



# Tiger Woods and the New Racial Order

Ellis Cashmore

Staffordshire University, UK

**abstract:** There is no more serviceable celebrity than Tiger Woods. He is a colour-free emblem of a new America in which racism is dead and there are no barriers to progress for any member of its citizenry – a new racial order. His success obscures the grimmer reality of contemporary America. This article examines Woods, less as a person, more as a commodity of immense utility: something that effectively advertises a society that has long struggled with the issue of racism, but has finally won. Woods functions as ambulant publicity: he studiously avoids engaging with any political or remotely sensitive issue and refuses to align himself with any particular ethnic group. In a sense, he is what one writer has called ‘a new kind of white person’. On the evidence presented here, Woods effectively invites consumers not to challenge racism directly, but to buy commodities that externalize success and in this way avoid confronting the racism that continues to bedevil most of America’s black population.

**keywords:** celebrity ♦ commodification ♦ consumer culture ♦ culture industry ♦ race ♦ Tiger Woods

## Proof that America is a Colourblind Society

13 April 1997, Augusta, Georgia. Tiger Woods, a 21-year-old golf prodigy, becomes the youngest player to win the Masters. Woods is instantly and spectacularly transformed into a symbol of integrated America. Fifty years after Jackie Robinson’s breakthrough into major league baseball, Woods breaches the final bastion. Golf, for long a stalwart institution of segregation, has finally found a champion who embodies the spirit of multiculturalism. The timing of Woods’ valorization is especially pertinent: it follows a sequence of racially motivated incidents, the most infamous of which is the Rodney King beating in 1991, though the Ku Klux Klan’s torching of a black church in South Carolina in 1995 is a less publicized though no less repellent episode.

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7 June 1998, Jasper, Texas. James Byrd Jr, a 29-year-old African American, is walking home from a niece's bridal shower. A pickup truck driven by a white male and carrying two other white men draws alongside him. Byrd accepts a ride and jumps inside the vehicle. But, instead of driving Byrd home, the men take him to a wooded area, beat him, chain him behind the truck and speed down a bumpy road, dragging his body. Byrd's severed head, neck and right arm are discovered about a mile from where his shredded torso is dumped. A trail of blood, body parts and personal effects stretches for two miles.

Tiger Woods is not a nigga. At least not in the sense of being a transgressive African American bent on testing the limits of middle America's forbearance with persistent reminders that the past is not really another country but a place just a few miles from here. He is not even black, if blackness is, as Herman S. Gray (2005: 19) argues, 'cultural practices, social meanings, and cultural representations . . . people use to negotiate and construct meaningful lives'.

Woods has distanced himself from controversies about race and positioned himself as a 'Cablinasian', his own amalgam of *Ca* for Caucasian, *bl* for black, *in* for Indian, plus *Asian*. This is not strictly accurate: certainly Woods has *tried* to distance himself from racial controversy, though not always successfully. Critics believe his posture is too mannered and rehearsed. 'Tiger Woods is selfish and self-centered', sneers Rufus Sanders (2002: 8). 'Because he has made it, he feels it is up to every other individual to make it on their own. There is no sense of social responsibility, moral accountability or righteous indignation. He sees no color. He knows no race.'

Since emerging in the late 1990s, Woods has become a central figure in the construction of the US's new racial order, one in which archaic divisions have been eradicated and racism has disappeared. 'Look at Tiger Woods and see the face of America's future,' the *International Herald Tribune* (22 June 2000: 9) declared, 'showing how far Americans have come on an unstoppable national journey . . . from the time-honored myth of racial clarity to the all-mixed-up reality of multiracialism.'

Earl Ofari Hutchinson suspects this type of impression conceals a contrivance: 'While many whites sincerely cheered Tiger for his triumphs, many others twisted his success into final proof that America is a color-blind society, and discrimination mostly a figment of the warped imaginations of many African-Americans' (Hutchinson, 1998: A7).

On this account, Woods and the order he personifies helps perpetuate a popular impression of America and indeed the West, as inclusive, embracing a multitude of ethnic groups, respecting difference and diversity and relentless in its effort to eradicate racism. Woods is both an exemplar of a new racial order and a reminder that the past is exactly that – the past. Urged on by media smitten by his wholesome image, his accessibility

as well as his prowess, Woods has become arguably the best known and certainly highest paid athlete in history.

And yet, the image is misleading. Far from being a multicultural haven, the West continues to harbour racism, institutional discrimination and the vestiges of age-old prejudices that manifest in different educational attainments, discrepancies in health and welfare provision, segregated housing and inconsistent incarceration. As William Lyne (2000: 39) reminds us, 'black enrollments in US colleges have declined, real incomes for black workers have dropped through the floor, black life expectancy has gone down, and a staggering percentage of young African American males have been warehoused in prisons'.

Hurricane Katrina exposed the position of African Americans dramatically in 2005. In its wake, the poverty of New Orleans' black population was nakedly revealed; it prompted even the president to acknowledge 'the problems of racial inequality and persistent poverty' (see Reed and Steinberg, 2006: 2).

Woods, or, more correctly, the media portrayal or visible representation of Woods, is a discursive product for managing difference. By discursive product, I mean an article that is manufactured, refined in a way that conveys an argument or a persuasive type of reasoning. Woods' identity or character might have been formed by a particular period or context, but it is not Woods the person but rather the descriptions, images and sounds of Woods, and how they are communicated that makes the product. These are practically independent of the flesh-and-blood man himself. They depict a personalized reproduction of America: it is a place where the racism that was such a source of torment throughout the 20th century has now almost disappeared, receded in importance, paving the way for a culturally eclectic environment in which race might matter, but not nearly as much as it did as recently as the 1990s. Discrimination is portrayed, to repeat Ofari Hutchinson, as a figment, something that exists only in the 'warped imagination'. In this vision, racism may not be at an end, but an end is in sight.

### **If the Rest of Society Views You as Black**

Woods arrived amid a racial interruption. Having progressed through civil rights and the riots of the 1960s, the US was relieved by what William Julius Wilson observed to be *The Declining Significance of Race* in 1978. During the 1980s, the Reagan administration appeared to hasten the trend towards insignificance, reining back race-specific policies and entrusting equal opportunity to the market. Occasional incidents that threatened to disturb the fragile equilibrium were interpreted as isolated episodes rather than reflections of a continuing unease. The Rodney King beating and the disturbances prompted by the acquittal of the police officers

accused of the violence disclosed a less propitious image of America. So, in some senses, Woods' appearance was like a *deus ex machina* – an unexpected arrival saving a seemingly disintegrating situation.

In 1997, Woods won his first Masters title, one of golf's premier championships. While Woods was a surprise winner, his prowess was well known in golf circles. In the previous year, when he turned professional, he did so with a portfolio of endorsement contracts estimated to be worth over US\$40 million. His most lucrative and long-lasting deal was with Nike, the corporation that had helped elevate Michael Jordan to iconic status. It was not such a risky proposition for Nike: Woods was already a proven commodity, having been carefully instructed and developed by his father, Earl, since he was old enough to stand. He featured on television when aged three, showing off his prodigious talent. In 1994, when aged 19, he became the youngest golfer ever to win the US Amateur title and went on to defend it three times. But it was his annexing of the Masters that confirmed his athletic potential. It also earned him a distinction he evidently did not welcome.

Woods might not regard himself as an African American, but the rest of the world apparently did and he was hailed not only as the first black man to win a golf major, but as a someone who had attacked and defeated the cherished beliefs, values and practices of what was considered a white man's sport. Golf was an institution based on racism. Even in the year of Woods' triumph, there were golf clubs that excluded blacks. 'Why is Tiger Woods the only Black on the Green?', asked Pete McDaniel of *Crisis*, as recently as 2004.

Historically, there had been black golfers, such as Charlie Sifford (the first black man to win a PGA event at the Greater Hartford Open, 1967), Lee Elders (the first African American to play at the Masters in 1975) and Calvin Peete (who won the 1985 Tournament Players' Championship at Sawgrass) (see Dawkins, 2004); but none had won a major and they remained largely anonymous for their sporting lives. Woods, by complete contrast, was greeted with a fervour typically reserved for messianic leaders or probable saviours. 'That's destiny', a black resident of Augusta, Georgia, told Steve Rushin, of *Sports Illustrated* in 1997, as he watched Woods in action. 'That is God's work. Ain't nothing you can do about it.'

Even before his 1997 success, Woods resisted the plaudits that are typically attendant on black trailblazers. Affixing race or colour to him or his achievements was, he reminded the media, 'belittling . . . I am one-quarter black, one-quarter-Chinese, one-quarter-Thai, one-eighth American Indian and one-eighth white' (quoted in Boyd, 1995).

This did nothing to daunt his acolytes. If anything, it widened the scope of his votaries. Writing in the *Jewish Bulletin of Northern California*, Mark Hardie (1997: 25) asserted: 'Tiger transcends racial categories and presents

himself as a universal human being, a mensch [a person of great integrity]. Indeed, by refusing to choose a single race he challenges society's myopic obsession with skin tone, complexion and facial features.'

Yet when another race-transcendent celebrity alluded to this, the consequences were sobering. As Marcus Amick wrote in 1997: 'On one of her recent shows, Oprah Winfrey referred to Woods as "America's son", but the hate mail and death threats Woods said he gets implies that a substantial part of America is still not ready for a "son" of African American origin' (Amick, 1997: 1A).

Even if Woods did not regard himself as black, he could hardly have escaped noticing that a great many others did. These included fellow golfer Fuzzy Zoeller, whose famous playful remarks about Woods' eating fried chicken and collard greens backfired grotesquely, causing Zoeller embarrassment and loss of endorsements. It forcibly reminded Woods that, as Jerelyn Eddings and Kenneth T. Walsh (1997: 23) put it, 'self-identification doesn't much matter if the rest of society views you as black'.

Peter Giacobbi and Joy DeSensi believe that the reaction to Zoeller's jibe served to remind the nation that, as an ESPN journalist (whom they quote) put it, 'race lurks just below the surface of much of American life . . . Woods' explosive arrival has proven that' (Giacobbi and DeSensi, 1999: 413).

It erupted with the racially motivated James Byrd Jr killing, for which three whites were indicted in 1998. The incident delivered a kind of reminder that race was like a still-active volcano.

In 2000, the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) urged Woods to boycott a PGA (Professional Golfers' Association) event in South Carolina. He refused, prompting Charles Barkley to explain, 'Tiger likes to be okay with everybody, to appeal to all people', adding, presumably in allusion to the Oprah interview, 'Thai people don't get hate mail, black people do' (quoted in Nordlinger, 2002: 39). (Woods insists that he receives hate mail and reads it all, according to the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 31 January 2001.)

Ralph Gordon underlined the futility of Woods' abnegation: 'Whether he [Woods] likes it or not, he must contend with the fact that many of the remaining racists in this country see him as Black. Imagine Woods trying to explain to a racist policeman or to a skinhead that he's not really Black' (Gordon, 1997: 66).

The declaration has echoes of promoter Don King's *aide-mémoire* to Michael Jackson in the 1980s: 'It doesn't matter how great he [Jackson] can sing and dance. . . . He's one of the megastars in the world, but he's still going to be a nigger megastar' (quoted in Taraborrelli, 1991: 377).

Jackson never denied he was black, though his surgical transmogrification insinuated dissatisfaction with his physical self. And, while King might have gauged the awareness of many Americans, Jackson's 'megastar'

standing did not depend on his blackness and was, in a way, achieved *in spite* of this (MTV initially refused to feature his singles in 1983). Writing in 1997, Gordon advised that Woods had benefited from a completely different propulsion: 'The key element beyond his considerable talent – his Blackness – vaulted him to prominence' (Gordon, 1997: 66).

Strenuously as Woods tried to repudiate blackness, it was this very aspect that helped establish him as one of the world's foremost celebrities and a regular on *Forbes'* highest earners list. None of this denies his athletic ability: the Masters win was the first of several moments that established Woods as one of the finest golfers of all time. Yet his predecessors Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus never approached Woods' global status, nor commanded godlike reverence. Woods was unique: his fame and, for that matter, considerable fortune, was predicated on the same quality that had retarded, restricted and restrained black people for over 300 years.

### **A Different Kind of White Person**

Woods offered a new kind of Other: not uncivil, heathen or incapable of reaching the intellectual and cultural levels of white Americans or Europeans; but gifted, blessed with exceptional talent or natural ability. He presented a new synthesis of internal contradictions. He did not see himself as black, yet others did. 'Of course, in defining others we implicitly define ourselves, if only through unspoken contrast', Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann (1998: 29) remind us. 'At the heart of racial identification lie the claims we wish to make about "them" and about how different "they" are from "us".'

Perhaps Woods is different, yet the same, 'a different kind of white person', as Wiley Hall (2001) describes the new presence. Referring to the generation of African American entertainers who have divested themselves of their blackness in their efforts to maintain popularity, Hall singles out the Hollywood comedy actor Whoopi Goldberg, who famously declared: 'I am not an African American. I am an American.'

Woods *is* different. Fans gape in awe at his ability, perhaps in the same way they were amazed at the destructive prowess of Joe Louis, champion boxer in the 1930s and 1940s, or the prodigious batting of the legendary baseball player Willie Mays in the 1950s and 1960s, or, more recently, the astonishing all-round court skills of the iconic basketball player Michael Jordan. The admiration, perhaps adulation, afforded these and other extraordinarily talented athletes might be genuine, but it is also what John Hoberman (1997: 53) calls 'a form of entrapment'.

Hoberman posits what he calls the Law of Compensation, 'an inverse relationship between mind and muscle, between athletic and intellectual development' (Hoberman, 1997: 225). White America has lionized black

athletes, while comforting themselves that the athletic gifts compensated for the absence of intellect. The assumption has been given specious credibility by the race–IQ debate, notable contributors to which were Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray (1994). Hoberman’s critique of America’s trap-like admiration of black athleticism was published in the same year that Woods rose to international prominence.

But Woods quickly disarmed those who suspected he might submit to Hoberman’s Law of Compensation. While he had left Stanford midway through his studies, he manifested the intelligence of a graduate and the maturity of a media veteran. At a time when Mike Tyson had been released from prison and was resuming his uproarious boxing career and O. J. Simpson had just emerged from his 1990s’ *cause célèbre*,<sup>1</sup> Woods offered a different kind of Other – a much more domesticated model, yet one that still secreted an implicit definition of middle America, or the ‘ourselves’, as Cornell and Hartmann (1998) put it.

Woods’ explanation of why he was not black resembled a chef reciting the recipe of the dish while the diners devour the meal. An early example of this occurred in July 1997, when he appeared with Barbara Walters on prime-time ABC television. Walters called attention to questions of racism and discrimination and asked Woods about his black heritage. Woods restated his multicultural credentials: ‘I’m African-American and Asian. Granted, I’m all these other things.’ This is quoted by Giacobbi and DeSensi (1999: 412), who believe it was a key interview in transforming Woods. ‘Tiger Woods then became an anomaly, the exotic/unique highly successful professional golfer who is set apart from his race, exploited because of his differences from the majority, and yet distinguished in the ranks’ (Giacobbi and DeSensi, 1999: 413). A new kind of Other, one that signifies sameness within difference and stability amid change. This dual-edged quality prompts different responses.

‘Imagine a scenario in which the young Tiger Woods is so obsessed with gaining equal access that he never sees his inborn talent for golf. Such a scenario may sound ludicrous, but it is repeated every day across the country.’ The statement might have been written by the aforementioned William Julius Wilson or any number of reactionaries who want black people to stop wasting their energies on fighting racism and spend them on developing themselves as individuals. It was, in fact, written by Aman A. Motwane (2000: 11), of the *Mississippi Link*. ‘Nurturing a nation of individuals to help bring out their best’ is the aim of Motwane’s programme. Woods is an unwitting standard-bearer: he may not see himself as black, but he realized his ‘inborn talent’ early on (or rather his father did: Woods was listening to motivational tapes as early as six). And he was not ‘obsessed with gaining equal access’; by which we presume Motwane means challenging racist practices at every opportunity.

Signalling Woods in this way carries dangers, according to Bankole Thompson, who quotes Tracy Martin-Henry, of the Sugar Law Center: 'The mainstream mistakenly believes affirmative action is now obsolete because they see Michael Jackson, Tiger Woods and Oprah Winfrey on tv . . . but they are exceptions, not the rule' (Thompson, 2003: A1).

In other words, Woods is not a neutral presence, but an inimical one. Rasheed Z. Baaith advances a related argument. '12 percent of our [African American] young men between the ages of 21 and 35 are behind bars', reports Baaith, who argues that the retreat from social policies focused on blacks is 'a new strategy', which he summarizes: 'Put a few Black men in the spotlight and put the rest of us in prison' (Baaith, 2003: 7). The title of Baaith's article conveys the role of Woods in the lexicon of Information Technology: 'Tiger Woods: Part of the Disconnect'.

### **Pixie Dust of the American Dream**

When, in 1996, Woods turned professional, he signed deals reported to be worth US\$40 million. He immediately became one of the top 10 highest earning athletes without even teeing off in a pro tournament. Contracts with, inter alia, Rolex, American Express and Fortune Brands were lucrative, though his major sponsor was Nike, which extended its contract with a further US\$90 million and, in terms of sales, has been the chief beneficiary (Farrell et al., 2000). In 2006, Woods earned an estimated US\$54 million from endorsements alone. By then, the buying power of affluent African Americans had reached US\$292.4 billion, with the entire African American market totalling US\$682.5 billion.

Woods did not pose a solution to what Gunnar Myrdal (1944) had called *An American Dilemma*. He did, however, make it manageable – something that was susceptible to control without too much effort. Of course, he was not unassisted in this endeavour and was probably unaware of his role in the collaboration. Yet Woods became a symbol of African American integration, not by defiantly leading marches, or stirring the masses with blistering oratory, but by consuming.

The idea that African Americans could be coaxed into the mainstream was raised most memorably by E. Franklin Frazier's (1957) *Black Bourgeoisie*, which was first published in 1955 (as *Bourgeoisie Noire*). By the mid-1980s, Bart Landry (1987) was able to distinguish between Frazier's subjects and a newly emergent class of aspirational black professionals and entrepreneurs with disposable income. The market responded, as Clint Wilson and Félix Gutiérrez noted in a 1985 analysis of how and why the media's portrayal of ethnic groups has changed: 'Advertisers promote consumption of their products as a shortcut to the good life, a quick fix for low-income consumers' (Wilson and Gutiérrez, 1985: 128).

'The message to their low-income audience is clear', they wrote, referring to the manner in which advertisers had begun to take notice of previously ignored segments of the market: 'You may not be able to live in the best neighborhoods, wear the best clothes, or have the best job, but you can drink the same liquor, smoke the same cigarettes, and drive the same car as those who do' (Wilson and Gutiérrez, 1985: 128).

Wilson and Gutiérrez's study was published just as markets were segmenting and advertisers were recognizing the distinct consumption patterns of certain ethnic minorities. The authors showed that there had been 'dramatic changes in the relationship between marketing and racial minorities' since the 1960s and that, by the mid-1980s, advertising agencies understood that the ghettos were waiting to be exploited. Wilson and Gutiérrez (1985: 130) noted that while advertisers were wooing African Americans, 'a system of inequality that keeps them below national norms in education, housing, income, health and other social indicators' remained.

One of the triumphs of today's celebrity culture is that it has assuaged our discomfort with persisting inequalities. Two decades after Wilson and Gutiérrez's reminder, there was any number of conspicuously successful African Americans who enjoyed opulent lifestyles, elevated status and the kind of wealth that would have been unimaginable for most in the 1980s. Woods was one of them.

All celebrities exhibit their bodies in a way that makes them merchandise – articles of trade that can be bought and sold in the marketplace. They help sell a range of articles, from movie tickets, DVDs and CDs to the cars, colognes and the designer labels they endorse. They also embody exchange values. As such, they are living commodities themselves: their very presence, whether at a premiere or at the gym, has value, if for no other reason than we are interested enough to pay for it – how many celebrity magazines feature pictures of stars driving, shopping or just doing nothing in particular? They are also ambulant advertisements for a 'short cut to the good life', in which there is universal consumption, the promise of luxury for all, an endless cycle of insatiable desire and in which demand for goods is the most fundamental human experience.

They are both constituent parts of and a perfect complement for a consumer culture predicated on the principle that anything – *anything* – can be bought in the market. This includes the end of racism; or, more specifically, an end to the effects racism personally has on any consumer who can afford Wilson and Gutiérrez's 'short cut to the good life'. 'How can you say racism is still a big problem in the US?' might be a near-rhetorical question asked by middle Americans. 'Look at Tiger Woods and all the other black celebrities, like Beyoncé, P. Diddy, or Jamie Foxx. They earn billions. If they made it, so can others.'

It is a hypothetical reaction, but one that has perhaps too much credence among whites *and* blacks to be entirely dismissed. Christopher Holmes Smith explains why and, while he is referring to Diddy-like hip-hop moguls, he might be calling attention to Woods: 'His trade is purely in the realm of socially mobile aspirations – the quintessential pixie dust of the postwar American dream' (Holmes Smith, 2003: 80). ('Pixie dust' was the magic powder that enabled humans to fly in *Peter Pan*).

### **Race as Part of a Marketing Formula**

Remember, whether he liked it or not, Woods was and is widely regarded as a black man, a bellwether in fact, someone who was leading a flock of others – or Others. But he was also the heir to Michael Jordan, described by Giacobbi and DeSensi (1999: 413) as 'a non-threatening, non-controversial black athlete' and one, we should add, whose signature helped Nike sell US\$5.2 billion worth of Air Jordan footwear and who earned about US\$130m from Nike over the course of his sports career (see Johnson, 2003; Johnson and Harrington, 1998). Nike had revelled in a prosperous relationship with Jordan, exercising care in positioning the basketball icon and not only in the market. 'Get the money, don't say anything substantial and for heaven's sake, never offend white people', is how Baaith summarizes Jordan's strategy. Woods, Baaith (2002: 8) points out, adopted the same stance.

While this is intended as a critique, it is effectively a statement of fact in a society that dotes on consumption. When Woods signed for Nike and the others, he entered a bargain other than the one stated in the contracts. 'His race immediately became part of the marketing formula,' write John Leland and Gregory Beals (1997: 60), noting, 'Woods was perfect for a company that's made a lot of money off people that look like him.'

In his first commercial for Nike, Woods declared: 'There are still golf courses in the United States that I cannot play because of the color of my skin. I'm told I'm not ready for you. Are you ready for me?' (quoted in Millard, 1996: 9). Nike maintained it had discovered 23 private clubs that excluded African Americans and so prompted debate over how such exclusionary policies could be vanquished.

Woods thus became a living advertisement, both commercial and ideological. As well as promoting a vision of a colourblind America, he implicitly held out an offer to all Americans, but particularly to the African Americans, some of whom accorded him near-messianic status. The offer was to buy into the lifestyle he had created for himself. Then again, this is essentially the same message that all celebrities convey. It seems crass to suggest that Woods does ideological work in this respect. More properly, we might argue that he exposes the limitations of a society in which the

summit of success is to consume in a manner that approximates that of conspicuous celebrities.

Pero Gaglo Dagbovie (2005: 304) compares members of what he calls the hip-hop generation with their predecessors of the 1960s: 'They have not responded collectively to black oppression or made distinctive contributions to the black "tradition of protest" . . . [they] appear to share a general lack of concern for and knowledge of black history . . . are distracted by a multitude of media-generated images and messages with which no previous younger black generation has had to deal.'

An entire generation has effectively been dazzled by Gucci jewellery, Cristal champagne, Lexuses and Rocawear. Woods is not the kind of self-dramatizing stereotype associated with rap music, nor even an A-list actor who eschews those same stereotypes. Yet he is still what Gaglo Dagbovie considers a distraction: images of Woods circulate among the media, radiating signifiers of success, splendour and prosperity. The generation Gaglo Dagbovie respects had no such images: ghettos in the 1960s were segregated slums not computer-generated backdrops for 50 cent videos. While this generation dreams of consumables, its predecessor demanded social change.

Does this mean that African Americans have snorted too much pixie dust? If Amitai Etzioni (1998: 60) is to be believed, the answer is yes: 'When it comes to basic tenets of the American creed, the overwhelming majority of blacks are surprisingly accepting of them.' Woods embodies 'the harmonious blend of American diversity', as Judy Polumbaum and Stephen Wieting (2001: 237) put it. But he is also 'a commercial emblem', state Cheryl Cole and David Andrews (2001: 72) 'who makes visible . . . America's narrative of itself'.

He does so by endorsing not only commodities, but the culture in which those commodities have value, signify the worth of the consumer and express an acceptance that was unavailable to previous generations of African Americans. Black people have been persuaded that the American dream is theirs – as long as they have the money to buy it. 'If we don't like it, we have a right,' maintains Hall (2001: A2): 'Don't buy, don't watch, don't consume.' This might work as a gesture of defiance, but it is hardly a practical programme of resistance.

Tiger Woods sells watches, sportswear, cologne and pretty much any product he deems worthy of his imprimatur. Television channels sell advertising space when Woods plays in a televised tournament. His books, CDs, DVDs and computer games are stacked on the shelves of millions of stores from Chicago to Shanghai, Anchorage to Adelaide. But the most valuable commodity he trades in is a singular view of the US. It is a view of a society that has replaced America's dilemma with a new dream – a land of opportunity in which racial divisions are no longer a prominent feature of the landscape.

America has struggled, often vainly, to deal with its most lacerating problem, though since the 1980s and the advent of celebrity culture, a solution of sorts has offered itself. Oprah, Jordan, Beyoncé and the plethora of black celebrities collectively present a new image of talented, determined and noticeably wealthy African Americans who resist grumbling about racism. As arguably the most conspicuously talented and globally feted black celebrity of today, Woods effectively demonstrates how racism is no longer an impediment. His importance can be understood in the context of a small but highly visible group of black celebrities who display opulence, desist from deliberating on racism and whose credibility remains colossal because of, rather than in spite of this.

While Woods stringently resists being pigeonholed, Hall's 'different kind of white person' looms as apposite. Today we observe celebrities operating in a culture that has rendered whiteness plastic, melting, stretching and shaping it in a way that accommodates new meanings. Woods might be seen in this light: as part of a new type of whiteness that makes the racial hierarchy invisible or at least opaque.

Perhaps, post-9/11 America has become so preoccupied with new malefactors, such as al-Qaeda, that it has no energy to confront the racism that has persisted since the end of slavery. It looks to exemplars of conspicuous black success as proof that the world has moved on and those who carp about racism in the aftermath of the New Orleans calamity are unrepresentative of the 21st century.

### Note

1. O. J. Simpson (b. 1947) was the much-decorated football player who moved into acting, appearing in the *Naked Gun* movie series. In June 1994, he was charged with the murder of his estranged wife, Nicole Simpson, and her friend, Ronald Goodman. He was cleared in 1995 after one of the most famous and controversial trials of the 20th century.

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**Biographical Note:** Ellis Cashmore is the author of *Celebrity/Culture* (Routledge, 2006), *Tyson: Nurture of the Beast* (Polity Press, 2005) and *Beckham* (Polity Press, 2004). He was professor of sociology at the University of Tampa and, before that, lecturer in sociology at the University of Hong Kong. Presently, he is professor of culture, media and sport at Staffordshire University, England.

**Address:** Faculty of Health, Staffordshire University, Stafford ST18 0AD, UK.  
[email: e.cashmore@staffs.ac.uk]