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Sport, and the changing definition of whiteness

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SPORT, AND THE CHANGING DEFINITION OF WHITENESS

A Thesis

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Abstract

This paper looks at the effects of professional basketball on white culture. Traditional scholarship focuses on the impact this has on the African-American community. Very little attention is given to its effects on white America. The focus of this paper is to examine whiteness and to understand how it is socially constructed. In addition, this paper will examine how some elements of black style have been appropriated by white America and changed the definition of whiteness in America.

White America's appropriation of limited aspects of black style has been facilitated by the culture that is associated with professional basketball. The economic and social contributions of these athletes have expanded the boundaries of traditional whiteness. This paper presents the argument that the parameters of historical whiteness has expanded to include certain elements of blackness, but this pattern does not alter traditional racist ideology.

Introduction

I remember when I was in high school I would always rush home in the afternoon to play basketball with my friends. This was an activity that I greatly enjoyed. We would spend many hours at local playgrounds hanging out and shooting the "rock." Most of us were good-natured and very few fights broke out. What I did not realize at the time, and in fact would take me years to adequately understand, would be the fact that I was usually one of the only white guys on the court. Race was not something that I thought about, I just wanted to play ball. Now that I reflect on those events, I can trace the origins of my interest in race relations to those days of just "hanging with the boys." In those days my view could have been summarized as follows: I wanted to be a good basketball player, so I associated myself with people I perceived to possess a great deal of acumen in the sport. This line of thought has merit. If you want to be good at something, it is best to test your ability against the best in your area.

Now that I am older I realize the question this situation naturally asks is why did I perceive African-Americans had a monopoly on this sport. What cultural factors shaped this belief? What effect did my association with African-American players have on my identity? In addition to these questions I

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wanted to understand what historical events could be responsible for me to characterize my friends as African-American when I simply called myself "white"? This paper aims to answer to those questions. I present the argument that what I believed to be white was not a reality, but rather a socially constructed concept. This social construction is not static rather it is constantly changing. I submit one of the main factors that caused this concept to change is the domination of professional athletics by African-Americans. In a sentence, this paper aims to answer one question: how professional basketball changed the definition of whiteness in America.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze American culture from a different perspective. Whiteness as a concept is a new entity in the academic world. The birth of whiteness studies is a clear signal that the countless African-American thinkers and writers have impacted society and caused white intellectuals to reevaluate their reality. Whiteness Studies is not a substitute for African-American studies, but a continuation of that discipline. The goals are the same for each. Both branches of thought attempt to understand American History from different perspectives. In addition, this paper is an interdisciplinary effort to synthesize the principles of historical interpretation with that of other academic disciplines. The Whiteness studies

movement is not exclusive to one branch of thought, but it ranges across all academic endeavors.

The focus of this paper will be to extract some theoretical concepts about the subject and apply them to an area that has received very little attention. Most scholarship concentrates on areas where whiteness is the norm. This paper will focus on a culture where whiteness is not the majority, but rather the minority. I present the idea that the African-American domination of sports presents a situation that challenges the very definition of whiteness in America.

One of the most precarious aspects of whiteness studies is that most scholarship agrees that it is an anti-culture. Some identity theorists such as Ruth Frankenburg argue that whiteness is invisible because it lacks definition and is constructed as the norm. She based her work on interviews with white women who expressed a feeling of cultural emptiness because there was no sense of belonging. Other whiteness scholars such as David Roediger suggest that whiteness is an identity based on what one isn't, and whom one can hold back. In short, whiteness is non-existent because it is based on the other.

I present the argument that whiteness is a negative culture that is defined by all that it isn't. In addition to this it is a system of privilege based on perceptions of race and ethnicity. The African-American domination of professional

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sports, particularly basketball, expanded the definition of

whiteness by appropriating certain aspects of black culture. An

example of this is white youth imitating black style. These

athletes because of their economic and social contributions are

embraced by white America. This reception does not eradicate

racist ideology, but only affects change on a superficial level.

Existing Scholarship: Towards a Definition Of Whiteness

Reviewing American history provides many historical definitions and examples of what is whiteness. Attempting to define this term independently of other factors is problematic. The idea is not self-sufficient.   Whiteness in an American context is not a state; it is a reaction. Consider the divisions of Europe. The English consider themselves distinct from the Germans. The same could be applied to the divisions between the French and almost any other Caucasian group residing within any nation state in Europe. The political divisions of Europe are based on linguistic and perceived racial differences. Consequently, there is no pure definition of "whiteness" in a European mindset.

This pattern does not apply to the American arena. The American concept of whiteness is a direct reaction to the American concept of blackness and eventually other racial minorities. The dichotomy between Europeans and Africans on the North American Continent is one of the driving factors that forged the American identity. In Valerie Babb's *Whiteness Visible,* she argues that,

> From the 1700's on, whiteness is the key to the
> maintenance of American nation-state identity. It
> replaced a cohesive Old World culture whose beliefs,
> traditions, and practices bound a people together over
> time. The different ethnicities and classes who left

> Europe to come to an unfamiliar wilderness where new
> structures had to be devised to meet new needs, whiteness
> furnished a social order that forged a nascent national
> identity and minimized potential class warfare.(Babb, 37)

In other words whiteness could transcend class borders within the white community. In Europe the political divisions between the different groups created a situation where the continent remained divided. There was no presence of an outside factor that could serve as a neutralizer to unite the various groups. In America, the outside factor was the ubiquitous presence of Africans, and eventually other minorities such as Native Americans and Asians. Any European group that settled in the New World had one thing in common. They were white.

This point illustrates a key idea in attempting to understand whiteness. If whiteness is a reaction to blackness, then whiteness does not define itself. It is defined in every exclusionary act that established a difference between the races. In Babb's *Whiteness Visible* she asserts that whiteness, "articulate(s) not necessarily who or what is white but rather who or what is not white. As such, they reveal the fundamental paradox of whiteness: the persistent need of non-whiteness to give it form and expression."(Babb, 42) History provides numerous examples that underscore this point.

Consider the Supreme Court's decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. In that infamous ruling the court held that the

"separate but equal doctrine" was just under the Constitution of the United States. It reasoned that, "if the two races are to meet upon terms of social equality, it must be the result of natural affinities, a mutual appreciation of each others merits and a voluntary consent of the individuals."(Rossum, 385) I mention this infamous case because this is the ultimate embodiment of whiteness. The concept of whiteness depends on the separation of the races. The underlying ideology is one of innate inferiority of the non-white races. In essence, this court decision approved second-class citizenry for all but the white race. That is to argue that only white members of the culture were entitled to enjoy the benefits of the American dream.

Viewing *Plessy v. Ferguson* from this perspective illustrates an important concept about American whiteness. America had divisions between European immigrants living in the New World. Often these groups would bind together in various communities. These groups might hold on to certain aspects of their heritage, but assimilate into the American culture. After several generations they might start to lose connection with their ancestry. Mary C. Waters argues that third and fourth generations of European immigrants assimilate into American culture and retain only symbolic aspects of their ancestry.

This she concludes creates much benefit for immigrants that settled in the United States. She asserts that the perceived,

> symbolic ethnicity is something that people value despite a seemingly superficial attachment to it, has implications for the ways in which respondents think about the whole concept of ethnicity. For my respondents, having an ethnic identity is for the most part something that brings pleasure to the individual. Rather than being a handicap to full participation in American Society.(D'innocenzo,89)

The poignant idea here is that these European immigrants could come to the United States and face no physical barrier to assimilation. Their unique culture could be hidden from American society and they could fully integrate into mainstream life. It would not happen within the first generation, it usually took several decades. This could not happen if you were black or Asian. This is a physical trait that cannot be hidden. An examination of two different immigrant groups and their struggles to assimilate and gain acceptance will illustrate this point. Those groups are the Irish and Japanese immigrants that came to this country during the 19th century.

Consider David Roediger's work concerning early Irish immigrants. In his *Wages of Whiteness,* Roediger chronicles the process by which Irish immigrants came to be considered white. Early in the 19th century the Irish faced a great deal of discrimination in American society. Very often comparisons were made between Irish immigrants and African-American slaves.

During the 1840's and 1850's America witnessed just under one
million Irish immigrants migrating to the United States. These
new Americans settled in the northern urban slums and were
forced to work and live along side African-Americans. This
juxtaposition fueled preexisting fears and bigotries about the
Irish who were often perceived to be an inferior race. The
immigrants that came to this country did not posses the
resources or skills to secure lucrative employment.
They had to compete with African-Americans for jobs that
involved drudging labor.

The process by which these immigrants came to be considered
white is very illuminating about the concept of whiteness. They
possessed two attributes that aided them in their effectiveness
to transcend their social state: sheer political numbers, and
they were not black. Historian David Roediger argues that this
transformation into whiteness was a two-sided affair. The first
step was a large-scale acceptance by the American public. The
other was an insistence on their own whiteness. The latter
stage was accomplished by subscribing to the ideologies of white
supremacy. Roediger asserts that,

> from the 1830's, (Irish) Democrats appreciated the ways
> in which the idea that all Blacks were unfit for civic
> participation could be transmuted into the notion that
> whites were so fit." (Roediger, 141)

This a good example of how whiteness can transcend class borders. Certainly Americans of English decent would consider the Irish to belong to a lower class. But by creating a white social structure, it de-emphasizes class differences and places the focus on the other. In this case the attention was directed at African-Americans. Another principle that can be extracted from this is that whiteness culture is not static rather it is expansive. The example of the Irish underscores the point that doors of privilege could be opened up if you possessed the correct keys for membership.

The Irish immigrants were not the only peoples who traversed the ocean's waters to search out America in hope of a better life. During the latter part of the 19th century America witnessed an influx of peoples who traveled east across the Pacific. It is estimated that between the 1885 and 1924 nearly 200,000 Japanese citizens migrated to the continental United States seeking a better life. Very much like the Irish, when they reached the shores they found that the reality was quite different from the dream. America, the land of freedom and opportunity produced only prejudice. Unlike the Irish the strategy of acceptance was not based on adopting the principles of white supremacy. Rather the tactic was to foster positive relations by becoming good farmers and contributing to American society. This did not eradicate any racial discrimination; in

fact, their success was used to justify further discrimination.

In Ronald Takaki's *A Different Mirror,* he writes that in

response to the agricultural success,

> California and many other states enacted legislation to
> exclude Japanese immigrants from owning and leasing land.
> These restrictive alien laws were based on the
> ineligibility of the Japanese for naturalized citizenship
> because of a 1790 law had provided that only "white"
> Persons could become citizens. (Takaki, 273)

Again this reinforces the idea that access to the system of

privilege was based on perceptions of race and ethnicity. The

Irish were able to assimilate into "white" culture because they

have the appearance of that of a White European. This is

something that the Japanese immigrants did not posses, or most

other minority groups for that matter. This physical trait made

certain that this immigrant group would have to fight for

privilege in American society. In the United States racial

characteristics have always superseded political and social

dimensions.

Towards a Definition Of White Fear

    Compared to other areas of study, very little scholarship
is devoted to the idea of whiteness. In the academic world
"whiteness studies" is a new phenomenon. The reason for this is
simple. It was not until very recently that race or ethnicity
was analyzed from multiple perspectives. The idea of the white
voice was considered the normative reality.   The American
perspective is founded on this ideal. Only the white male had a
voice that resonated in the culture. Historically this voice
was reinforced with property and ownership. This is a key
point, and to comprehend this idea it is necessary to understand
the white mentality and the factors that motivate it. In other
words, it is necessary to understand white supremacy. Whiteness
as a culture was fueled by notions of superiority, and driven by
fears of inferiority.

    The best way to understand the power of this paradigm is an
analysis of David Wark Griffith's *The Birth Of a Nation*. In an
essay written by Clyde Taylor he argues that, "*The Birth of a
Nation* accomplished the significant feat of transposing the
national myth of the south into terms congruent with the
mythology of White American nationalism."(Bernardi p. 20) I
choose this cultural document because it is an early on screen
representation of whiteness. The many layers to the film

illuminate key concepts about white supremacy and culture. Also the film is an example of how whiteness as a concept can go unnoticed in cultural discourse. This film, in spite of its blatant racist agenda, is hailed a classic for its aesthetic and cultural merits. Often, its dark undertones are mentioned in passing. This is a testament to the idea that whiteness is always present, but not always visible.

A brief summary of the film's plot is necessary to understand its implications in a larger context. The storyline of the film centers around two families before the start of the Civil War. The families are the Stonemans, who reside in the north, and the Camerons who are residents of the south. The families know each other and respect the differences in lifestyles. The Camerons are slave owners who enjoy a bucolic southern lifestyle. Eventually, the Civil War transforms the tranquil southern lifestyle into one of chaos. From this point, the film focuses on the reconstruction in the south, and the perceptions that this process was hindered by the by the presence of northern and black influences. An example of this is seen when a former slave attempts to marry a white woman. The woman chooses death instead of marrying outside of her race. Another example is when a bi-racial (an onscreen embodiment of miscegenation) is appointed lieutenant governor in the south. Ultimately the Ku Klux Klan is created to fight northern and

black aggression. The Klan is presented as the instrument that saves the south from desegregation and miscegenation.

One of the most fascinating and frightening aspects of this film is that its characters are representative of early racial fears in this country. Consider the character of Charles Sumner presented in the early part of the film. Sumner is the leader of the Senate. The film alludes to a sexual relationship between Sumner and his bi-racial housekeeper named Lydia Brown. In one disturbing scene Brown tentatively approaches Sumner to engage in various carnal acts. Sumner refuses the invitation and leaves the room. Brown is then shown clutching her heaving breasts and spitting in Sumner's direction. The idea is that Brown is an animal that cannot control her desires. Then the screen flashes the phrase, "the Great leader's weakness is the blight of the nation."

Now compare this with the presentation of the white Elsie Stoneman. Stoneman, who is played by the actor Lilian Gish, is portrayed as the apotheosis of purity. Consider the scene in which Elsie is shown interacting with her on screen love interest Ben Cameron. The scene shows Cameron making approaches toward Elsie, but Elise is very shy and timid. Cameron then presents Elsie with a white dove. Elsie is shown kissing the dove, but she will not kiss Cameron.

It is interesting that Griffith depicts Elsie interacting

with a dove. The dove is a traditional symbol of purity and

peace. Why would the director choose to juxtapose his female

lead against the image of a dove? Perhaps the answer lies in

his conceptions of femininity, and its role in white society.

In Clyde Taylor's essay, entitled *The Re-Birth of an Aesthetic,*

there is a lengthy discussion pertaining to this topic. In that

article, Taylor argues that Griffith's obsession with what he

terms the "*femme ideal*" is at the core of the Griffith's

bigotry. Taylor provides an historical analysis of Griffith's

motivation. He asserts that,

> With Griffith we are dealing not so much with racial
> prejudice, but rather a deep and permanent sexual
> obsession. Indeed, the thought recurs that blackness was
> almost incidental to the obsession, a convenient visual aid
> in symbolizing the ugliest and most rapacious of male
> impulses. (Bernardi, 24)

I do not agree with Taylor that in Griffith's film the

motivation is not a racial prejudice. But I do suggest that

that the prejudice is somewhat facilitated by the sexual

obsession. One of the most ironic aspects of white supremacy is

that it reacts to its own perceptions about blackness. This

ultimately dehumanizes the victim from the process. The *femme*

ideal is a perfect example of that. This idea is that white

women maintained a virginal purity that was not to be tarnished.

The ideal did not exist except in the minds of those who

subscribed to this idea. In other words, this was merely a

theoretical concept that had very dire consequences for black

males. Most often when a black person was lynched in this

country, it usually involved a threat or a perceived threat to a

white woman. The perceived threat justified the actions. Also

the supremacy was justified through social practices.

One example of a social practice that was used as

justification for white supremacy was the preservation of the

femme ideal. This concept is directly related to one of the

most frightening cultural practices of the Jim Crow south. I am

referring to the practice of lynching black males. While the

birth of idealizing white femininity did not originate in the

reconstruction of the South, it undoubtedly picked up momentum

there. The glorification of white femininity can be traced back

to the colonial era. (Jordan, 77) But the post civil-war era

breathed new life into this practice. White men returning from

the war placed white females on a pedestal for their ability to

hold homes together during the war. This lofty status created

an over romanticized version of white women that was

unattainable sexually. In addition to this, the emancipation of

the female slaves reduced the opportunity for a sexual outlet.

Thus, lynching served as a pseudo-sexual thrill to alleviate

sexual repression.   In Grace Elizabeth Hall's *Making Whiteness*

she asserts that the practice of "lynching, then relieved the

tensions and transferred the super-sexual powers of the white-constructed "black rapist" of the white woman who now needed white male protection." (Hall, 233) This point fully illustrates the idea that Blackness was secondary to a white reaction. I do not suggest that racial injustice is not based on a physical world; rather I would argue that it is based on white perceptions to that physical world. I have already stated that whiteness is a reaction to blackness. White Supremacy being motivated to defend the *femme ideal* demonstrates that part of the motivation to have and discriminate is born incubated within the aggressor and not the victim. The literal and figurative emasculation of a black masculinity speaks volumes about the fragile state of white manhood.

Another example of a cultural justification for white supremacy is the pseudo-scientific evidence that was offered to dehumanize African-Americans. Take into account Joseph Simms' book, *Physiognomy Illustrated*. This book, which was published in 1891, was a medical attempt to draw conclusions between certain physical characteristics and relate them to appropriate human behavior. The book was intended to present arguments about non-white races and to justify their place as second-class citizens. Comparing the facial features of an European-American and an African-American, Simms argues that the latter was committed,

To the fullest and freest play: his animal juices must be abundant, and the whole machine must be throbbing in the exuberance of overflowing life and action. In such subjects we find the lips full and protruding, the cheeks plump, eyes sparkling, and a warm and healthy glow overspreading the entire physiognomy. (Simms, 131)

This is one passage from the book, but the language of the document can be connected to two stereotypes that have plagued African-Americans throughout this country's collective history. The segments that suggest that the animal juices must be abundant are related to idea that the African-American male was a beast-rapist that was unable to control his sexual urges. Often this is referred to as the "Bad Black Man." Also this passage could be used to fuel the image of "Sambo." This is the idea that black males are happy creatures that are devoid of reason whose primary function is to interact socially. It is important to observe that physical attributes were assigned to these characteristics. This process of assigning physical attributes and trying to equate it with certain type of behavior facilitates the process taking hate and projecting it into the world.

The purpose of this section was to demonstrate that whiteness is a negative culture based on what it is not. Historically what it reacted against was perceptions of blackness. An example of this is the process by which the Irish immigrants came to be considered white. They distanced

themselves from African-Americans by subscribing to the

principles of white supremacy. Whiteness does not change, in

that it is always a negative culture, but certain circumstances

can alter what is included within the parameters of white

culture.

The Cultural Importance of Sports

The focus of this paper is how modern basketball culture
has changed the definition of whiteness in America. To
understand this idea fully it is necessary to discuss the
cultural importance of sports in the United States. When a
social historian or any other social scientist looks at our
cultural history, it takes no great amount of research to
discover that sports plays a paramount role in our collective
history. Consider the impact the sports world has made on this
culture. What is America's favorite pastime?   It is a baseball
game. What is the Super Sunday? It is one cold day in January
when eighty-five percent of the nation congregates around the
television to watch a football game. The list could go on. The
point is that the social, economic, and cultural influences of
sports are enormous. And but for a few examples, it is largely
unregulated and unstudied.

America's favorite sports are those that require the
athlete to display a great deal of physical acumen. Consider
the core sports that occupy the nation's interest. The big
three are: baseball, football, and basketball. Also, Americans
reserve a special place in their heart for the heavyweight
champion of the world. All of these sports have some traits in
common. These sports place a premium on speed, agility and

endurance. All of these sports require the athlete to endure a

great deal of suffering and sacrifice to attain the prize. In

other words these sports require the athlete to have a certain

amount of toughness. America's fixation with these sports is

not a randomly occurring phenomenon, but rather a reaction to a

series of historical events that shaped our culture.

Historically American society has placed a premium on the

importance of sports. This trend was intensified during the

Cold War. Donald Mrozek who writes on this subject in *History

of Sport*, argues that America's fascination with toughness had

its origin in the Cold War climate that followed the Second

World War. He asserts that Americans were,

> heartened by the experience of WWII, which seemed to
> prove that Americans were capable of action on an
> unparalleled scale, various figures in government,
> organized athletics and phyical education used sport and
> physical training in increasingly ritualized forms to
> generate a tough and winning attitude in the Cold War
> (Wiggins, 257).

It is during this time that the federal government started

programs that made physicality a part of the high school

curriculum. The idea was that the national identity was founded

on the inherent toughness of the country's forefathers. Their

innate physicality was one of the deciding factors the allowed

the country to flourish. The Cold War created a situation where

the nation's fears were focused on falling behind the "Soviets"

from a physical standpoint. The fear was that America's youth

was soft and that this image was undercutting the country's role as world leader.

In the decades following the Second World War the focus on physical fitness increased. In 1962 President John Kennedy wrote in a *Sports Illustrated* article that, "physical hardihood enabled Americans to overcome tenacious foes in World Wars I and II."(Wiggins, 262) Wiggins also asserts that Kennedy "associated the improvement of the physical condition of American youth in his presidency with meeting military demands in Europe and in the jungles of Asia."(Wiggins, 263) This ideology had a trickle down effect that started in the highest branch of the Executive Office and made its way through the country. In the early 1960's Kennedy appointed Bud Wilkinson as his advisor on fitness. Wilkinson, who was best known for his stint as head football coach at the University of Oklahoma, served the federal government in an advisory capacity. Consider the implications of this action. The President of the United States had a football coach advising him on the physical well being of the nation's citizenry. It takes no great leap of faith to understand that physical experience is important to the American perspective.

This situation reveals that the American love of sports is both a fascination with speed and power, but also a fear of inadequacy. In a 1962 *Saturday Evening Post* article entitled

"Toughening our Soft Generation," columnist R.M. Marshall wrote an article that expressed the fears of the nation. In that work Marshall asserted, "that nearly 60% of American children showed failure in the tests of physical performance that only 8.7% of European children failed."(Wiggins, 263) Marshall then pointed out that Americans might be losing their physical supremacy over other peoples. His basis for this conclusion was founded on America's dismal athletic performance in the 1956 and 1960 Olympic games. Deepening the sense of loss was the fact that the Americans were trounced by the Soviets. The key concept to understand is that sports and physical fitness had captivated the attention of the nation. Americans worship and idealize their sports heroes, but also feared that a weak performance might be indicative of their own weaknesses.

Another very important aspect of this cultural phenomenon is that during this time America's fears were being transformed into weekly entertainment. It was during the 1960's and 1970's that Americans witnessed the birth of sports as entertainment. Americans had always gone to sporting events to be entertained. The difference now is that the sports events were being projected into their homes via the television. Roone Arledge can be credited for the sports revolution. While serving as sports producer for the American Broadcasting Company in the 1960's 1970's, Arledge's central philosophy was that sports

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images combined with technological devices would heighten the country's interest in the product. His ideas had enormous success. Roone witnessed his college football programs receive unparalleled ratings. In addition to this, his brainchild, "Wide World of Sports," was so successful that he convinced the commissioner of the National Football League, Pete Rozelle, to attack primetime viewers with Monday Night Football. The secret behind his success was simple. Sports were to be presented as entertainment. A human drama played out each week in the homes of every American willing to tune into his programs. He used technological devices that would make the viewer forget he was home, and feel like he was experiencing the drama first hand.

Arledge was selling a package, and the athletic competition was just one element of it. In Randy Robert's book, *Winning is the Only Thing*, there is lengthy discussion of what he terms the "Roone Revolution." Roberts asserted that Roone Arledge was targeting male viewers. Arledge's top director Andy Sidaris was famous for his "T and A shots." Sidaris was quoted as saying, "I'd rather see a great-looking body than a touchdown anytime. You can see thousands of touchdowns every weekend, but a great looking woman is something to behold."(Roberts, 116) This is important for several reasons.

First, it supports the idea that the athletes were not the only product being sold. It was merely a package that was being

presented to the American public. Week after week the American public was being bombarded with images of athletic achievement juxtaposed against the image of beautiful young women who were viewed as a prize for the victor. Consider, the ubiquitous presence of the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders that accompanied the "America's Team" in the late 1960's and early 1970's. On some levels these women gained as much notoriety as the male football players. They did not achieve individual fame, but rather collective recognition for attributes that they brought to the table. Secondly, the placing of women in a context of male athletics creates a situation where females are viewed as a prize. I do not suggest that this is a novel concept. Rather I do submit that it being presented through the medium of television transformed the situation where all athletes were competing for the prize in the minds of the viewing audience. This competitive element played an important role in the changing of how these women were viewed.

All of these elements are key to understanding how athletics affects change. Consider the transformation of American sports from merely an athletic competition to a multi-billion dollar entertainment industry that touches every corner of the globe. In addition to this is the fact that American culture is a physical one that measures its collective self-worth on how well its athletes perform. These factors created a

situation that primed America for change. By the arrival of the late 1980's, American culture was in the unique position to be influenced by the athletes that graced the television week after week.

Professional Basketball, as much as any other enterprise
has impacted whiteness in American culture. Sport provides a
unique mirror that reflects racial parameters of the country.
Consider the Olympics Games of 1988. These games provided the
country with a stunning loss to the Soviets in basketball. This
loss was humiliating for the American team. Basketball is an
American sport. It was created in this country. The American
team should not lose in a sport that we have always dominated
in.   The loss was rationalized on the idea that the American
team was composed of mostly college or amateur players, while
the Soviets were using trained professionals. This loss created
a panic that America was losing a stronghold on an area that it
had previously dominated. This loss transcended the basketball
court and demonstrated the country's fears of economic and
political decline on the international scene. (Boyd, 3) Again
the perception was that if the country's best athletes cannot
win in a game that was invented by Americans, perhaps these
defeats are indicative of diminished international prestige.

The idea of the "Dream Team" was born out of the fears that
were stirred up with the loss in 1988. Now the country would
turn to its professional ranks and take the best players from
the NBA to provide an answer to fears that were agitated in

1988. It could be argued that the anxiety that manifested in

1988 is very similar to the games of 1956 and 1960, which I

discussed earlier. The glaring difference was that in the late

1950's and early 1960's, the face of athletics was still

predominantly white. In that time there were a number of great

non-white players, but the national identity of athletics was

still centered around the white athlete.

During the 1980's African-Americans came to dominate the

American sport scene, particularly professional basketball. So

when the men's basketball team lost to the Soviets in 1988, it

would be a group of predominantly black Americans that would

provide the answer in the 1992 games. These celebrity athletes

were heroes to America. There were several whites on the team,

including Larry Bird. But the majority of the team was

overwhelmingly African-American. The racial demographic of the

1992 Olympic team would foreshadow the makeup of the NBA.

Currently the NBA is approximately eighty-five percent African

American.

With this statistic in mind it could be argued that

basketball is one of the few contemporary domains where

whiteness is the "other." By this I mean white players are not

the majority.   No team exemplifies this more that the "Dream

Team." In Larry Platt's article, "The White Shadow," he

discusses this trend. Platt argues that the N.B.A. is the

quintessential example of meritocracy. The makeup of the N.B.A.

is reflective of the athlete's abilities, not their race. The

bottom line is, if you can play you are in. Charles Barkley,

was quoted as saying,

> unlike most of the American workplace, discrimination
> isn't an impediment to opportunity in sports. Partly
> that's because performance in sports can be so easily
> measured: If you can score twenty points and make half or
> your shots, there is a good chance you will find yourself
> on a NBA rooster. (Platt, 28)

The racial breakdown of the NBA is not a result of exclusion or

prejudice, but the African-American athletic monopoly of the

abilities necessary to excel in the sport. The playing field is

level for all athletes trying to get in. The results are

simple: most of the players are not white. This fact as much as

any other has changed white supremacy in this country.

Basketball and athletics has created a situation where whiteness

must face the reality of being the other. The response to this

is many white Americans, primarily those of Generation X, have

embraced certain aspects of black style, while still being

dismissive about others. Now we are witnessing a trend where a

certain number of white Americans are assimilating into black

style. With this assimilation there is a certain amount of fear

and anxiety that accompany it.

The image of the NBA, more than any other sport reflects the style of the African-American male. It should be noted that when I use the term culture. I am not referring to culture in the anthropological sense of the word. It is intended only to reflect a very small section of culture that is represented by clothes or fashion. This section will focus on the prominence of the African-American male in the NBA, and analysis its effects on white culture.

Earlier in the paper I analyzed *Birth of A Nation* as an early film expression of white fear. One area where athletics has impacted whiteness is how it expressed it fear. In *Birth of A Nation,* white fear is expressed directly and seemingly independent of Blackness. Contemporary whiteness does not express itself as an independent entity. Rather, it expresses itself in terms of blackness. In other words, whiteness has absorbed blackness in the process of expressing fear. Ron Shelton's *White Men Can't Jump* is a film that conforms to this trend. In many ways this film is a semi-contemporary expression of white fear. The title itself suggests many inadequacies about white men. Released in 1992 this film focuses on the relationship between two basketball players: a white player

portrayed by Woody Harrelson, and a black player portrayed by Wesley Snipes.

Snipes and Harrelson are hustlers who use basketball as a means to make a living. Their main hustle is centered on the idea that Harrelson's character, Billy Hoyle, is an inept athlete simply because he is white. They embark on a series of arranged games where they benefit from Harrelson's athletic prowess. The perception addressed in the film is that Harrelson can't play because he is white. This creates a situation where Snipes and Harrelson can benefit from this idea. This film is useful for its social commentary on race relations and is a statement about modern whiteness. An analysis of the film's characters will underscore this point.

The voice of whiteness in the film is represented by Harrelson's character Billy Hoyle. This character makes a sharp contrast to some of the more urban denizens presented in the film. Harrelson is presented as a slow-witted, country boy trying to establish himself in an urban environment. Harrelson's character is from Louisiana. I assume Louisiana is intended to be one of the few remaining bastions of "good ole boys." Although Harrelson is good example of this type, his character is more complex and revealing. On one level he is the elegiac embodiment of whiteness. In several scenes he offers a very harsh critique of blackness. The dialogue between

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Harrelson and Wesley Snipes' character, Sydney Dean emphasizes this idea. Harrelson asserts that from his perspective, African-Americans value style over substance. In addition, winning and achievement take a back seat to maintaining an impressive reputation. This attitude is in line with traditional white supremacy. The idea that African-Americans are lazy and lack a fundamental desire to work hard and achieve success in a white society is a typical historical expression of white racism.

While Harrelson rejects certain aspects of black culture, he embraces other aspects. Harrelson irreverently alludes to an interest in gospel music, but in the process maintains a safe distance from it. Also his attire is quasi-urban. Often he wears baggy khaki shorts and a wild t-shirt accompanied by a baseball hat flipped around backwards. Some elements of urban culture have manifested themselves in Harrelson. Yet for all of Harrelson's seeming assimilation into black style and culture, he remains comfortably distanced from it. He maintains this distance by playing the chump or fool. There is a comedic element to Harrelson's encounter with the basketball culture that also has a surreal effect. On one level he openly embraces the urban world, on another he mocks and insults it with irreverence. Hoyle's character is symbolic of much of America's middle class white youth who adopt certain aspects of black

life, then in a very eclectic fashion, discard what they do not want.

In John Hoberman's *Darwin's Athletes* there is a lengthy discussion of this subject. Hoberman chronicles the white-power structure of the NBA's effort, namely the white owners and the white commissioner, David Stern, to market an image that is accessible and palatable for the average white John Doe. World-class athletes are marketed to middle class white America. The problem according to Hoberman is that,

> The more cynical purpose of the crossover marketing
> is to encourage affluent young whites to adopt the
> athletic clothing and speech styles of black
> "homeboys" while learning nothing else about black life.
> The barren emotional landscape of the ghetto is
> converted into pure style, so that white male audience
> can take a vicarious walk on the wild side.(Hoberman,
> 34)

Marketing NBA players to white America allows these players to enter the homes of millions of Americans each and every night. One of the results is white youth embracing and imitating these black athletes.

The importance of this point should not be underestimated. This is an example where whiteness defines and asserts itself in terms of Blackness. Hoyle's identity is a reaction to Blackness. But where traditional whiteness would assert itself independently of blackness, this is an example of the incorporation of a somewhat forbidden culture. In other words,

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whiteness in this small context defines and expresses itself in terms of blackness.

In Ronald Jackson's *The Negotiation of Cultural Identity* he argues that when two different cultures meet, or in this case two different races come face to face, the dominant culture will take precedence and role-playing will development into a dominant culture and counter-culture. Jackson asserts that the counter culture is defined as a representation of the norms and values of the established dominant at the expense of abandoning one's primary culture. Placing this principle in the context of basketball and the culture that is associated with it. Blackness is the dominant or primary group, and whites are on the outside looking in. One of the clearest indicators that a mixing or swapping of cultures has occurred can be seen from different styles of dress. It is interesting to note that Cross's theory of Nigrescence, the process by which African-Americans come to consider themselves Black, involves a stage where dress is indicative of this process. Cross argues that clothes and a type of hairstyle can signal that this process has begun. This will manifest in what he terms the immersion stage. As noted earlier, this was represented in *White Men Can't Jump* by Harrelson's attempt to immerse himself in Black culture.

The question that this naturally forces a critical scholar to ask is what is the significance of this white imitation?

This question can best be answered by understanding the historical function of the Uncle Tom. Traditionally, this was an African-American who assumed the superficial identity of whites to better his chances in a white environment. Uncle Tom's would alter their identity to accommodate that of the dominant group. In other words they would downplay their blackness and imitate white characteristics. It was a defense mechanism to assimilate and gain success in white America. The fear that incubates in persons that Hoyle's character represents is that they are not equipped to compete with the biologically superior black athlete.

The idea that the African-American athlete is naturally superior has affected both groups. A fair amount of scholarship is devoted to the detrimental affects this myth has on the image of the African-American male. John Entine's *Taboo* argues that the success is related to biological attributes that are unique to the African-American male. This myth of the natural athlete perpetuates the notion that African-American males are inferior intellectually. Hoberman's *Darwin's Athletes*, advances the theory that athletic success fuels racial stereotypes. This myth that negatively affected African-American athletes has a substantial impact on white athletes as well.

This myth is a taboo that resonates through the culture. Yet, for all of its seeming importance, very little scholarship

is devoted to the impact on white culture. A discernible example of its cultural significance can be witnessed in Michael Wilbon's article, *To NBA's Stars, Big White Stiff Doesn't Translate*. Wilbon, a respected sports analyst, argues that the influx of European players into the NBA is a testament to the myth of the inept white athlete. Wilbon writes,

> (Europeans) don't regularly face parents and friends who say they won't feel comfortable in basketball's culture of hip-hop music, uniquely urban fashion and language. Rarely are Russian and Turkish kids confronted with the notion of being the big white stiff. (Wilbon)

In the context of basketball, and the culture that is associated with it, Blackness is an indicator of ability and prowess. The effects are twofold. First, a situation is created where white athletes are deterred from playing because of a socially constructed hierarchy that tells them that they cannot compete. Second, concerning the ones that do participate in black sports, some adopt the façade of Blackness, to identify with ability and masculinity. A contemporary example of this is Jason Williams, a white NBA player colloquially termed "white Chocolate." Williams is noted for his immersion into hip-hop culture and his "Black" style of play. The research suggests that there are tangible differences in style and approach between blacks and whites. (Dufor, 126) Again this is addressed *in White Men Can't Jump* through the character of Billy Hoyle as a character in search of an identity. (Dyer, 212) The identity the character

seeks is some form of a defense mechanism to acclimate into a different environment.

At slight variance with this is Henry Giroux's discussion of white youth who attempt to shed the traditional layers of whiteness. He argues that white students who gain a certain level of social and political consciousness begin to distance themselves from traditional forms of whiteness. A defensive posture is assumed,

> That the only role they could play in the struggle against racism was either to renounce their whiteness and adopt the modalities of the subordinated group or to suffer the charge that any claim to whiteness was tantamount to racism. (Giroux, 232)

In this context whiteness was perceived to be a symbol of racism. In the context of basketball discussed earlier, it was a sign of physical and athletic inferiority. The important factor to bear in mind when considering figures such as the Hoyle's character is its larger significance. The crossing over into a new identity is representative of a diminished sense of masculinity and privilege within in the system.

White Men Can't Jump is not the only film to emerge that is indicative an of identity search. It is during the 1980's that American popular cinema is inundated with films that fit in to this genre. That genre of course is anything that is suggestive about the diminishing state of white belonging. In Richard

Dyer's *White* he embarks on a critical representation of

whiteness in popular media. Dyer, writing about the influx of

white male bodies in cinema during the 1980s, argues that these

films function to place the white male body from their

surroundings in an effort to maintain white superiority. In the

narrow context of the film, the white body is visually distinct

from other on screen images. The appeal of that distinction is

to pacify the diminished sense of masculinity. Films, such as

Rambo and *Conan the Barbarian* are indicative of the fears and

anxieties that confront white masculinity during this period. He

argues that the body itself represents the superiority of the

white spirit. Drawing on an analogy between the built body and

colonialism Dyer asserts,

> The built body and the imperial enterprise are analogous.
> The muscle hero has landscaped his body with muscles and
> he controls them sagely and superbly. The built white
> male body and colonial enterprise act as mirrors of each
> other, both display the white man's magnificent
> corporeality, tell of the spirit within. (Dyer, 165)

The defined white physique reinforces a positive image to an

audience that is uncertain about its own virility. It is

important to note that we are dealing with image of physicality

because that is the aspect that is threatened in this context.

The important aspect to consider in this context is that

the adjusting of identity and the attraction to films that

reinforce positive images of white masculinity and physicality

are a reaction against the same catalyst. Historically,

American racism is founded on the idea that the white race was

superior. The inability to compete in various sports undermines

this idea. This resulted in white youth imitating black style.

Yet, insecurity is not the only motivating factor. In

addition, this is not the first time white America has

incorporated elements of black style into mainstream culture.

Consider jazz and gospel music. These elements were

appropriated by white America. Professional basketball is

another arena of appropriation. Todd Boyd, in *The Day the*

Niggaz Took Over, argues that,

> The recurrence of nigga imagery through the game of
> basketball is another indication of the way in which
> contemporary popular has found profitability through
> the selling of the most strident forms of African-
> American discourse. (Boyd, 140)

Boyd contends that economic considerations fuel the NBA's use of

black imagery. Athletes like Charles Barkley and Allen Iverson

are marketed to sell to white America.

Earlier I asserted that whiteness was a negative culture

defined by what it is not. Professional basketball changed the

definition of whiteness by making certain elements of black

culture acceptable for white America. Insecurities about

physicality, in addition to economic factors have expanded the

boundaries of whiteness to accept limited portions of black

culture.

Expanding Boundaries of Whiteness

In the previous section I argued the definition of whiteness was expanded by white youth manifesting black style. This section I intend to argue near the opposite. The focus here will be on celebrity athletes who by virtue of their unique status transcend traditional parameters of categorical placement. In other words this section will introduce the term, non-whiteness. One of the functional definitions of whiteness was a system of privilege based on exclusion. Non-whiteness simply refers to a group who was historically excluded, and then included. One can anticipate the inherent danger in using to this term. The risk is the term will place the focus on whites and exclude everything else. (Roediger 2002, 117) I use this term because it exists within the formal literature, and it is a useful term to help explain the following points.

The idea of using athletics as a vehicle for first class citizenship is not a recent occurrence. Historically, numerous athletes have gained many privileges in society where it would not have been possible otherwise. In ancient Rome the gladiators were socially on par with the prostitutes and the slaves, but their warrior status created opportunities for them to gain celebrity status and enjoy the benefits of full citizenship. Athletics allowed athletes to gain fame even in

the hierarchies of Rome. Applying that concept to the United

States this pattern applies to the country's relationship with

its celebrity athletes. It needs not be mentioned that this

country has always been divided on economic and racial lines. I

do not submit that sports has eradicated the social ills of this

country, but I do submit that is has produced a situation where

athletics can be viewed as a medium to first-class citizenship.

This is not something that affects only African-Americans, but

whites as well.

The first African-American athlete to capture the attention

of the nation was Jack Johnson, who became the heavy weight

champion of the world. Johnson was born the son of a slave in

Galveston Texas in 1878. He spent most of his formative years

in that state brawling and learning how to fight. He captured

his title from a white champion named Tommie Burns in 1908. The

fight was held in Australia, and recorded and shown in the

States. The impact of the fight film was immediate and

powerful. The image of an African-American easily defeating

white boxers was too much for the American public. Across the

nation his fights caused civil unrest and riots. The American

public was not ready for a boxing champion who was not white.

Jack Johnson's image in the ring terrified white America. It is

during this time that the federal government outlawed interstate

transportation of his fight films. Apparently there was not a

single great white hope to defeat Johnson, so the United States Congress attempted to quiet the champ.

Essentially the legislative branch made it illegal to sell the films of Johnson's fights. Congress was fairly successful. In Dan Streible's article *Jack Johnson's Fight Films* he chronicles this situation. Streible asserts that, "white censors severely restricted films of Johnson's greatest moment of fame," and that "only a small percentage of Johnson's black constituency got to see the Johnson-Jeffries Fight."(Bernardi, 193) Streible is referring to Johnson's victory over the former heavyweight champion, Jeff Jeffries. Jeffries was viewed as the true heavyweight champion by white America. Most felt Johnson's title was a result of Jeffries retirement. The censoring of Johnson's films made it difficult for African-Americans to see their hero in action.

Obviously while white America did not want a black champion, they also did not want one that behaved like Johnson. Johnson's every move was in direct challenge to the Jim Crow laws of the day. He openly defied the segregation that characterized the country during that era. In addition, he had a considerable amount of possessions and money to spend. He spent his cash on items ranging from fast cars to white women. All these can be viewed as symbols of success in white America. In essence, his celebrity status opened doors that would have

been closed otherwise. Johnson's attraction to white women is of interest here. This fact as much as any other made him hated. White America did not want him to be champ, but mostly they did not want him to degrade white women. In a biography written about Johnson entitled *Papa Jack*, author Randy Roberts asserts that,

> If there was love in his attitude toward his white women, there was also hate. Capable of tenderness at one moment, he could be mean and cruel the next. About all his relationships there was a pattern. He gave expensive gifts, then took them back. He made love to white women, but he also beat them up. They provided both a badge of his advanced status and a reminder of his inferior position. (Roberts, 75)

Johnson's celebrity status did not alleviate him from social ills, although they certainly offered him something of a reprise. He gained fame for his athleticism, but he did not transcend his social status. Now let us compare him with modern athletes.

The contemporary athlete enjoys a status that Johnson could not have imagined. Contemporary athletes are some of society's most revered figures. In fact they are so revered they are often bestowed with special privileges where they are often impervious to the criminal justice system. (Ogletree, 18) Ogletree asserts that one out of every five members of the NFL have a criminal record. In addition to this, the alleged criminality does not bring about dismissal from the sport.

Going even a step further, there is a category of athletes that have a universal appeal that cross racial lines. Michael Jordan and Tiger woods are a good example of this type. These athletes are not only extended special privileges; very often they transcend their perceived ethnicity or race. An example of a special privilege would be a lucrative endorsement contract. Fortune Magazine estimates that Michael Jordan via his Nike advertisements has had a 10 billion dollar effect on the economy. The projections are even greater for Tiger Woods. Does this mean that these athletes are responsible for a breakdown in racist ideology? No. Consider Pamela Perry's article, *White Means Never Having to Say You're Ethnic.*

Perry writes that, "racial identities are not fixed or uniform but variable or multiple. They may even be contradictory." (Perry, 87) Her basic argument is that whiteness is a ticket that transcends perceived ethnicity. In the case of athletes such as Jordan and Woods, their status within in their sport enables them to cross a racial boundary that would have otherwise been impossible. Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods are both African-American males. I asserted earlier that "white" culture was founded against perceptions about "black" culture. This is the idea of a negative culture. Athletes who achieve this status are embraced by white culture. Again this is an example of appropriation. Because of their

economic and social contributions they are not first perceived as black. They are not excluded, but they are not completely included.

One of the qualifiers for these celebrity athletes is behavior. Michael Jordan is a good example because he is not political, and he does not publicly identify with any threatening aspect of black culture. His blackness and his politics are removed from the public's eye. As long as his behavior remains in the acceptable parameters, he will continue to be appropriated by white America. The moment that he strays from that path, his blackness is again the focal point, and America will no longer be clamoring "I want to be like Mike."

History provides numerous examples of professional athletes who have ventured outside of these acceptable parameters. Consider Muhammad Ali. During the 1960's Ali had his boxing license revoked for joining the Nation of Islam. Ali's involvement with the Black Power Movement placed him outside of white America's embrace. Another example is the never-ending saga of Mike Tyson. In John Sloop's article, *Mike Tyson and the Perils of Discursive Constraints*, he argues that Tyson's public persona was a contributing factor to his rape conviction. Sloop does not argue Tyson's guilt or innocence. Rather he merely asserts that,

> Seeing culturally not only how Tyson is portrayed,
> But perhaps more important, how boxers in general
> are portrayed, I am attempting to underscore that
> the way in which Tyson is culturally portrayed
> significantly influences our chances of seeing him as
> capable of rape and other crimes. (Sloop, 119)

Because Mike Tyson is portrayed and perceived in line with traditional racism, he is outside of the parameters of appropriation. It should be noted, that unlike Jordan, Tyson often speaks out against white America. He makes no effort to conceal his blackness. This, as much as any other factor, places Tyson outside the realm of non-whiteness.

Conclusion

The goal of this paper was to study and understand the impact of professional basketball on whiteness. This has impacted white culture in several ways. Professional sports provides an opportunity for whiteness to express it itself in a different manner. As the paper demonstrates, whiteness initially expressed itself independent of blackness. The social and economic impact of African-American athletes has caused white America to broaden the boundaries of whiteness to include what was once largely forbidden. In terms of sports culture, whiteness expresses itself congruent with blackness, not in direct reaction to it.

Again whiteness is a negative culture that is defined by what it is not. So when whiteness adopts the façade of blackness, there is no fundamental change in its theoretical construction. There is nothing that suggests that this process is anything more than simply changing one's clothes and adopting different speech patterns. Very often when male white youth embark on this journey, it will do nothing to eradicate racist tendencies. Therefore white youth can identify with their black heroes and still practice racism because they do not see these celebrity/athletes in terms of race. An illustration of this point is the relationship athletes like Michael Jordan have with

white America. As long as Jordan operates within the acceptable parameters, his blackness is not the focal point. But the moment that his actions deviate from the expected path, his race is again the issue. So when white youth identify with black sports heroes, they are on some small levels adopting black style, but they are not evaluating these professional athletes in terms of race.

This is what David Roediger terms the Ralph Ellison question: what can one make of a white kid who has a juke box on his shoulder singing the tunes, and at the same time he is yelling racial epithets? There is no logical explanation to this problem. The answer lies in the ability or disability of white youth to see African-American celebrities and athletes in a manner that does not reflect racial stereotypes. White America is attracted to these athletes for their unique abilities, but this attraction and appropriation only changes the perception on a superficial level. It does not undermine racist ideology.

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