in the history of American professional basketball and have had consistent success in every decade since the 1950s, but the 1991 series against Jordan’s Bulls represented a changing of the guard from an era of great teams like the “Showtime” Lakers to an era of transcendent and defining players.

**Third Level – The Cult of Individuality**

Inspecting Jordan’s straightforward role in the global expansion of American corporations is well established (Gates, 1998; Halberstam, 1999; LaFeber, 1999) and linking the context of basketball itself to this globalization of Jordan (Smart, 2005) is accepted. The overt ideology of this 1991 Gatorade commercial represents the crux of Jordan’s image as “a spectacle of color who elevates difference to sublimity and who raises blackness to dignity and respect” (Kellner, 2001, p. 51) within a specific post-Communist media age.

When Michael Jordan began to mature as a superstar in 1991, this series represented the turn of basketball into a globally recognized star-driven industry not unlike Hollywood – but Jordan was every leading man all rolled into one, his dominance was so complete on the court. Jordan took “Showtime” and made it his time, and in doing so ushered the world into a new era of sports superstars who were also media commodities and instruments of capitalist expansion capable of global deployment.

Jordan made the difficult look easy and the impossible seem mundane. Soaring to new heights in a singular way yet also raising up his team to the top level, Jordan mirrored the happy rise of Western capitalism as the Berlin Wall fell and China shook with revolt. The old guard was indeed defeated, and at first glance it seemed as if it
were done in by the sheer willpower of a singular force. “Within this mythical realm, personal perseverance was cast as the primary determinant of individual success and the socially inscribed experiences and identities associated with racism and exploitation were viewed as irrelevant remnants of the past” (Andrews, 2001, p. 26).

Scene Two – A More Perfect Union

First Level

The next scene is made up of three shots edited so that Michael Jordan reacts to dunk attempts by two teens on the playground. The first shot is a two-second clip of a black male vigorously exerting and lunging to dunk a basketball. The subject has a timely and popular early-1990s high-top fade haircut (unlike Jordan), but is wearing a red basketball jersey in the dominant red and black colors of Jordan’s Chicago Bulls. Further connecting the unidentified black male to Jordan is the fact that, as he is jumping up to dunk the basketball, the subject is sticking out his tongue – thereby aping one of the most recognizable aspects of Michael Jordan’s on-court machinations.

The end of the dunk is not depicted on screen, as a two second clip of a white male immediately follows. Clad in white t-shirt and grey shorts and wearing a backwards baseball cap on his head, the white male is attempting to jump towards the basket with large bounding steps while twirling the ball behind his back. It is ungraceful and sloppy, but clearly evocative of a highlight-reel drive.

The next clip is a completion of the three images working in concert. This quick close-up of Michael Jordan smirking and making a funny face from the bench during an NBA game seems to interact with the previous two shots. Jordan’s facial expression is that of lighthearted incredulity. The viewer of the commercial is left to assume that Jordan is laughing at the white player’s half-hearted attempt at a dunk, but the laughter
does not seem mean-spirited. The commercial presents the image that Jordan, through the edited position of the three clips in succession, is viewing the proceedings with a knowing superiority.

**Second Level – Racially Neutral Sporting Ambassador**

Michael Jordan never scowls in this commercial, probably the facial expression this incredibly competitive player was best known for on the basketball court. After seeming to watch a young black and a young white teen attempt to dunk the basketball in fluid movements vaguely reminiscent of his own on-court exploits, Michael is featured smiling for the second time in a row within the first twelve seconds of the commercial. This same calm and happy commercial Jordan would go on to sell Hanes underwear, Chevrolet sport utility vehicles and of course Nike shoes and apparel, but the archetype for his commercial persona was outlined by Gatorade.

By placing the black superstar athlete into a situation where he benevolently judges basketball effort by both black and white teenagers, Gatorade set the tone for how Michael Jordan would be deployed by American corporations. An ambassador of basketball whose even-handed demeanor with children of all races belied his on-court intensity, Gatorade scripted the colorless society built around sporting competition and consumption that Jordan represented.

**Third Level – Multicultural Mythmaking**

Nike, Jordan’s main corporate master, spent millions in offshoot advertising campaigns disguised as philanthropic gestures starring Jordan in anti-drug and youth sports advocacy programs in the 1990s (Cole, 2001) which further fed the Jordan mythos, thereby protecting the towering monetary and social investment the company
had already made in Jordan’s manufactured image while assisting the prevailing political demagoguery.

Jordan’s pioneering career personified “transnational capital’s encroachment into the symbolic orchestration of national cultures (that) has usurped the productive role of modern political institutions” (Silk, Andrews & Cole, 2005, p. 7). By portraying Jordan as “the moral obverse of the masses of African Americans vilified by the New Right for allegedly lacking the (new) right stuff” (Andrews, 2001, p. 26), Gatorade was the first in a series of global corporations to sell the color of Michael Jordan’s skin stretched over an exploitative and dynamic re-reading of racial identity. As the combination of wholesale privatization of the penal system and Reagan’s “War on Drugs” turned America’s cities into profit centers and created a nonstop harvest of black males shoveled into the corporatized prison system, Jordan’s smiling and salient racial role in the construction of national mythology is more than that of mere accomplice because of his exalted position in the national discourse.

Andrews (2001) laments that “by embodying the neo-liberal economics, neo-conservative politics, and moralistic cultural traditionalism” the early Jordan narrative “celebrated Reagan’s vision of a colorblind American society” (p. 26) that completely reshaped the socioeconomic, political, judicial and racial landscapes of our country. The willful commercial misappropriation of Jordan’s image as a colorless black global icon went hand in glove with a complete reworking of the direction and scope of the American economy and governmental focus. It is now possible to detach these concepts from a deceased actor, as Ronald Reagan merely led the initial skirmishes in the pitched political battles that have largely defined the new American century.
Scene Three – *The Soaring Apprenticeship*

**First Level**

The commercial jumps from Jordan’s goofy facial expressions to a young white female making an aggressive movement toward the basket, shooting the basketball with her right hand extended in what looks like a layup attempt while being guarded by other females in a pickup basketball game. This shot attempt isn’t finished, though, as two-second clip is abruptly ended and the commercial quickly cuts.

The next two seconds of screen time are occupied by a shot of young men walking together towards the camera, presumably after their game of basketball. The group of young men appears to be the same teens that had just earned a smirk from Jordan earlier in the commercial for their futile attempts to mimic the dynamic dunking style of the inimitable Air Jordan. The men are all depicted drinking or holding bottles of Gatorade save for one, a young white male who is attempting to roll the basketball across his shoulders in a playful manner. The multi-racial group is all smiles and seems to be genuinely bonding over their different flavors of Gatorade while enjoying a sunny day on a conspicuously fenced, presumably inner-city basketball court.

Another jump cut places the commercial in a wholly different context. A very young white male child is dribbling a basketball while “backing down” Michael Jordan (dribbling facing opposite Jordan). Both Jordan and the child are wearing matching outfits of a red basketball top and black shorts as well as high-top basketball shoes. The clip is taking place on a schoolyard basketball court where approximately a dozen children ring the court sitting in full facial view of the camera and also watching the action taking place between Jordan and the child, orienting the viewer of the commercial on a lower visual plane as if the viewer is herself a child watching Jordan
play with a friend. Jordan is playfully swatting the young male child’s bottom with alternating hands, gently evoking the defensive posture of a real basketball game while retaining a great deal of childlike enthusiasm and mirth.

The next two seconds is a choppy shot of Jordan gulping yellow Gatorade from a bottle, surrounded by kids from the previous playground clip doing the same. Everyone in the clip is depicted drinking deeply on individual bottles of Gatorade. These seven seconds of combined airtime make up the third scene.

**Second Level – Purity of Purpose**

Children across the globe learn how to play basketball at a very young age and all grasp the same basic skills at first – the act of dribbling being foremost among these skills of orientation learned through “ludic diffusion” (Guttman, 1993) of team sports. Picking up and bouncing a basketball is something that almost everyone in the world can do, and even if one cannot aspire to do it as well as Michael Jordan and the stars of the NBA, they can still haltingly speak this global language.

Depicting Jordan involved with a group of young kids playing the game begins to define his role as a global basketball ambassador. Showing this action as it unfolds, and at the eye level of a young child close to the ground, presents the viewer with an intimate look at a man who at the time seemed to be larger than life. As the camera finds Jordan and this young boy cavorting on the court, it seems as if the viewer of the commercial is happening upon a secret and special moment that only Jordan and the impressionable young children were sharing. Basketball serves as the background of a teaching moment between the consummate and talented professional and the young apprentice, a process known the world over and throughout human history.
Featuring a white female in the commercial making a dynamic basketball move opens up the game (and Gatorade consumption) to both sexes and also reinforces the interracial bonds of the previous scene. The very next clip depicts young men of various racial backgrounds coming together with jocular embraces and broad smiles over a game of pickup basketball and the refreshing taste of Gatorade, having fun while staying healthy and fit (and very well hydrated).

**Third Level – Compassionate Corporatism**

Both sexes are featured prominently as learning at the altar of Jordan as the great man smiles beatifically. A racially diverse and idealized place fully enraptured by a winning and wholly unthreatening black leader, this vision of America is as potent as it is manufactured. Michael Jordan pioneered the art of putting commercialism above self in order to maximize profits, even when this meant his off-court behavior and freedom of speech would both be effectively neutered by the corporate exploitation of preferred readings of his race and personality. Jordan largely sat silent his entire career, famously eschewing political or social matters, and let his corporate masters explain his identity and belief system. Orienting Michael Jordan as global basketball star and benevolent teacher of the game, Gatorade constructed a black male icon who could not be afforded the luxury of self.

Andrews (1998) sites this usage of Jordan as symbolic bearer of cultural identity vindicating the basic American value polarity of “the paradoxical affective commitment to both individual and community” (p. 204). Jordan’s contracts with the Chicago Bulls had a highly unusual clause conspicuously written into them that specifically stated Jordan could stop and play basketball with kids in pickup games at his own discretion, and during his first retirement from basketball in 1994 Jordan reportedly played in one
such game and told his biographers he thought it would make a great commercial (Smart, 2005).

Scene Four – Master Class

First Level

The fourth scene is four seconds in an unidentified gym setting where Michael Jordan is playing a game of pickup basketball with white and black people of his own age cohort. Jordan is featured through a series of jump cuts, and each time he is smiling or playfully mishandling the basketball. This is the only scene shot inside of a building or structure, and the lighting is dimmer and more intimate than in the rest of the commercial.

Second Level - Idealized Competition

Accelerating the connections between Michael Jordan and his ability to represent a benevolent master of a specific skill set, Gatorade places Jordan into a gymnasium setting – with the camera now set slightly higher than it was during the playground scenes with young children – and shows the basketball star clowning around on the basketball court. Competition is necessarily brutal, and the realities of a zero-sum game like pickup basketball or global free trade ensure that there must be a winner and a loser. Judging by Michael’s knowing smile, it is obvious that his concerns do not include the consequences of losing.

Third Level - Zero-Sum Nationalism

Gatorade repeatedly reaffirms the commitment Jordan has to the game of basketball in the commercial, and this scene brings the athlete all the way from the highest level of NBA competition in the first clip to the game as played on thousands of courts all across the globe. Primarily, though, Gatorade sought to place Jordan
specifically within the American context of the game by taking Jordan from the NBA Finals to a couple random outdoor playgrounds filled with American children and teenagers and then finally placing him inside a gym playing against white and black middle-aged Americans.

For Kellner (2001), Jordan “discloses the extent to which contemporary society is constituted by image and spectacle and mediated by the institutions of consumer culture” (p. 38). The most powerful and impressionable bloc of global consumers have long been the millions of Americans whose unfulfilled identities and perceived needs long comprised much of the global market for virtually all manufactured goods. By maintaining the rhetoric of play and sport separate from the commodified experience and media hype (Denzin, 2001), Michael Jordan could occupy a central position in the construction of American nationalism while also selling his self-image in the service of a cornucopia of consumer products.

**Scene Five – Market Fundamentalism**

**First Level**

The colorful basketball images abruptly end directly after this scene, with a black screen and the direct order to “BE LIKE MIKE.” and, one second later to also “DRINK GATORADE” in all white capital letters. This shot of both exhortations holds for three seconds. The usage of punctuation is striking, and in combination with capital lettering seems to turn the words into blunt commands. The font is not cleanly bold but rather mildly frayed, as the lines of the letters are broken by what looks like the keystrokes of a typewriter – something still very much in use as a communication device in 1991.
Second Level - *Rule by Commandment*

The usage of all capital letters in the closing shots, to spell out BE LIKE MIKE and DRINK GATORADE, turns the slogan into a command akin to the commandment of a belief system. While Nike would gain global notoriety for the directness of their “Just Do It” corporate sloganeering, this early commercial featured Gatorade unabashedly connecting their product with some sort of transformative ability using blunt commands in the overtly evocative manner of religious tonality within the confines of market capitalism.

**Third Level – Cultural and Commercial Commandments**

By the end of the decade of the 1990s, Michael Jordan the actual human being became a mere footnote to the Jordan brand and the iconic “Jumpman” logo was shorthand for the mythic figure the world expected Michael Jordan to represent. As the smiling face of American corporations, Michael Jordan successfully sold himself out. The globe took off with Jordan on a flight into the unknown, as economies all married to the same system stumbled into the first decade of hypercommercialism driven by a nascent postmodern media culture saturating every market with signs. “The Michael Jordan spectacle implodes athletic achievement with commercialization, merging his sports image with corporate products, and making Jordan one of the highest paid and most fecund generators of social meaning and capital in the history of media culture” (Kellner, 2001, p. 44).

**Audio Accompaniment**

The jingle, a catchy tune that eventually got radio airplay and was one of the most arresting audio signatures of recent vintage, is an unabashed paean to Michael Jordan. The music begins with halting drumbeats and whistles which blast out at the start of the
commercial and it winds down as the commercial fades to black. The lyrics – set to a bouncy but deliberate beat of whistles, drums and a full chorus line of male and female singers – are as follows:

Sometimes I dream
That he is me
You've got to see that's how I dream to be
I dream I move, I dream I groove
Like Mike
If I could be like Mike
Again I try
Just need to fly
For just one day if I could
Be that way
I dream I move
I dream I groove
Like Mike
If I could be like Mike.

The musical composition of “Be Like Mike” is that of acoustic instrumentation, and aside from the beginning whistles remains relatively quiet and humble. The percussion, whistles and vocals all evoke street music, and while there is a hint of acoustic guitar the string instrumentation is far from dominant.

The lyrics and music of the jingle throughout the Be Like Mike commercial were reportedly based on The Monkey Song from the Disney cartoon film The Jungle Book (Rovell, 2005), which would have been costly to use in the commercial. Ad executives at Quaker Foods claim to have penned the song lyrics and blatantly evocative music in a single sitting, and the simplicity and overt idol worship of the lyrics suggest this may be borne out by reality.

The impermanent and forgettable nature of the jingle is key to understanding how the commercial would fit into television programming in dozens of countries at once. The singings of the full chorus are the only audible text of the ad, and this text is
overwhelmingly simplistic and worshipping. By paring down the instrumentation, Gatorade could focus viewers on the lyrics and the images as they worked in conjunction.

By orienting the sonic landscape of the commercial in the instrumentation of street music and using a full chorus singing worship praises, Gatorade’s duality places Jordan as a black man who rose from the streets into an idol worthy of adulation. One would not be surprised to hear “Be Like Mike” bursting from the open windows of an evangelical church in Lagos or Los Angeles.

**Summary**

“The Jordan persona as a commodity sign must be understood as fluid, complex and contradictory” (Andrews, 2001, p. 22). Thus, the “highly mobile sign” that Jordan represents has a lack of uniformity and permanent value (p. 22). The impermanence of his sign value allowed Jordan to fit into a multitude of corporate promotions and cultural contexts while also signaling a set of core values commonly held to be tenets of a zero-sum American market capitalism. The very first deployment of Michael Jordan as an ambassador of basketball values by Gatorade in 1991 scripted the transformation of the man from Air Jordan into an ideological signifier of major importance for American enterprise and market fundamentalism.

In the cultural shorthand, Michael Jordan stood for excellence because he won more championships than any other player and thoroughly dominated the game on every measurable level. This champion on the court was also, unlike any athlete before him, completely defined by his commercial image. While this total personal commitment to commercialization was his agent’s plan from the time Jordan left the University of North Carolina in 1984 (LaFeber, 1999), the extent to which such a plan became
manifestly true must surely represent one of the more compelling success stories in the annals of marketing. Gatorade sold an image of Jordan that truly made Americans want to “Be Like Mike,” and the runaway success of this manufactured image became the foundation for not only the commercial depiction of Michael Jordan but one of the unquestionably dominant icons of American identity formation over the last twenty years.

It is difficult to overstate how divergent this commercial construct of Michael Jordan stands in relation to the great man who dominated the sport of basketball for well over a decade. Michael Jordan the basketball player was absolutely the best player in the history of professional basketball, and his status as the greatest ever seems to be one of the few incontrovertible facts in the social discussion of American sporting icons. However, the greatness that Jordan displayed on the court was fueled by an unquenchable desire to succeed and an uncanny ability to magnify perceived slights into performance during gameplay.

In a telling anecdote, Michael Jordan let the outside world get a small glimpse of his ultracompetitive and vindictive side during his Basketball Hall of Fame induction ceremony in September 2009. The fawning American media was stunned to see the iconic Jordan stand at the podium during what is usually a staid and boring formality and berate men long since conquered by Jordan as a competitive athlete. Washington Post writer Michael Wilbon, a man who cultivated a close personal friendship with Michael Jordan off the official record, had an important perspective during the media firestorm that ensued this most interesting Hall of Fame induction ceremony. Wilbon knew Jordan well, and he wrote “without that specific personality trait – the need to win
Jordan said himself toward the end of his speech that he took all these perceived slights as challenges and turned them into wood that made the fire rage. Michael Jordan has always known who he is and what he needed to be Michael Jordan. It's just that few people knew this particular side until Friday night and almost nobody knew he was going to let the wall down when he did. Oh, there were some annoyed Hall of Famers and NBA people in the house Friday night who undoubtedly wanted comments that were typically safe and syrupy. But I love Jordan unplugged. For a quarter-century people said they wanted Jordan unvarnished. Yet when they got exactly that, they thought it was too rough” (Wilbon, 2009, p.2).

The companies who invested heavily in a specific manufactured image of Michael Jordan knew quite well that Americans needed to be fed a simplified and sugar-coated version of Jordan and not the “unvarnished” champion who took no prisoners on the basketball court. That this varnished image of Michael Jordan was able to sell so well and resonate so deeply within the American culture and national ideology is a testament to the powers of marketing and the brash persona cultivated by another Nike basketball superstar, Charles Barkley.
CHAPTER 4
CHARLES BARKLEY ANALYSIS

Nike – “I Am Not a Role Model”

Michael Jordan retired for the first time under mysterious circumstances in 1993 after the puzzling murder of his father James Jordan, undertaking a quixotic quest to play pro baseball instead of continuing his career as a championship basketball player. From October 1993 to March 1995 Jordan stayed away from basketball as a series of controversies raged around his documented problems with high-stakes gambling. That these events are not linked in a more comprehensive manner is perhaps due in no small part to Charles Barkley.

Barkley assumed a central place in the American sporting culture right as Jordan was stumbling; Charles hosted “Saturday Night Live” one month before Jordan announced his retirement from basketball. While this was in the afterglow of the Dream Team era and NBA superstars had a central place in popular culture, Barkley played a specific role in the formulation of American culture that was far from accidental. Barkley was the anti-Jordan; rough, ideological, challenging and unapologetic. Wearing the mantle of black superstar in a confrontational manner unlike any American since Muhammad Ali, Barkley was operating within strict corporate parameters as he challenged the core domestic structure of American society.

Barkley again carried the water for Jordan when both athletes publicly refused to wear their Reebok jumpsuits on the podium during the medal ceremony at the 1992 Olympics, putting corporate allegiance over national identification. Barkley famously stated that he “had two million reasons not to wear Reebok” (Smart, 2005), and the potential public relations crisis was averted when both Jordan and Barkley were allowed
to drape themselves in the American flag – which conveniently covered up any offending logos. As the most visible Olympians at the 1992 Barcelona games, Barkley loudly and Jordan silently re-engineered the Olympic ideal much more in line with commodity capitalism as the de facto American identity (Hargreaves, 1992; VanWynsberghe & Ritchie, 1998).

Like Jordan, Barkley, too, sold himself out – but he retained many of the negative racial stereotypes many Americans held about black men, and he even seemed to relish basking in the harsh light of negative judgment. For Nike, Charles Barkley had to co-opt the attention of the country while their main corporate breadwinner was sent out to pasture for a while. This analysis is a look at how they accomplished this amazing subterfuge.

**Scene One – The Politics of Irreverence**

**First Level**

The commercial is situated inside a gym, and immediately the viewer is thrown into a one-on-one game with Charles Barkley. Squeaks from sneakers on hardwood floors screech out, and percussive grunts and whacks fire out as parts of Charles become visible and smack against the camera. At the two-second mark, Charles Barkley’s face dominates the screen as he aggressively states, “I am not a role model.” Immediately after this statement, at the four-second mark the scene cuts back to the gym setting. Charles drives his elbow and shoulder into the body of the viewer as if he is backing them down offensively and the viewer is guarding him.

The next clip is a shot at five seconds of Charles Barkey’s face again dominating the picture, and his face actually stretches above and below the screen so that his features and expression are prominently displayed. Barkley states plainly “I am not paid
to be a role model.” For the next five seconds, the viewer watches as Barkley makes aggressive moves associated with rebounding a missed shot and, as the shot moves to a camera positioned above the action, the sound effects stop as Charles makes a rebound with his elbows flared out in slow motion. The ball is secured with a resounding slap, and this ten-second scene comprises the first scene of the commercial.

Second Level – Expressive Individuality
Charles Barkley had earned a reputation for being one of the more tough and hardened NBA players, and this commercial sought to build on that rugged image. Barkley plays with a tenacious energy and does not shy away from contact, and his commercial personality reflects this playing style. Famous for being the most outspoken member of the 1992 Olympic Dream Team, this commercial highlights the image of Charles Barkley as an aggressive and opinionated tough guy who won’t bow down to his corporate masters. Barkley had gotten the only non-fawning attention given to the Dream Team in 1992 when he seemed to purposely step on the stomach of an Angolan player laying supine on the court in an early Olympic game. Throughout the ad, the viewer is treated as if they were standing in opposition to Barkley on the basketball court and were being battered with the elbows, shoulders and overall ferocious style of Barkley the on-court menace.

Third Level – Facing the Structural Truth
When this ad first appeared in 1993, it was an explosive salvo fired at the entire structure of the NBA starmaking pedagogy – but the essential point is that it is counterprogramming created by the same corporation that spent millions constructing the pedestal Charles abandons with such vitriol. This “ostensible content is merely a faded foreground” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2001, p. 52) in the production of culture, and
regardless of the message itself the main structural key is that Barkley’s words were publicized though the “transmission of a set of standardized cultural products using standardized western technologies” (Hall, 1980, p. 210). Barkley supports the expansion of capitalism and the division of labor necessary for the stratification of society, as Nike did not tie his pay to his position as a role model but ostensibly paid him to dissent duplicitously from the platform of a nationwide advertising campaign. While basketball has historically provided a fertile backdrop for the exposition of “critical aspects of the sport-entertainment system in the United States” (Cole & King 1998, p. 67), this commercial exploits that history with dichotomous verve.

The cultural context of the Barkley ad is that of a hyper-aggressive American basketball warrior assaulting the family structure in a historical period where America began to assert a military presence in sovereign nations under the guise of humanitarian aims. As the Barkley commercial hit the airwaves in 1993, the American military was in Iraq for Operation Provide Comfort, in Somalia under Operation Restore Hope, in Bosnia and Herzegovina through Operation Provide Promise and enforcing a strict no-fly zone over Iraq and Kuwait (Wikipedia.org). With our soldiers engaged in humanitarian operations blanketed across the globe, aggressive and unapologetic American intervention became the de facto discursive reality for any nation deemed by American leadership unfit to properly lead her people. Charles Barkley’s message that the responsibility for the welfare of children was not his is another dichotomy within the context of American military intervention and the humanitarian occupation of sovereign nations.
Scene Two – Charles in Charge

First Level

For three seconds, Charles continues to batter the viewer for position under the basket as his elbows flare out and his shoulder knocks into the camera. His voice is heard over the continuing squeaks and grunts as he says, “I am paid to wreak havoc on the basketball court.” After twice swinging his elbow in a manner that would not be legal in gameplay, Barkley’s face again dominates the entire screen as he emphasizes his position by stating, “Parents should be role models.” The camera again moves to a position above the fray, and the viewer can see Charles make the same type of elbow-flared rebound in slow motion that is again punctuated by a resounding crash of noise as he vigorously secures the ball with both hands. The second scene takes the commercial to just past the halfway point.

Second Level – Clearly Defiant

Throughout the scene, Barkley continues his verbal assault on the viewer and physically attacks the camera with a series of moves that would draw an offensive foul for Charging. The phrase that Charles uses to orient his style of play, to “wreak havoc,” is an interesting choice of words. The enunciation of each syllable is stressed, and Charles makes sure to pronounce each word clearly – the “t” in “court” is plainly heard. Charles’ Alabama roots ensured that his speech almost never sounded this clear in most sound bites. The use of the close-up places Charles directly in the face of the viewer, ensuring his salient cultural criticisms are heard as clearly as he can say them.

Third Level – Charging Ahead

Right from the beginning of the ad, Charles Barkley attacks the viewer and in the second scene the assault continues. Barkley continues the explicit definition of Western
societies as he states that he is paid “to wreak havoc on the basketball court,” a job which he will do to the best of his abilities. One must be paid to specifically be a role model in Charles’ definition of society, thereby opening up a job opportunity for another, more willing person. The evacuation of his place as a role model due to it not being part of his explicit job description not only supports capitalism but also begins to claim some of the racially-tinged negativity that Michael Jordan’s commercial personal deflected so well. By angrily suggesting that parents alone should be role models, Barkley invents a “non-racial criteria” to justify the racial stratification of America as the fault of black Americans – “in this way, racial groups become associated with general dispositions, psychological states and tendencies that impact their performance and success” (Buffington & Fraley, 2011, p. 335). Angry and wreaking havoc, Charles gets to tell Americans why they are found wanting while himself directly representing the hulking, anti-social and unembraceable black male (Page, 1997).

**Scene Three – *Man With a Message***

**First Level**

The camera again focuses directly on Barkley’s face as he says, “Just because I can dunk a basketball…” and his voice trails off as the shot jumps to a slow motion highlight of Barkley going up for a dunk. At the 20-second mark, the camera is positioned above the action and watching Barkley jump and prepare to slam the ball through the hoop, and then for two seconds the shot jumps back to the visual plane of someone actually playing basketball against Barkley as his legs swing out and he completes the dunk. The last clip of the commercial is again a close-up of Barkley’s face, but his head is slightly cocked and he completes his earlier statement by saying, “…doesn’t mean I should raise your kids.” At :25, the screen goes black and “JUST DO
IT." bursts toward the viewer in white lettering. Nike, for the first time ever, ends the commercial without showing their iconic Swoosh logo after flashing their company motto.

**Second Level – Just Do It**

As Michael Jordan basically perfected the art of dunking a basketball by 1993, the fact that Barkley specifically mentions that dunking a basketball and raising children are not commensurate experiences must be seen as a dig at the cult American corporations built up around Jordan. That Nike chose not to place their logo at the end of this ad is telling, as removing the Swoosh from their corporate logo leaves simply a command – just do it. Coming at the end of the commercial where Barkley questions the skills of parents who let their children admire sports icons as role models, Nike is telling parents they should “just do it,” meaning just raise your children without letting them perceive athletes as role models.

**Third Level – Pay No Attention to the Logo Behind the Man**

Apoplectic at being challenged by a basketball player to raise their children correctly, Americans hated the “I am not a role model” commercial. The final line of the ad completes the circle as Barkley not only castigates parents for allowing their children to look up to him but also now specifically states that he has been commissioned by lazy Americans to actually raise their children, saying in no uncertain terms that parents have by and large fully abdicated their filial responsibilities. While Nike ran the commercial, they did so without placing their iconic Swoosh logo at the end – forcing viewers to confront a dual meaning for their traditional tagline “Just do it.” By omitting their logo, Nike chose to let Charles Barkley carry the burden of their odious message rather than leave their logo as the final image in viewers’ minds.
Summary

Barkley used the notoriety from this ad to construct a public image that was confrontational, matching his on-court persona. In the postmodern context where all publicity is good publicity, Nike and Charles Barkley both benefitted from this ad immensely. Nike was able to deflect much of the criticism off of Barkley, using his obviously abrasive personality as the crux of their excuse. Through Barkley’s “engagement of a moral question…Nike placed a morality issue in the foreground rather than keeping it tacit in the background. Once the ad hit the airwaves, it elicited interpretations arranged around the politics of social morality” (Goldman & Papson, 1998, p. 84). Illustrating a “looming tension in the maturation of a consumer society,” Nike felt “compelled to transgress middle class moral shibboleths, while also acknowledging as self-consciously as possible the nature of the advertising agenda in which they are engaged” (p. 85).

In conjunction with the beatific image of Michael Jordan that Gatorade, Nike, Chevrolet, McDonalds and Hanes all purchased at full retail price, Barkley worked to occupy the entire ideological spectrum in service of American corporations. Through the many millions of dollars spent on advertisements with basketball stars of the Dream Team era – and the awesome success of both the Dream Team and the corporations and products tied to them - it would be difficult to escape these defining American icons in the early 1990s. If nationalism is an imagined community made possible by communication (Anderson, 1983), than basketball stars defined America in the 1990s as they spoke the language of global capital expansion.

As an embodiment of the four types of Marxist alienation (Jarvie, 1994), Barkley nearly hits for the cycle in this commercial. His flying elbows and fierce rhetoric vividly
illustrate man’s alienation from others, and his pointed refusal to act as a role model can be seen as essentially the literal embodiment of man’s alienation from the species. Even the blank aggression on his face and careful enunciation seem to embody man’s alienation from self, for in non-commercial life Barkley was often jovial and always colloquial. If one reads the resolute insistence on defining himself in relation to his labor – overtly Marxist ideology in and of itself - as man’s alienation from nature, Barkley is the most blatantly Marxist American public figure of the last thirty years.

Perhaps a way to explicate the ideological work Charles Barkey took on concerning Marxist alienation would be to look at the “I Am Not a Role Model” commercial in the context of America’s complicated socio-military role in geopolitics which began to bloom in earnest as the Barkley commercial aired in 1993. Barkley the aggressive, ideological figure fit hand in glove with the dichotomy of America military intervention in the 1990s as a new doctrine of humanitarian occupation began to take shape across the globe. American might allowed our soldiers to enter sovereign nations and direct the citizens with aggressive airs of superiority while essentially abdicating any real responsibility for the welfare of the people of these countries. Whereas in the preceding decades American intervention in geopolitics was usually under the cloaked aims and procedures of the Central Intelligence Agency and spycraft set up to disrupt the spread of Communism, once the Berlin Wall fell the 1990s brought an outward show of American military force under the guise of humanitarian aims. Perhaps Barkley allowed America to understand that our presence in these countries was not enough of a determinant to allow for the transfer of responsibility from existing filial structures to our own military-industrial complex, and that just because we can invade other countries
and take over their societies did not mean that we would necessarily need to take any responsibility for our position or for the direct ramifications of our government’s actions.

As the confrontational figure outlined by Charles Barkley in 1993 slowly absorbed into American culture and national identity, Nike engineered a commercial subterfuge protecting their prized Jordan brand (not an exaggeration – one of Nike’s most valuable lines of shoes and apparel is the Jordan imprint, identified not by the iconic Nike swoosh but by the Jumpman icon of Michael Jordan) and challenging deeply held notions of familial structure and global identity. This explosively successful gambit propelled Charles Barkley to a comfortable career as a television commentator after his playing days were over, as Barkley now existed as an opinionated and divisive figure whose word mattered because it ostensibly came from an authentic place within the man himself and not filtered through layers of corporate public relations.

However, the aforementioned layers of corporate public relations became visible in May 2011 when Barkley complained on his television show that Nike had called him and asked him to tone down his public criticism of LeBron James (Freeman, 2011). Of course, Barkley was airing his grievances on national television and therefore directly disobeying the obvious intent of the Nike press relation machine, but simply the fact that this occurred is proof that Nike is acutely aware of the powerful platform they constructed for Charles Barkley in the early 1990s – and even more proof that Charles Barkley continues to represent a critically important role in the formation of public opinion and American identity.
CHAPTER 5
LEBRON JAMES ANALYSIS

Nike – “LeBron:RISE”

For Nike, the way that America negatively responded to LeBron James must have been a particularly rude awakening. Their expert handling of Michael Jordan, with the benefit of twenty years hindsight, may have actually been more the synergistic product of historical circumstance, the role of Charles Barkley, Jordan’s foresighted agent David Falk and the relevant advertising agencies than something solely attributed to the global shoe and apparel company. Nevertheless, Nike ultimately has a great deal of ownership over the visual and ideological significations attached to their ads.

The “LeBron:RISE” advertisement was produced with a digital audience in mind, as corporate communications have a life online that far outlives the fleeting immediacy of a 30-second television ad in an increasingly cluttered media landscape. For this reason, the ad is layered with multiple characters and situations all stemming from different criticisms lobbed at LeBron throughout 2010 and into 2011. Perhaps hoping that American audiences were more cynical or ironic (or perhaps aimed at a more international market with a multiplicity of social mores), the “LeBron:RISE” ad nevertheless became a vital part of the LeBron backlash itself, serving in the minds of the American public to neatly define the new public image of LeBron James months before he would ever play for his new team.

Scene One – Confronting “The Decision”

First Level

The commercial starts with five seconds of silence as the shot opens up in a familiar place – a set mocked up to look exactly like the Boys and Girls Club in
Greenwich, Connecticut, where LeBron had made his fateful decision to sign with the Miami Heat in an hour-long television special live on Entertainment and Sports Programming Network that was titled “The Decision.” LeBron is dressed in a light violet patterned long-sleeve shirt and dark jeans and seated in a director’s chair facing straight ahead (just as he had been during “The Decision”) and the dramatic pause mirrors the events of the TV special as LeBron built suspense for his free-agent destination. LeBron does not look at the camera as he asks, “What should I do?” James turns his face toward the viewer one second later and asks, “Should I admit that I made mistakes?” After nine seconds, the first scene ends.

**Second Level – What Did I Do?**

LeBron anchors the commercial in the present by revisiting his fateful ESPN special, and putting together the scene to look exactly like the set of “The Decision” brings the viewer back to this culturally relevant context while the questioning tone already established makes this Nike commercial something of a mashup of past and present. As a great deal of the enmity directed toward LeBron in the months following “The Decision” seemed to stem from the miscalculated and tone-deaf manner in which James spurned his longtime home region, this part of the ad is a direct acknowledgement of that line of questioning.

**Third Level – You Can Go Home Again**

It would be difficult to imagine that LeBron wanted to revisit the site of his greatest disaster, but perhaps Nike knew it had to start at the origin of the negativity for their ad to work as a piece of commercial reconciliation. Going back to the site where he butchered his public image allowed LeBron to soften the impact of his misjudgment and publicly mourn his mistakes without actually apologizing or making amends in any way.
Mirroring the actions of British Petroleum last summer when they planned a blitzing, multiplatform media mea culpa for their massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, it could be seen that LeBron was making a concerted attempt to assuage his guilt in a public manner while not quite apologizing and certainly not changing the behavior that led to the incident in the first place. The sanitized non-apology used to be contained in the realm of corporate public relations, but LeBron uses it to great effect here as he deflects some of the valid criticisms of his past by reimagining the incident in a more favorable light.

**Scene Two – Past as Prologue**

**First Level**

The next scene is wholly different than the first, as a young black male is depicted wearing a green and gold varsity jacket while walking in front of a trophy case. LeBron’s voiceover asks, “Should I remind you that I’ve done this before?” at the twelve second point, and then another voice (presumably that of young LeBron in the commercial) asks, “Should I give you a history lesson?” As this clip ends, LeBron’s voiceover asks in a slightly irritated manner, “What should I do?”

The next clip jumps to an entirely different context as the screen fills up with the iconic Cleveland commercial artwork Nike hung on the side of a building that featured LeBron, arms stretched wide and clad in the home jersey of the Cleveland Cavaliers, with the text “WE ARE ALL WITNESSES” across the bottom. The building-sized banner is pictured falling to the ground in billowing waves for five seconds as LeBron looks on from the driver’s seat of a dark Sport Utility Vehicle and his voiceover asks, “Should I tell you how much fun we had?” The faint voice of an announcer is heard in the background saying “…with the number one pick, LeBron James” as LeBron rolls up his window and
drives through this painful recreation of a memory. These two clips represent LeBron’s basketball past, and this ten-second statement comprises the second scene.

**Second Level – Instant History**

As LeBron was atop the last draft class in NBA history allowed to jump straight from high school to the NBA Draft, his path was spectacular but geographically limited. From St. Vincent-St. Mary’s High School near Akron to being drafted first overall by the Cleveland Cavaliers in the 2003 Draft, LeBron had the unique experience of playing his entire (albeit short) career within a hundred mile radius in Northern Ohio. By driving past his iconic banner falling to the ground, LeBron is witnessing his own fall from grace as the only home he ever knew publicly rejected him. The effort to link LeBron in his high school persona with the iconic Cleveland Nike advertisement is an attempt to place Ohio in the past as LeBron moves on with his basketball career.

**Third Level – Corporate Encroachment of Public Space**

With the ink barely dry on his new contract with the Miami Heat, LeBron sought to distance himself from his past and from the state of Ohio. LeBron stood accused of being somewhat insulated by his Northern Ohio lineage, chiefly represented in the fawning Nike advertising campaign “We Are All Witnesses,” a controversial gambit that played off of the fierce regional provinciality Ohioans felt for LeBron as well as his prodigious skills and self-proclaimed role as the “Chosen One”.

In reality, the huge banner was taken down in daytime and witnessed by only a handful of Clevelanders, none of whom were LeBron James. However, the Nike banner celebrating a single Ohioan and the devotion of his followers – hung on the Sherwin-Williams building in downtown Cleveland – was replaced by a similarly-sized banner hung by the paint company itself featuring a black and white picture of the skyline of
Cleveland with the words, “Our home since 1866. Our pride forever.” Nike created a public space where their corporate message inspired civic pride, and Sherwin-Williams continued to present that public space in a similar corporate-civic manner. LeBron may have left the building, but a prominent blank wall in Downtown Cleveland now presents a postmodern marketing site where advertising has claimed what was once public space and turned it into corporate ad copy playing off civic identity.

Scene Three – Future Tense

First Level

The twelve seconds in the third scene make up the speculative segment of the commercial that deals with LeBron’s basketball legacy. For three seconds, LeBron stands at the podium of a Hall of Fame induction ceremony that is completely forsaken by the world. Nobody showed up to celebrate LeBron’s induction into the Hall of Fame, save for the people who were paid to attend; the camera pulls back to reveal a middle-aged white female banquet server, holding a silver pitcher of water for refills she never had to pour as LeBron intones in a voiceover, “So…this went well.” The camera finds LeBron behind the podium as LeBron directly addresses the viewer and asks, “Should I really believe I ruined my legacy?” Three seconds later, the camera moves behind the podium and, as LeBron turns around toward the camera which is now facing the empty room, his face cannot hide the unease with which he imagines this scenario. Stage lights shine in the viewer’s face, the microphone gives some squeaking feedback and LeBron exits stage left.

For the first time in this commercial, in the next clip the viewer gets to see LeBron as he sees himself. This scene opens with LeBron wearing a black basketball jersey and a genuinely perplexed look on his face as his voiceover repeatedly asks the
question “What should I do?” A jump cut places LeBron inside a gym in black and white dressed in this same uniform, where he slams the basketball with both hands to end his internal questioning with audio punctuation.

The next two seconds are two one second scenes of LeBron getting his famous “Chosen One” tattoo laser removed from across the span of his upper back. The first clip is accompanied by a voiceover of LeBron asking, “Should I get my tattoo removed?” and the next one-second clip is the same procedure but from a different angle as LeBron grimaces in pain and makes a slightly feminine noise.

A jump cut gives the viewer a first look at the second “real” LeBron, this one dressed in a red basketball jersey and wearing a black headband. LeBron, again situated in an indoor basketball court, directly addresses the camera and asks the viewer in a lighthearted manner if they “Wanna see my shiny new shoes?”

Another jump cut places the viewer on a street corner in what is ostensibly Miami, where a fictitious advertisement for LeBron’s shoes sits behind glass in a corner storefront as a single figure walks by to admire the advertisement and a bus pulls up on the corner identified as the “SOUTH BEACH LOCAL.” As the camera pulls into a closer shot of the ad itself – which features LeBron holding both hands out to offer his shoes to passers-by while wearing a tuxedo with black tie, dark sunglasses and huge diamond stud earrings in his ears – the glass of the storefront reflects the face of the single walking figure to be LeBron, but he is wearing a dark skullcap and a pair of classic Ray Ban Wayfarer sunglasses. Throughout this two-second clip of LeBron admiring his own advertisement on an imaginary street corner in Miami, his voiceover says, “Shoes, sell


shoes, shiny new shoes.” Many images and ideas are packed into this twelve-second scene, but they all deal with future speculations.

Second Level – Personal Concerns

LeBron’s concern with his image and with his future seems overtly clear in this segment as he openly opines something of a worst-case scenario. The fact that the banquet hall is empty represents his rejection by his basketball peers, as the Hall of Fame ceremony for the NBA is easily the most low-key of the three major American sports leagues and fans are rarely even given much more than a glimpse of this private ceremony they are now witnessing. In this scene, LeBron is taking all of the criticism he received from other players – current and retired – and placing it in a contextual scenario where nobody came to celebrate his penultimate career moment.

Having LeBron voluntarily remove his “Chosen One” tattoo is not only a nod to the idea that the man himself is humbled, but may also be an implicit admission that the tattoo itself is a remnant of an adolescent period in his life that he must now leave behind. The feminine manner in which LeBron lets the viewer know his pain and displeasure with the tattoo removal process could also be an attempt to soften the public image of a superstar without a country who is wholly unsure of his role in the world.

Nike dips into the realm of metacommuniaction here, as this commercial starring a basketball superstar with his own line of clothing and his own personal logo to match his annually revised shoe catalog makes fun of the process of television advertisements as a means to sell shoes. While invoking irreverence and metacommunication in an overt manner, this scene also depicts an authentic and commanding LeBron character in two distinct characters dressed in different clothes. Why LeBron or Nike felt it necessary to
dilute into two characters the “real” LeBron in this commercial – the character speaking with a declarative voice and posing most of the queries in the ad – isn’t known, but perhaps is an attempt to allow the LeBron character to fit into multiple contexts simultaneously, as Jordan had so successfully managed to do (Andrews, 2001).

Perhaps Nike is taking a thinly veiled shot at Michael Jordan in this scene, as Michael Jordan’s Hall of Fame induction speech in 2009 stands as one of the few times in the last twenty years Jordan let the public see his inner demons and incredible personal drive behind the shine of a sanitized and silent commercial image. Placing LeBron behind the podium places the viewer inside the Hall of Fame ceremony, and the only time one of those ceremonies pierced the public consciousness is the 2009 Jordan ceremony. Having LeBron reject his own fantasy of an empty ceremony is a public rejection of the emotional and personal attachment to such a ceremony, and possibly a public rejection of the Jordan-sized expectations that LeBron has had to carry on his shoulders since he was 16 years old.

**Third Level – Crisis of Confidence**

Scrambling to place all of the unseemly aspects of LeBron’s personality into one disjointed segment, Nike encapsulates LeBron’s fear of an uncertain future. Unsure whether or not to humble himself outwardly by removing his garish tattoo or inwardly by reminding himself that his only real job is that of a product pitchman, LeBron is nothing if not tentative. In following Michael Jordan as the anointed American basketball star cum global icon, LeBron is the first athlete since Jordan to have secured a groundbreaking contract from the company before playing his first NBA game and is also the first athlete to have his own specially-designed Nike logo. Perhaps without the knowledge of either player, Nike has also engineered their respective advertising campaigns along
nationalist fault lines. Where Jordan represented the booming 1990s, LeBron fully embodies the uncertain economic present.

As traditional Social Security begins to crumble apart in earnest over the next decade, many Americans will feel let down by the system as they approach retirement – just as LeBron showed with his paranoid, empty Hall of Fame machinations. LeBron merely did what scores of athletes did before him, which was to exercise his right to free agency at the end of a contract and change teams. While superstar players may not have done this as much in the past – and Michael Jordan conspicuously did not – LeBron represents a new prototype. This new prototype mirrors the manner in which once reliably American corporations suddenly move their operations overseas, chasing the lowest production costs and spurred on by investors looking for implausibly constant profits. As LeBron has dropped any pretense to emotional attachment to his hometown – choosing instead an easier path with lower barriers for constant success – his movement shows that it is not just corporations who are seeking a way to normalize unnatural and regularly unsustainable levels of success.

Managing the public image of the companies who have proscribed to the prevailing economic theory and become nomadic entities has become more difficult in the face of global market upheaval and the resurgence of nationalist identification worldwide as millions of global citizens search for an identity anchored to the strong historical markers of nationhood. Perhaps managing LeBron’s public image is no less of a challenge than the task of navigating the cultural obstacles facing companies who once successfully played off their core cultural identities and now find themselves unmoored from national contexts and somewhat adrift on uncertain global seas.
Scene Four – “Hi Chuck”

First Level

The sixteen seconds of the fourth scene all directly refer to Charles Barkley. The screen goes black and the word “LEBRON” rises up from the background in white capital letters. The next four seconds are directly evocative of Charles Barkley’s black and white Nike commercial from 1993 as LeBron elbows the camera in a dark gym setting, screams, and grabs a rebound with both elbows extended exactly as Barkley had in his commercial. The camera closes in on a black and white shot of LeBron’s face where his features dominate the frame and his face extends above and below the shot – the shot composition is exactly the same as in the 1993 Barkley commercial. LeBrons voiceover asks, “Should I tell you…” as a prelude to LeBron stating directly, “I am not a role model.” To emphasize his disdain with Barkley and to play off the fact that Barkley battled weight issues his whole life, black and white close-up LeBron takes a big bite from a donut with bright pink frosting. The scene jumps to a clip of “real” LeBron – the one dressed in red shirt and black headband in the gymnasium – greeting Barkley with a knowing “Hi Chuck,” before jumping back to the black and white facial close-up shot of LeBron winking. The shots work in conjunction so that “real” LeBron knowingly greets Barkley while the LeBron who is directly copying Barkley winks knowingly and finishes the personal dig.

The next clip is again the “real” LeBron in red asking the viewer “Seriously, what should I do?” in a strained and open manner. The other “authentic” LeBron, the one wearing a black jersey and no headband, occupies the screen after a jumpcut and asks, “Should I tell you I’m a championship chaser, did it for the money, rings?” The clip
again jumps back to the “real” LeBron in red as he challenges the viewer with a forceful question – “Should I be who YOU want me to be?”

The scene jumps to a wholly different context as whistles and sound effects of an old Western movie ring out and the words “THE VILLAIN” spin up from the middle of the shot in white capital letters with a classic Hollywood Western font over a stylized western scene of a diamondback rattlesnake slithering over a light brown leather cowboy boot. LeBron’s voiceover asks, “Should I accept my role…” as the camera reveals LeBron dressed as a stereotypical Old West villain in brown cowboy hat, chaps and weathered leather jacket. LeBron frantically searches his holsters and finds he is not armed, as which point he drops his hands to his side and directly addresses the camera with an incredulous tone to finish his voiceover question, “…as a villain?”

“Real” LeBron, wearing red, appears and whispers to the camera, “Maybe I should just disappear?” as the screen abruptly turns black with some visual feedback, as if an old cathode ray television set had been turned off. Silence and black fill the screen. This sixteen-second mélange comprises the fourth scene of the commercial.

**Second Level – Heavy Lies the Crown**

This scene reminds the viewer that LeBron is acutely aware of his place in the hierarchy of basketball icons as he challenges the conception that he somehow shamed the rules of the game by teaming up with other superstars instead of completing the Sisyphean task of winning in Cleveland. Directly copying the iconic Charles Barkley commercial does LeBron no favors, especially as he pokes fun of Barkley’s weight – the comparison makes LeBron seem small and petty. The self-depiction as being unarmed and unready to assume the mantle of villain flies in the face of reality, as the context of the images is an advertisement bankrolled by Nike that copies and denigrates the very
person who had been among his most public critics over the previous months. LeBron asks for mercy just as he shows that he has no ability to shrug off criticism or extend the olive branch of peace.

**Third Level – Corporate Takeover of Communication**

By publicly taking on Charles Barkley in this commercial, LeBron is able to speak more directly in this corporate-sponsored forum than he is in real life. Barkley often shapes public opinion about LeBron with his critical comments, and at one point Nike reportedly called Charles to tell him that he should no longer publicly castigate their billion-dollar baby. Charles seemed happy to assume the role of villain for Nike in 1993, but the level of investment Nike has in LeBron ensures that the company will try to rehabilitate LeBron’s public image at all costs. Using Charles Barkley as a foil is an easy way to deflect criticism of LeBron – racially motivated or not – onto a public figure more than happy to be an angry black male.

The secondary condition of this scene is the establishment of Nike as the communicative background between these two remarkably similar individuals. The only way these two rich, black Americans in the tiny fraternity of NBA players will directly address each other is in the public sphere, and it is usually when one or the other is being paid to do so. Charles opines from his position as an NBA commentator, and LeBron only talks from behind the guise of his commercial presence. One must presume that LeBron either asked Nike to intervene on his behalf or refused to speak to Barkley as a private citizen, necessitating a phone call from their shared corporate benefactor. Barkley was understandably upset when he was asked by Nike to leave LeBron alone, but both men owe their wealth and fame largely to the way Nike has been able to monetize the sport of basketball and turn images into profits. Both Barkley
and James contribute mightily to the commercialization of communication in the global digital age.

Where James sets a new standard is his representation in multiple characters throughout the commercial, a paradigmatic shift that allows his communication to be filtered through a series of mediated personalities. The viewer is left perplexed as to what LeBron actually feels about many of the issues he ostensibly addresses in this commercial, as LeBron is literally filtered through different personas. This obfuscation could be seen to allow LeBron to have plausible deniability as to the true nature of his feelings and to hide behind the metacommunication of the commercial, another tool borrowed from the business of communicating for corporations.

**Scene Five – The Value of Historical Alliances**

**First Level**

The five-second scene that makes up the fifth separate part of this commercial opens with LeBron’s face visible on a black background, surrounded by the faces of his four best friends in profile oriented all around him at the upper and lower quadrants of the picture. Only their faces are visible as the four friends repeatedly call out LeBron’s name – as if to get his attention – and LeBron covers his ears and tries to block them out by making a “La la la la la” noise. Lowercase white text - the words “blah blah blah” repeated ad nauseum - encircle LeBron and start spinning around his head. LeBron’s voiceover asks, “Should I stop listening to my friends?” in a straining and questioning manner, and he answers this query as the shot jumps to the red-clad “real” LeBron bluntly and forcefully stating, “They’re my friends.”
Second Level - *Friendship*

LeBron is known as an insular superstar who trusts his high school friends intensely, and the four friends featured in profile in this scene actually make up the majority of his decision-making and management team. For this reason, many in the media have questioned the value of their input and wondered if their proximity and close relationship have compromised James’ ability to make prudent decisions about his career and the management of his image. This scene is a pointed response to these critics.

Third Level – *Alliances, Allegiance and Allegory*

As America enters the stage of global economic maturation where emerging economies have distinct advantages to their relative positions, our strategic friendships forged over the last century have been called into question. Where the binary relations of power began to dissolve when the Berlin Wall fell, proximity and proximal economic blocs became the primary force driving partnerships throughout the 1990s. Europe massed into a weak economic union, and North America cobbled together the North American Free Trade Agreement economically linking the United States with Mexico and Canada. However, as China and Russia began to form an eastern wall of common economic and political allegiance in opposition to the freer Western countries, the binary relations of power again become prescient. When one evaluates the ideological and existential threat posed by America’s decade-long “War on Terror” right as the stumbling global economy threatens loose economic ties, national alliances and the shape of their formation have again been called into question. LeBron stands firmly in the corner of keeping traditional alliances strong in the face of mounting opposition.
It may be that LeBron’s limited circle of influence was a defining factor in how he so blatantly misjudged the prevailing cultural trends and ran afoul of American national identification. By keeping his friends in a cocoon of runaway success and lavish appointment made possible by the insular world of American regionalism in Northern Ohio, LeBron allowed very little contact with oppositional voices and shut out opinions that could run contrary to his grand narrative. Once LeBron got outside of his small circle and experienced overwhelmingly negative feedback in the majority of the country, it may be that LeBron found quite clearly that his decision to leave Ohio had left him afoul of some potent cultural mores. Extreme insularity, whether on the global political, corporate or individual level, often has this bracing effect once the veil is lifted.

**Scene Six – Best Male Actor in a Supporting Role**

**First Level**

The “real” LeBron clad in black asks at the beginning of the sixth scene, “Should I try acting?” A jumpcut puts LeBron into the seminal 1980s television show Miami Vice as the iconic logo for the show dominates the shot and LeBron flashes a police badge. Clad in a pink suit, LeBron and Miami Vice star Don Johnson share a scene set in the steamy underbelly of Miami. Johnson starts into a monologue as the camera slowly focuses on his face. “You just gotta deal with the heat, man, be patient. After a while, the temperature drops and everything is free and easy.” The camera moves from Johnson to LeBron as the player asks the actor, “Should I be writing this down?” Johnson replies, “Uh huh.”

“Real” LeBron assumes the shot as another quick jumpcut gives a one-second scene where James asks, “Should I make you laugh?” His face dissolves into a broad smile and he chuckles expressively before the scene slams into a beat poetry recital
where LeBron is onstage in front of the microphone, dressed in a casual brown jacket, gradient sunglasses and brown fedora hat. LeBron’s voiceover asks, “Should I read you a soulful poem?” Onstage, LeBron begins to recite his poetry. “Shoot me with your words, cut me with your eyes; but still, like air, I rise.” This twenty-second scene takes the viewer to the 1:15 mark in the commercial.

**Second Level – Play-Acting**

The ridiculousness of the premise that LeBron try acting is patently obvious – he is wooden in the scenes with Johnson, and the only time he emotes on a human level in the ad is when he is visibly angry or ham-handedly attempting to elicit sympathy from the viewer – but the text of the Miami Vice scene and the poem are all pointed digs at his critics in the culture. Johnson’s lines can be read as, “You just gotta deal with the Heat, man” – referring to his teammates and the fact that, in order to be successful, LeBron must only answer to his partners on his new team. In the poetry recital, LeBron’s defensive posture is extended as he tells his critics that “like Air” Jordan, he will rise above their slings and arrows to be a championship player.

Sports fans in Miami are notoriously fickle, and their support for their professional sports teams has traditionally been less than stellar when measured in attendance figures. By linking him to a seminal Miami television show and therefore period of time that celebrated the city as an exotic and dangerous place to live, Nike attempts to place LeBron into the cultural fabric of the city of Miami.

LeBron’s poem is actually a snippet of a very famous poem by Maya Angelou titled “Still I Rise.” The stanza that LeBron read ignited immediate criticism among poetry and cultural critics, most notably critic Liz Jones-Dilworth, whose opinion is that Nike has completely bastardized the work for commercial use.
“In its attachment to Nike and LeBron, the power of Angelou’s original poem is diminished if not entirely undercut. “Shoot” and “cut” acquire basketball and advertising connotations (shoot a basketball, shoot a commercial, cut across court, cut to a closeup) that reduce the social and gendered violence of “shoot me with your words” and “cut me with your eyes” to simple trash talk and gamesmanship. Similarly, “air” becomes a brand name, an act of commercial broadcasting, and a basketball style, not a figure for woman’s survival and triumph. Admittedly, the ad is a really savvy, thought-out deployment of Angelou’s poem; Nike obviously has a poetry critic (albeit a cynical one) on staff. But one nevertheless can’t help wondering, how can the poem be soulful if it’s really all about basketball and shoes?… As a brand, Nike creates heroes—performer-athletes with strong personalities. Nike is the poet, not LeBron” (Jones-Dilworth, 2011).

Third Level – LeBron’s I.P.O.

In this scene, LeBron is thinly disguising his desire to be like Mike. As a man seemingly unsure of his legacy aside from the idea that championships are his only salvation, LeBron made a decision to move from his hometown and join forces with other superstar players on their home turf to win rather than let the competition come to him. In this analysis the new corporate paradigm is extended to LeBron, and like a corporation bought, sold and split up, LeBron no longer has full possession of his image in the same way that Pillsbury now must first check with their European overlords before they undertake any large-scale decisions. LeBron may indeed rise like Air, but he will never be the independent superlative that Jordan represents.

Part of the reason for this lies with the historical era that birthed each superstar, but each man made decisions that brought them to this point as well. Maybe like a company that never went public and never opened up to the machinations of the global market, Jordan kept his image under total control at all times. LeBron went public, and no matter how many rings he accumulates he will always have to answer to his shareholding superstar teammates. While each player in this analysis represented the
corporate ethos of his particular era, it may be that the way America viewed corporations while Jordan was an active player differed greatly from the way Americans viewed corporate activity in LeBron’s heyday right now.

As a corporate entity untethered from his home region and free to sell his wares to the highest bidder in the most desirable venue, LeBron is acting in accordance with current corporate values and as such cannot afford to stay concurrent with older values and paradigms. Even though Michael Jordan stayed in the American Midwest for his entire career, so much has changed in the global economic landscape that LeBron may have felt it necessary to ply his trade in a more cosmopolitan city (Miami) for the betterment of his livelihood. Nike, having had a couple months to put together this commercial tasked with helping America release their hatred for LeBron’s decision and turn the page to acceptance and hopefully admiration, chose to connect LeBron with the sixth stanza of a powerful poem by perhaps the country’s most famous poet. Perhaps Nike had in mind the first five stanzas of the poem when addressing a nation of basketball fans who turned on the company’s chosen breadwinner, a combative and declarative set of stanzas whose tone would possibly more directly reflect the hostility LeBron faced as a young man blessed with all the natural talent in the world and a mind for corporatizing his image.

“You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may tread me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.
Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops.
Weakened by my soulful cries.

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own back yard" (Angelou, 2003).

**Scene Seven – Mixed Messages, Clear Connections**

**First Level**

The final scene is a combination of two clips that comprise the last fifteen seconds of the commercial. First, LeBron is depicted wearing a hardhat and clad in a work shirt as he pilots a large piece of heavy machinery inside a gymnasium. LeBron turns to the
camera positioned next to him in the cockpit of a huge backhoe and asks, “Should we just clear the decks? Start over?” As he says this line, he is tearing up the hardwood of a nice indoor basketball court as a group of unidentified males attempt to play on the dismantled hardwood alongside his huge work vehicle. LeBron continues destroying the court as the group gamely plays on next to the shards of wood being piled up in huge mounds. LeBron’s voiceover warns the unlucky players that he is “Comin’ through here.”

“Real” LeBron wearing red asks “What should I do?” in a resigned manner, and the camera catches him blinking reflexively to drive home the point that he is tired of the negative attention in a relatively long three-second shot. The next three seconds are a quick progression of the previous scenes, jumping directly from the first scene made to look like “The Decision” to the tattoo removal, LeBron stuffing his face with a pink donut, the iconic Cleveland banner falling, LeBron as unarmed gunslinger shrugging, the empty Hall of Fame ceremony, the Miami Vice scene and finally to a new context – a slow-motion scene of “real” LeBron, clad in his red basketball jersey and black headband, making an aggressive move to the basket in a pickup basketball game. The next two seconds are taken up by this slow-motion drive, which eventually evolves into a dynamic scooping layup attempt that evokes the way Michael Jordan would manipulate the ball in midair to create a spectacular and evasive shot attempt. LeBron’s voiceover asks the final question in a commercial filed with questions when he wonders aloud, “Should I be who YOU want me to be?” The screen goes black after this shot, and the customary “JUST DO IT” appears on black background in white capital lettering.
for one full second before giving way to the solitary white Nike Swoosh with the words “nikebasketball.com” across the bottom of the screen.

**Second Level – Damage Done**

This scene encapsulates the tone and scope of the whole commercial, as it tracks almost all of the scenes and characters LeBron played. LeBron in hardhat, “clearing the decks” and destroying a basketball court, is a visually arresting rhetorical image that brings a level of violence to LeBron that had not previously been explored. In many ways, LeBron completely destroyed his image with his decision and “The Decision,” so the metaphor is apt. While rhetorical devices have shown some degree of efficacy in advertisements (Tom & Eves, 1999), it is not clear that LeBron as an athlete or as a commercial character would benefit from an increased perception of violent capabilities if his goal is to shed his negative and villainous connotations. The final clip suggests that it is us, the viewer, who have been forcing LeBron into the blueprint set out by Michael Jordan – by having LeBron emphasize the word you in “Should I be what you want me to be?” - and that he is more comfortable being something completely different.

**Third Level – Trending Downward**

Nike placed their website at the bottom of the ad perhaps in an attempt to shepherd the discussion surrounding LeBron according to corporate parameters. The company also uploaded the vide to YouTube, thereby retaining the ability to delete comments it finds unsavory and fully manage the digital representation of “Lebron:RISE.” This is something they did not do in the past – a great majority of Nike ads on YouTube were uploaded by users and not by the company itself, raising questions about image rights and copyright issues.
In the end, LeBron suggests that judging him against Jordan is something he does not support. Downplaying expectations and keeping options open, this is good for LeBron's image as Nike knows full well there can never be another Michael Jordan. However, in the final level of this analysis, the way LeBron presented himself at the end of the advertisement is akin to asking Americans to tamper their expectations for the future and flies in the face of long-held middle-class belief systems like the rising tide that lifts all boats and standards of living that improve with every passing generation. For Americans, the future must be limitless – the theoretical construct of our nation rests upon this very idea. This analysis shows how LeBron refuses to bend to this reality, and because of this he is the first American supervillain of the global digital age.

Summary

It is my opinion that LeBron is the most physically gifted and talented athlete in professional sports in terms relative to his competition – his skill level is much more diverse and spectacular than anyone else in his sport, and the margin by which he leads all comers is greater than that of any other athlete in any other sport. However, LeBron has now found himself on the wrong side of national public opinion even though he has never been in trouble with the law or transgressed against any conscribed social norms. For a global media superstar in the shadow of basketball greats like Michael Jordan, LeBron is in rarefied air indeed.

The Nike ad “LeBron"RISE" shows clearly that, “As with any cultural product, there is no guarantee that sport celebrities will be consumed in the manner intended by those orchestrating the manufacturing process” (Andrews, 2008, p.69). By acting in a manner commensurate with that of an American corporation, LeBron merely did what Michael Jordan did twenty years prior. Perhaps the missing variable in the equation pieced
together by Nike and LeBron is that the American public no longer affiliates positive representations with their corporate structure, or that LeBron simply embodies the wrong kind of national sentiment for the spirit of the times. Another factor could be the championship level that Jordan performed at, but critical to the Jordan mythos is the fact that he stayed in one Midwestern American city (Chicago) for the entirety of his athletic peak. LeBron moved from his Midwestern American hometown at the perceived height of his athletic career and went looking for easy opportunity and unnatural results. This semiotic analysis of the commercial image of LeBron James, coupled with the intense public reaction to his move, might show that - unlike the powerlessness most Americans feel when a factory closes down in their hometown and moves overseas in search of lower opportunity costs and unnatural profit – Americans seemingly felt empowered since October 2010 to openly show their derision towards a solitary black man who plays basketball excellently but perhaps acts too much like a corporation in an era of structural reaction.

It is not clear that LeBron or his small circle of friends/advisors were even acutely aware of the possibility that his decision to leave Cleveland in a live, hour-long, nationwide television special would be one of the more flagrant public relations nightmares of recent vintage. Once his image was in tatters, though, it is abundantly clear that LeBron was entirely unprepared on any level to deal with the national backlash that painted a bull’s-eye on his back. The “LeBron:RISE” ad may be proof that LeBron and Nike still want him to occupy a positive place in the American sociocultural landscape, but this semiotic evaluation of the ad shows that the company and the athlete continue to associate with the wrong images and values if the goal is to occupy
an exalted commercial position similar to Michael Jordan. Every line in the
“LeBron:RISE” commercial save for a small handful were posed as questions, perhaps
the most glaring key that the company and the basketball star have not yet found a
cultural ethos that suits their commercial and professional goals simultaneously.
CHAPTER 6
DISCUSSION

Understanding basketball as a historical artifact born in the intense sporting nationalism of the Olympic movement in the early 1900s helps us to decipher how transnational corporations used a handful of young black athletes in “effectively engaging and invoking national sensibilities and experiences within a multitude of markets at one and the same time” (Andrews and Silk 2005, 186). This, in turn, is vital for decoding how LeBron has become the first American sports supervillian of the global digital age.

Millions of Americans viscerally reacted to LeBron in a complicated and overwhelmingly negative way despite the best efforts of a billion dollar company that had successfully engineered basketball images for two decades. Middle America – a vernacular way of talking about the silent white majority in this country – wholly rejected LeBron’s move to play in Miami and leave his hometown of Northern Ohio. The tone and scope of the negative reaction to LeBron could be perceived as not too dissimilar to the reaction in Middle America to prevailing global market forces that premeditate a Ford Motor Company plant closing in Northern Ohio and moving to Mexico, except that the LeBron blowback occurred on a nationwide scale, in a finite period of time and focused predominantly on one young black man.

The repositioning of the dominant basketball superstar as center of public discourse in America, though ostensibly featuring the exploits of LeBron James, seemed to only reflect LeBron’s mediated image off the towering personalities of previous dominant basketball superstars Jordan and Barkley. Michael Jordan and Charles Barkley combined to signify something about America in the era of the original
Dream Team that continues to resonate within our culture (Andrews & Silk, 2005), whereas Americans are clearly uneasy about the truths that are self-evident in LeBron James. The culmination of this focused American enmity towards perhaps the most talented athlete in the country was the cathartic spectacle of the most watched NBA Finals game of the last dozen years in June 2011 as LeBron collapsed on the biggest stage and lost the penultimate game of the year with a middling performance.

LeBron James discovered quite vividly that he can never be the “next Michael Jordan,” perhaps because even the first Michael Jordan existed only in the rarefied air of our own imaginations (Kellner, 2001). Standing in the coarse cultural shadow of Charles Barkley is similarly unfavorable for LeBron. In negotiating his international image as a superstar beset by doubts and racked by workplace insecurities, LeBron represents a post-modern “creolization” of the cultural icons that Charles Barkley and Michael Jordan were programmed to represent (Andrews, 1998; 2001; LaFeber, 2002) during the economically explosive 1990s. LeBron’s gilded placement in the American ethos as a global superstar in the age of rapid digital globalization shines a much brighter light on our shared American identity in the uncertain economic present than actually reflecting James’ tangible personal characteristics.

Where Michael Jordan represented only the best qualities on the human spectrum and helped Americans self-identify with a winning black leader (Andrews, 1998; Denzin, 2001; Kellner, 2001), Charles Barkley worked hard at the other end of that same ideological spectrum in the same period of time to usurp all of the negative connotations of his race (Page, 1997; Burstyn, 1998; Cole & King, 1998; Ebanda de B’beri & Hogarth, 2009; Buffington & Fraley, 2011) and his powerful position with some of the more
dramatic counter-programming in the history of advertising. While Nike worked hard to place these two Olympic teammates in diametrical opposition ideologically, it is not clear that the global company would have had the same level of success had their commercials struck at anything but the perfect historical time period. With Communism vanquished and the “good” early part of globalized market economies working in their favor, this analysis attempts to show that Nike merely had the luck of impeccable timing in creating an American icon and an ideological rebel for a world waking up to the seeming inevitability of proud, winning American nationalism as the de facto global discursive reality (Andrews 1998; 2001).

When LeBron James ascended to a globally relevant throne as the “King” of American basketball and got to wear the mantle atop a historically globalized game with deeply American roots, the view from up there was decidedly less rosy. While Michael Jordan stood silent and let his corporate masters define his personality (LaFeber, 2002) – and Charles Barkley loudly and angrily did the same (Goldman & Papson, 2001) – LeBron perhaps unknowingly patterned his career choices and responses seemingly after corporate America. Through the unrelenting negative attention for the entirety of the 2010/2011 NBA season, LeBron perhaps discovered that Americans prefer their basketball superstars ascribe to historical and anachronistic ideological markers rather than reflect reality with their actions or with their manufactured image.

It is not clear if Americans truly reject the corporatism they see reflected in the image of LeBron James, or if these semiotic similarities even play a substantive role in the public perception of this sublimely talented athlete. What is clear remains the fact that America wholly rejected her proscribed prodigal son and King of the basketball
image-manufacturing machine for simply exercising his rights as a worker unbound by contractual obligations. This semiotic analysis is an attempt to place that reaction within a wider context of political economic upheaval and American national identity while hewing close to the tenets of American semiotics and utilizing the Piercean triad, using the uniquely American game of basketball as the key to understanding a way to utilize American semiotics in media and cultural studies.
CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION

Through a historical examination of the globalized origins of basketball and a series of American semiotic analyses of defining sports commercials, basketball stars have been shown to be the site of a great deal of social signification (McChesney, 1989; Berger, 2000). These overwhelmingly black American sports superstars are in many ways the global representations of American nationalism as it is imagined by a nation connected through communication and mass culture (Anderson, 1983), and the nationalism they proscribe is affective on a number of ideological levels (Dunning, 1999; Maguire, 1999; Epner, 2005; Silk, Andrews & Cole, 2005). Whether or not the intentions of the athletes themselves can ever be uncovered is not material to the larger discussion of how their images and their livelihoods were co-opted by corporations looking to assert their brands in a world awash in market fundamentalism.

Michael Jordan set the bar quite high with his commercial career, and just like the inflated highs of the 1990s stock market he may have been riding on little more than hot air. When combined with Charles Barkley – the Yin to his Yang – Michael Jordan was able to say little but mean so very much to a nation and a world awash in signs and easy money through his exploits as a great champion of a globally-diffused American game. Barkley, on the other hand, occupied a very real place in the cultural landscape and still commands an essential countercultural capacity in the formation of American nationalism and identity (Burstyn, 1998; Goldman & Papson, 1998; Mazzarella, 2004).

The discussion of nationalism has faded in recent years as scholars moved quickly to embrace what they perceived as the new trends toward globalization, which undoubtedly seemed like an intoxicating new era in human history. However, the
economic earthquakes of recent years have called into question the viability and even the wisdom of market economies connected at the hip and corporations who wander the Earth in search of cheap labor and tax shelters. For now, at least, the important questions are once again being asked about economic ownership and the value of the nation as an economic and social platform.

In the study of sports and society, the trend toward globalization also produced research that seemed to discard the nation as a meaningful actor. Bairner (2009) has suggested a return to “primordialism,” or the re-establishment of the nation as central in the social constructions that make sport a site of important cultural analysis. As corporations lose their ability to move consumers, even the most influential companies know that they too must speak the language of nationalism in order to sell their products.

While Michael Jordan keyed several potent social constructs that Americans desired to identify with (Andrews, 1998; 2001; 2006), Charles Barkley took much of the flak that would otherwise have been directed at Jordan through his positioning as an ideological and combative figure (Page, 1997; Burstyn, 1998; Buffington & Fraley, 2011). LeBron did not have the luxury of ideological cover, but his actions and the social constructs he has been identified with in this paper have not allowed him to occupy the exalted position in the national ethos traditionally afforded the highly visible superstars of the only truly global game. Perhaps this analysis can lead to the conclusion that LeBron James’ biggest mistake in 2010 was letting his image dovetail so neatly with that of a corporation in an era when corporations have lost much of their social capital. By paying little attention to the old schools of thought and embracing the ethos of
corporatization in his image and through his career choices, LeBron lost his exalted cultural placement and enraged a nation perhaps fed up with the machinations of corporate America. LeBron is truly a man without a country, and in the immediate future that is not an agreeable place to be.

This American semiotic analysis is an attempt to place three basketball stars into a cultural context that is colored by ideology, which is a potential weakness in the structure of semiotics. By openly admitting bias and working through the lens of predisposed cultural and ideological viewpoints, the use of a triad analysis in the vein of Piercean semiotics is an attempt to turn the weakness of semiotics into a position of strength. The three levels of analysis, as they are overtly colored by ideology and the inherent biases of human thought, are structurally composed to place this analysis alongside competing and complimentary viewpoints of further triadic analysis by researchers with different – but no less important – personal biases and ideological angles. The viewpoint presented in this research is that of postmodern cultural critique (Hall, 1980) and postmodern sports sociology (Gruneau, 1993; Andrews, 1998; 2001; 2006). By making an effort to show how a triadic analysis could be constructed using the Piercean semiotic structure (Sebeok, 1976; Danesi, 1995) and imbuing it with the strength of an ideological angle (Hall, 1980; Kellner, 2001; Silk, Andrews & Cole, 2001), this research could do worse than be a marker in a movement toward transparency in academic analysis and a disengagement from the impossibility of objectivity in the social sciences (Mazzarella, 2004). As the sporting cultures grow more salient in a media age where sports programming is one of the most profitable ways to reach consumers – and live sporting events are virtually the only way to circumvent newer
technologies like digital video recorders which allow consumers to skip television
advertisements altogether or to otherwise alter their viewing patterns – finding ways to
study the impact of sports like basketball can only work to inform and strengthen media
and cultural studies across the social sciences.

Further work is necessary to build the body of knowledge discerned by triadic and
Piercean semiotics, as the subjectivity inherent to the analysis is necessarily incomplete
without further exploration from contrasting viewpoints. Perhaps an analysis colored by
Critical Discourse Analysis would be an even more effective way to approach an
ideological study similarly oriented to this one. Another, more structurally focused
analysis could take the tenets of Marxism and link them up more completely with the
basketball images of the commercials, or attach political and ideological value of any
number of persuasions to the commercial texts – Piercean analysis is only as good as it
is diverse, incorporating many viewpoints into a spectrum of what could be referred to
as the “truth” of reality.

As sports such as basketball are truly global games with global impacts, the
semiotic study of sports is an attempt to understand a global language. This contribution
is steeped in American mores and values, and other perspectives regarding the global
game of basketball could only help discern how different cultures speak this universal
sporting language.
### Table A-1. Gatorade – “Be Like Mike” commercial script.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VIDEO</th>
<th>AUDIO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>MICHAEL JORDAN LAYS UP THE BASKETBALL IN 1991 FINALS</strong></td>
<td><em>Drumbeats, music begins to play, male singer's voice: “Sometimes I dream”</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>JORDAN COVERS HIS FACE WITH TOWEL, SMILES</strong></td>
<td>“That he is me”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BLACK TEENAGER ATTEMPTS DUNK</strong></td>
<td>“You’ve got to see that’s how…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WHITE TEENAGER ATTEMPTS DUNK</strong></td>
<td>“… I dream to be”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MICHAEL JORDAN MAKES FUNNY FACE</strong></td>
<td>“bum ba bum bum bum”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>YOUNG WHITE FEMALE ATTEMPTS LAYUP SHOT</strong></td>
<td>“I dream I move”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BLACK AND WHITE MALE TEENS JOKE AROUND WITH BASKETBALL, DRINK GATORADE</strong></td>
<td>“I dream I groove”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>YOUNG WHITE MALE CHILD BACKS DOWN JORDAN, JORDAN PLAYFULLY SLAPS AT CHILD</strong></td>
<td><em>Child’s voice: “Like Mike, if I …”</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MICHAEL JORDAN AND GROUP OF YOUNG CHILDREN DRINK GATORADE TOGETHER</strong></td>
<td>“… could be like Mike”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MICHAEL JORDAN FACES WHITE ADULT MALE IN GYM SETTING, MAKES MOVE WITH BASKETBALL</strong></td>
<td><em>Female voice: “I wanna be I wanna be like Mike”</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MICHAEL JORDAN PLAYFULLY MISHANDLES BASKETBALL, LETTING THE BALL BOUNCE OFF HIS HEAD</strong></td>
<td><em>Chorus sings: “Like Mike, if I could be…”</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MICHAEL JORDAN SMIRKS AT CAMERA WITH CUP OF GATORADE IN HIS HAND</strong></td>
<td>“… like Mike.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SCREEN BLACK – TEXT READS “BE LIKE MIKE. DRINK GATORADE”</strong></td>
<td><em>Chorus sings: “Be Like Mike”</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B
CHARLES BARKLEY “I AM NOT A ROLE MODEL”

Table B-1. Nike – “I Am Not a Role Model” commercial script.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VIDEO</th>
<th>AUDIO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHARLES BARKLEY’S FACE IN CLOSE-UP SHOT</td>
<td>Charles Barkley’s voice: “I am not a role model”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BARKLEY DRIBBLING THE BASKETBALL, CAMERA JERKS SIDEWAYS</td>
<td>Loud screeching noises and percussive blasts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHARLES BARKLEY’S FACE IN CLOSE-UP SHOT</td>
<td>Barkley: “I am not paid to be a role model”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BARKLEY REBOUNDING THE BASKETBALL WITH FORCE</td>
<td>Loud screeching noises and percussive blasts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHARLES BARKLEY’S FACE IN CLOSE-UP SHOT</td>
<td>“I am paid to wreak havoc on the basketball court”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BARKLEY THROWS ELBOWS AND REBOUNDS BASKETBALL</td>
<td>Silence, followed by loud blast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHARLES BARKLEY’S FACE IN CLOSE-UP SHOT</td>
<td>“Period”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BARKLEY REBOUNDS BASKETBALL, CAMERA SHOWS HIS TORSO</td>
<td>Loud screeching noises and percussive blasts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHARLES BARKLEY’S FACE IN CLOSE-UP SHOT</td>
<td>“Parents should be role models”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BARKLEY AGGRESSIVELY HANDLING THE BASKETBALL</td>
<td>Loud screeching noises and percussive blasts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHARLES BARKLEY’S FACE IN CLOSE-UP SHOT</td>
<td>“Just because I can dunk a basketball”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLOW-MOTION ANGLE OF BARKLEY DUNKING, LEGS FLARED</td>
<td>Sound of jet engine taking off, followed by loud noise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHARLES BARKLEY’S FACE IN CLOSE-UP SHOT</td>
<td>“Doesn’t mean I should raise your kids”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCREEN BLACK – TEXT READS “JUST DO IT.”</td>
<td>Silence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table C-1. Nike – “LeBron:RISE” commercial script.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VIDEO</th>
<th>AUDIO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LEBRON SITS IN CHAIR, STARES STRAIGHT AHEAD</td>
<td>LeBron’s voice: “What should I do?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEBRON FACES CAMERA</td>
<td>“Should I admit that I made mistakes?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YOUNG LEBRON FACES HIGH SCHOOL TROPHY CASE</td>
<td>“Should I remind you that I’ve done this before?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other voice: “Should I give you a history lesson?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bell rings, “What should I do?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEBRON WATCHES BANNER FALL FROM DRIVERS SEAT OF DARK S.U.V., DRIVES AWAY</td>
<td>“Should I remind you how much fun we had?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other voice: “With the first pick, LeBron James…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEBRON STANDS AT PODIUM, DRESSED IN SUIT AND TIE</td>
<td>“So, this went well…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAMERA FINDS WHITE FEMALE SERVER HOLDING PITCHER OF WATER</td>
<td>“Should I really believe I ruined my legacy?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEBRON TURNS FROM PODIUM, LEAVES STAGE</td>
<td>Microphone feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEBRON IN GYM, SLAPS BASKETBALL</td>
<td>Loud percussive noise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“What should I do?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEBRON HAVING TATTOO REMOVED FROM BACK</td>
<td>“Should I have my tattoo removed?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEBRON ADDRESSES CAMERA</td>
<td>“Should I just sell shoes?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OUTDOOR SCENE OF A BUS PULLING UP TO ADVERTISEMENT IN STORE WINDOW, FIGURE PASSES BY WINDOW</td>
<td>“Sell shoes, shiny new shoes”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BLACK AND WHITE LENS: LEBRON ELBOWS CAMERA</td>
<td>“Should I tell you that…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEBRON JAMES’ FACE IN CLOSE-UP SHOT</td>
<td>“I am not a role model”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Loud screeching noises and percussive blasts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEBRON EATS DONUT</td>
<td>Twinkling bell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEBRON WINKS AT CAMERA</td>
<td>“Hi Chuck”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene Description</td>
<td>Dialogue or Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEBRON ADDRESSES CAMERA</td>
<td>“Seriously, What should I do? Should I tell you that I’m a championship chaser…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLOW-MOTION LEBRON MAKING MOVE TOWARD BASKET IN DARK GYM</td>
<td>“… did it for the money, rings?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEBRON ADDRESSES CAMERA</td>
<td>“Should I be who you want me to be?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEBRON DRESSED IN LEATHER CHAPS, JACKET &amp; COWBOY HAT</td>
<td>Gunshot, trumpet blast, sound effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNAKE SLITHERS ACROSS BOOTS, WORDS “THE VILLAIN” SPIN INTO CENTER OF SCREEN</td>
<td>“Should I accept my role…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEBRON IN LEATHER SHOWS HE IS NOT CARRYING GUNS, SHRUGS</td>
<td>“…as a villain?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEBRON ADDRESSES CAMERA</td>
<td>Whispers “Maybe I should just disappear?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCREEN GOES BLACK</td>
<td>Sound effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEBRON SURROUNDED BY FOUR FACES, WORDS “BLAH BLAH BLAH” ENCIRCLE HIS FACE</td>
<td>“La la la la”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Should I stop listening to my friends?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEBRON ADDRESSES CAMERA</td>
<td>“They’re my friends.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Should I try acting?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OUTDOOR SCENE AT NIGHT, WORDS “MIAMI VICE” FLASH ON SCREEN</td>
<td>Police horn bleeps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEBRON AND DON JOHNSON SHARE SCREEN</td>
<td>Don Johnson: “You just gotta deal with the heat, man. Be patient. After awhile, the temperature drops, and everything is free and easy”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LeBron: “Should I be writing this down?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEBRON ADDRESSES CAMERA, LAUGHS</td>
<td>“Should I try to make you laugh?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEBRON ONSTAGE WEARING HAT AND SUNGLASSES IN FRONT OF MIC</td>
<td>“Should I read you a soulful poem. Shoot me with your words, you may cut me with your eyes, but still, like air, I rise”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEBRON ADDRESSES CAMERA WEARING A HARDHAT FROM INSIDE BULLDOZER</td>
<td>“Or should I just clear the decks, start over?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BULLDOZER TEARS UP INDOOR BASKETBALL COURT WHILE GROUP OF MALES PLAY ON COURT</td>
<td>“Coming through here”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table C-1. Continued.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>LEBRON ADDRESSES CAMERA</strong></td>
<td>“What should I do?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PREVIOUS SCENES FLASH QUICKLY</strong></td>
<td>Gunshot sound effect, screeching noise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SLOW MOTION SHOT OF LEBRON MAKING AGGRESSIVE LAYUP</strong></td>
<td>“Should I be who you want me to be?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SCREEN BLACK – TEXT READS “JUST DO IT.”</strong></td>
<td>Silence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SCREEN BLACK – TEXT READS “NIKEBASKETBALL.COM”</strong></td>
<td>Silence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Born and raised in Gainesville, the only school Thomas Maple ever wanted to attend was the University of Florida. As the son of two high school teachers and older brother to two younger brothers, Mr. Maple wanted dearly to provide a good example and reflect well upon his family. By finally completing this degree and reaching the level of education that his father and mother achieved, Mr. Maple has completed his educational saga in North Central Florida and can now leave the University of Florida with his head held high.