CHAPTER FIVE

The Black Athlete’s Racialized Experiences and the Predominantly White Intercollegiate Institution

“Dirty nigger!” Or simply, “Look, a Negro!”
I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.

—Franz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks

Introduction

Growing up Black in the South, privileges one with insight into issues involving race and race relations. My early experience with race relations began in my small hometown, where hypersegregation prevailed in communities, schools, churches, recreational centers, and so on. Blacks contact with Whites was very limited, except for school and work. Although there were Blacks whose economic status would classify them as middle to upper class, relatively speaking, their race relegated them to always being subordinate in their interaction with the White citizens in this community. It was not until the desegregation of the school system that the interaction between racial groups increased, but not necessarily positively. Our Black skin made us objects by which others, based on predetermined assumptions, perceived our worth and structured interracial interaction.

After leaving the South, racial objectification was experienced in different ways. Encountering Whites that either had no or very limited contact with Blacks always presented interesting phenomena. The feelings and looks of discomfort, bewilderment, suspicion, skepticism, and so on, were quite evident during these engagements. I will never forget
a First Lieutenant in my military unit who grew-up in upper peninsula of Michigan expressing the fact that he had never seen a Black person in person until he went to college. This was not surprising because I vividly remember several occasions in northern Midwest cities during the early nineties where I was the first encounter Whites had with Blacks. I remember the embarrassment parents experienced trying to silence “little Johnny” for blustering out in complete amazement, “look mom, there’s a Black person.” How amusing it must have been for them to see a Black person—live and in person, instead of only the media renditions they received and used to construct their frame of reference about different racial groups.

Despite the pockets within the U.S. population that are completely naïve or blatantly ignorant about race, this country has since developed an acceptance and an admiration for several Blacks that have reached levels of prominence. In politics for example, Colin L. Powell was admired by a majority of the U.S. population from 1998 until 2004. Since 2005, Condoleezza Rice has been considered the most popular member in the Bush administration. During the presidential election, Senator Barack Obama, now President Barack Obama, had a celebrity-like following throughout many parts of the world. For example, in Berlin, it was estimated that he drew a crowd of over 200,000. Clearly, some of this attendance was out of curiosity and skepticism, but it also speaks to his popularity and admiration.

In the media industry, Oprah Winfrey remains the most popular television personality for four of the last five years. Several Black actors and entertainers have emerged to garner honor and admiration across racial lines, for example, Denzel Washington, Halle Barry, and Will Smith.

Furthermore, in the world of sports there are several Black athletes that have been accepted and are admired by a majority within this country and globally. Since the retirement of Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, Kobe Bryant, and LeBron James are the most popular sports stars; nationally and internationally.

As it relates to race, this country has made tremendous progress given the fact of its horrible history of slavery, racial segregation, and terrorist acts of lynching. I must draw caution to the abbreviated list of Blacks that have transcended racial barriers and evolved to be accepted and admired by the masses. I understand the argument of cultural critics and scholars that profess the end of racism, especially with the Democratic Party’s nomination of a Black male and the election of the United States first Black president, or those that proclaim the insignificance of race. I would love to believe the following statement by William J. Wilson, as it pertains to economic rewards that:

Race relations in America have undergone fundamental changes in recent years, so much so that now the life chances of individual