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**“Celtic Pride”: White Nostalgia and Working-Class Masculinity in 1970s Professional Basketball**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
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by

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### Abstract

In the 1970s, the Boston Celtics were widely regarded as the pinnacle of “white” basketball, a style of play that emphasized teamwork, intelligence, efficiency, hard work, grit, and selflessness. They were upheld as a bulwark against the invasion and takeover of the NBA by “black” basketball. If the Celtics and “white” basketball represented everything good and honorable about the league, “black” basketball—and the players and teams who embodied it—represented everything wrong and morally abhorrent about the league. So-called “black” style players were flashy, self-centered, egotistical, greedy, and blessed with a supposedly “natural” athletic ability they had done nothing to earn. There are striking similarities between how the media framed the Celtics, its players, and opposing teams and the rhetoric used to articulate white, working-class anxieties that came to dominate the 1970s political landscape; both white working-class men and the Celtics were framed as underdogs, under attack from the forces of change, and ultimately needing to rely upon working-class masculine values to compete with the unfair “special advantages” given to blacks, whether welfare or innate athletic ability. The Celtics ultimately represented a bastion of white working-class masculinity, an athletic utopia in which hard work, toughness, and dedication could still lead to success and recognition. They also represented the ability of white men, through sheer determination and force of will, to overcome the “special advantages” granted to blacks—whether by the government, in the form of welfare and affirmative action, or by genetics, in the form of innate, unearned athletic ability. I argue that the narrative imposed by the media on the Boston Celtics, its players, and its opponents was the product of the unique political, social, and cultural developments of the 1970s and of those in Boston more specifically.

This thesis is dedicated to Christopher Kloth, for all of his support and for always being my number-one cheerleader; to my parents and grandparents, for their constant encouragement; to all of the incredible and inspiring women I've been lucky enough to work with throughout my degree; and to all of those athletes who put their careers and livelihood on the line in the name of social justice.

## Table of Contents

### INTRODUCTION

- I. Theoretical Approach
- II. Historiography

### CHAPTER ONE: “A Catalog of Monstrosities”: The Perfect Political Storm of the 1970s

- I. “America Amok”
- II. “Will the new feminism kill off dear old mom?”
- III. Putting the “White” in “Working-Class”
- IV. An Analytical Sleight of Hand: Conflating Class and Culture
- V. Race Without Class: The Case of Boston School Desegregation

### CHAPTER TWO: “Motherhood, apple pie, and the Boston Celtics”

- I. Celtics Pride: Nostalgia and the Shaping of a Boston Tradition
- II. “Up South”: The Racial Sport Climate in Boston
- III. “Paul Revere Reincarnate”: The Tireless John Havlicek
- IV. The “Undersized Center With the Giant Heart”: Dave Cowens and the Myth of the Underdog
- V. “A pathetic collection of self-centered All-Americans”: Sidney Wicks, Curtis Rowe, and the Fall of the Celtics Dynasty
- VI. A “Motley Crew of Infantile Thrillionaires”: The Philadelphia 76ers as Anti-Celtics
- VII. Boston’s Great White “Hick”: Larry Bird and the Redemption of the NBA
- VIII. Conclusion: The Celtics as Defenders of the NBA’s Virtue

### CONCLUSION

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

## Introduction

On May 2, 2017, *Time* magazine ran an article titled “Why Boston’s Sports Teams Can’t Escape the City’s Racism.” It was largely a response to the racial slurs directed at Baltimore Orioles player Adam Jones, a black man, while he was playing in Boston’s Fenway Park just a few days prior. Author Sean Gregory noted, however, that while anger was an appropriate reaction, surprise was perhaps not. Jones, he said, was “just the latest pro athlete to experience discrimination in the city.”<sup>1</sup> Famous victims of Boston sports fans’ racism include Red Sox player K.C. Jones, Celtics rookie Dee Brown, Washington Capitals player Joel Ward, New England Patriots player Garin Veris, and, perhaps most surprisingly, NBA legend and 11-time NBA championship winner (all with the Celtics) Bill Russell, who called Boston a “flea market of racism.”<sup>2</sup>

In fact, although Bill Russell was absolutely essential to the Celtics’ remarkable success in the 1960s, the Celtics had a reputation of being a “white team,” both in terms of style and in the racial makeup of their roster. With the drafting of “the hick from French Lick” Larry Bird in 1979, the Celtics were the proud home of one of the league’s best “Great White Hopes” throughout the 1980s. Less attention is paid to the 1970s Celtics, however, even though they were similarly led by white players (despite a marked league-wide demographic shift) and considered to play “white basketball.” With the retiring of Celtics legend Russell at the end of the sixties and the rise of Bird at the start of the eighties, those years in between are a prime site for novel historical research.

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<sup>1</sup> Sean Gregory, “Why Boston’s Sports Teams Can’t Escape the City’s Racism,” *Time*, May 2, 2017, <http://time.com/4763746/boston-baltimore-orioles-adam-jones-racism/>.

<sup>2</sup> Gregory, “Why Boston’s Sports Teams Can’t Escape the City’s Racism.”

The study of sport is a particularly fascinating approach to analyzing the intersections between race, class, gender, and the broader political, economic, and social landscape. Because sports are so prominent in American culture, and because hegemonic ideologies about race, class, and gender shape how we conceptualize and make sense of every aspect of our lives, analyzing sport can be immensely useful for examining how culture is shaped by politics and how politics are shaped by sports. More than anything else, sport is a useful site of historical analysis because of the way it absorbs, shapes, and then projects powerful racial tropes and ways of thinking about class and gender. Additionally, given the long-standing racist trope of reducing black people to their physical bodies, the athleticism, physicality, and visuals of sports make it a particularly essential site for understanding how those tropes have evolved and been carried through to the modern day. As Nicole Fleetwood points out, “the fundamental roots of racial capital are interwoven into the seemingly meritocratic and voluntary market of athletics.” As such, “the racial icon in sports registers differently than in other sectors of entertainment culture.”<sup>3</sup>

Basketball is particularly useful this kind of historical research. Linda Tucker argues that, more so than any other sport, “professional basketball reflects histories of racist practices and racialized representations of Black men in the United States,” and this makes it a crucial historical subject.<sup>4</sup> More specifically, Jeffrey Lane argues that professional basketball in the 1970s is particularly important to study because “of the emergence of a transcendent culture of the game, complete with values and symbols; aesthetics and styles; and economic, political, and racial dynamics.” Further, Lane contends, “race in basketball...is a particularly rich and revelatory subject, encompassing (among other things) tensions between black players and white owners and managers; the peculiarity of white minds—commentators and writers—thinking and talking

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<sup>3</sup> Nicole Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 81, eBook Comprehensive Academic Collection.

<sup>4</sup> Linda Tucker, “Blackballed: Basketball and Representations of the Black Male Athlete,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 47, no. 3 (November 2003): 311.

about black bodies; the definitions and self-fulfilling expectations of black and white masculinity; and overt and latent prejudices and fetishes of fired-up fans.”<sup>5</sup>

In addition, the 1970s are, in general, a fascinating yet regularly overlooked period in American history. Bookended by the radical changes and optimism of the sixties and the massive conservative backlash and reversals of the eighties, the 1970s were a crucial decade that laid the groundwork for the dramatic shifts and economic, political, and cultural changes that occurred. Given the role of the 1960s and the 1980’s Reagan Revolution in American popular memory, the 1970s are sometimes seen as little more than a filler decade. Yet they are an important site of historical analysis in their own right. A general mood of pessimism and apathetic individualism seemed to take hold, and combined with the “crises,” real and imagined, produced by the social and cultural changes of the 1960s and the declining economy, the 1970s saw the rise of political trends that would impact the future development of the American political landscape for decades to come.

Boston in the 1970s was perhaps best known for the racial tension that exploded during the mass protests and acts of violent opposition surrounding efforts to desegregate the public schools. The city quickly came to represent the insidious forms of institutionalized racism that had long been lurking in the North, unnoticed in light of the more dramatic events of the civil rights movement in the South. Boston’s urban policies had long enshrined racial segregation and inequality, and now combined with a racially-charged crisis occurring largely in Boston’s notoriously working-class, Irish-Catholic South Boston neighborhood. These factors, combined with the continuing “revolutions” in gender relations throughout the 1970s, make Boston a rich context in which to study the relationship between race, class, gender, and sport. The 1970s in

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<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Lane, *Under the Boards: The Cultural Revolution in Basketball* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), xvii, eBook Comprehensive Academic Collection.

general, and Boston in particular, help make sense of the media's framing of the 1970s Boston Celtics.

Emphasizing the media's role as a mediator—especially in an era that largely predates popular forms of sports media such as ESPN—allows me to explore how the sports print media relied upon specific rhetoric and methods of framing the Celtics, its players, and its opponents and how that framing was very clearly a response to the anxieties of white, working-class men. Utilizing sources such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Time* magazine, *Ebony*, and *Sports Illustrated* in addition to the *Boston Globe* and other newspapers from the region, I argue that the media imposed a narrative on the Boston Celtics, its players, and its opponents, and that this narrative reflected the unique political, social, and cultural developments of the 1970s and of those in Boston more specifically. Journalists valorized the Boston Celtics as a bastion of traditional “white” basketball values like hard work, loyalty, grit, and teamwork that were under attack from the morally deficient “black” style of basketball—a style dependent upon the perceived “special advantages” granted to black players by virtue of genetic luck. Through this valorization, the sports media, both in Boston and around the U.S., responded to the fears and anxieties of white, working-class men. The sports media framed the Celtics as a ray of hope in the dark, a “white” basketball team that could hold off the forces threatening to take over their league by embodying and upholding white, working-class masculine values. Through their rhetoric, media coverage of the Celtics articulated the grievances of white working-class men.

### Theoretical Approach

Following Jeffrey Hill, I reject the “correspondence theory of truth,” which holds that primary sources are “a point of access to a knowable past” and that they are “reflective of a reality held to exist outside the source itself.” Instead, I acknowledge the role of the act of

narration in the creation of my sources.<sup>6</sup> Recognizing the “mediating function of the press” means emphasizing that “the ‘experience’ of sport derived essentially from the meanings communicated by the written and spoken word.” As Hill writes, “the newspaper was the principal means by which people ‘knew’ sport: how to understand, interpret, make sense of it.”<sup>7</sup> Thus I am not interested in the facts of the games and other events depicted by the sports media, but rather the way these events were articulated to the public and how their framing fit into the broader political, social, cultural, and economic context. As Phillip J. Hutchinson argues, the press plays a “vital framing strategy” that “[renders] diverse, sometimes discordant, events as socially coherent news” and thus functions as “an agent of history.”<sup>8</sup> Understanding the role of the media in framing sports is particularly relevant, given that “most Americans understand race through media representations” and that “it is ‘only a slight exaggeration’ to suggest that sport, and particularly black-dominated professional sports, is ‘the most significant feature of the contemporary American racial order.’”<sup>9</sup>

Yago Colás’s excellent *Ball Don’t Lie: Myth, Genealogy, and Invention in the Cultures of Basketball* also questions the usefulness of the “correspondence theory,” arguing instead that truth is “what it is most practically useful to believe.”<sup>10</sup> Colás examines the myths that dominate popular understandings of professional basketball, which he defines as “a kind of story that ‘accomplishes something significant for its adherents’” and “may express a conviction that—

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<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey Hill, “Anecdotal Evidence: Sport, the Newspaper Press, and History,” in *Deconstructing Sport History: A Postmodern Analysis*, ed. Murray G. Philips (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006): 119.

<sup>7</sup> Hill, “Anecdotal Evidence,” 121.

<sup>8</sup> Phillip J. Hutchinson, “Framing White Hopes: The Press, Social Drama, and the Era of Jack Johnson, 1908-1915,” in *From Jack Johnson to LeBron James: Sports, Media, and the Color Line*, ed. Chris Lamb (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 20, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>9</sup> Toni Bruce, “Marking the boundaries of the ‘normal’ in televised sports: the play-by-play of race,” *Media, Culture & Society* 26, no. 6 (November 1, 2004): 863.

<sup>10</sup> Yago Colás, *Ball Don’t Lie: Myth, Genealogy, and Invention in the Cultures of Basketball* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2016), 7.

though it may be true or false—is held tenaciously by its adherents.”<sup>11</sup> These myths, Colás argues, “fabricate an idealized, timeless essence of the game and project it onto a succession of moments, individual players, coaches, and teams or, conversely, fantasize that a contrasting succession poses a destructive threat to that essence.”<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, Colás finds that many of these myths—including some of those that will be examined here—“vent and contain powerful anxieties and desires, whether harbored by whites or blacks, stirred in that collective cultural repository...called the white basketball unconscious.”<sup>13</sup> His contention that these myths—sometimes grounded in reality to varying degrees but nevertheless useful in perpetuating an idea important to the “white basketball unconscious”—rely upon imposing dominant narratives onto basketball is a central component to the analysis presented in this project.

Additionally, I draw heavily upon Mary G. McDonald and Susan Birrell’s article “Reading Sport Critically: A Methodology for Interrogating Sport.” They describe sport as a “popular yet deceptively innocent cultural form,”<sup>14</sup> and insist that “a focus on only one line of power [results] in partial analysis that [does] not adequately capture the complexity of domination and subordination within culture.” “A focus on one axis, isolated from the others,” they write, “is insufficient as a complete analysis.”<sup>15</sup> Like Hill, they advocate for an approach that analyzes sport as a cultural text and that “suggests that subjectivity and social life are always already embedded in particular relations of power that produce particular knowledges. The world has been made to mean according to which particular groups have access to the important cultural signifying systems (like the media) to proclaim a particular world view.”<sup>16</sup> Further, they argue that this

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<sup>11</sup> Colás, *Ball Don't Lie*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Colás, *Ball Don't Lie*, 11.

<sup>13</sup> Colás, *Ball Don't Lie*, 56.

<sup>14</sup> Mary G. McDonald and Susan Birrell, “Reading Sport Critically: A Methodology for Interrogating Power,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 16 (1999): 283.

<sup>15</sup> McDonald and Birrell, “Reading Sport Critically,” 286.

<sup>16</sup> McDonald and Birrell, “Reading Sport Critically,” 292.

approach should not focus on uncovering the facts of the sport-as-cultural-texts being analyzed but should instead “search for the ways in which those ‘facts’ are constructed, framed, foregrounded, obscured, and forgotten. Such an analytical strategy displaced the notion of privileged access to ‘truth,’ relocating it...in a complex interrelationship of the producer of the text and the reader of the text rather than the text itself or the self as text.”<sup>17</sup> Lastly, McDonald and Birrell argue that “the question is not whether there is such a thing as the truth or reality, but rather what counts as truth in a given circumstance and *who is privileged by that account*” (emphasis mine). “Facts are organized to produce and reproduce certain interests,” they write, “and any account must be subjected to careful scrutiny concerning who benefits when a particular spin or version is promulgated and accepted as the way things are. *Narratives are always already political*” (emphasis mine.)<sup>18</sup>

Lastly, Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s *Racial Formation in the United States* presents the concept of a “racial project” that is useful for explaining the relevance of the media framing of the Boston Celtics. “A racial project,” they write, “is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines. Racial projects connect what race *means* in particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially *organized*, based upon that meaning.”<sup>19</sup> Thus we can understand the media’s imposition of specific concepts of race, gender, and class upon its coverage of the Boston Celtics as part of a broader racial project that reified long-standing racial stereotypes while simultaneously attempting to strengthen and valorize a form of white working-class masculinity seen as under attack from all sides in the 1970s.

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<sup>17</sup> McDonald and Birrell, “Reading Sport Critically,” 292.

<sup>18</sup> McDonald and Birrell, “Reading Sport Critically,” 293.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 56.

In combining these theoretical understandings—that sports media can be analyzed as a cultural text with careful consideration of the power relationships under which they are produced; that sports media perpetuates myths and understandings of sports (and basketball in particular) that are beneficial to certain groups and that are responsive to broader political, racial, cultural, economic, and social contexts; and that these framings can be understood as “racial projects” that reinforce long-standing racial stereotypes while simultaneously reflecting the subtle changes to racial meaning that are produced by the context of the 1970s—this paper demonstrates that the media’s framing of the 1970s Boston Celtics, with its emphasis on drawing clear and unequivocal distinctions between “white” and “black” basketball, reinforced the stereotype of black people as lazy, naturally physically gifted, selfish, and egotistical, while white people—and white working-class men in particular—instead emphasize teamwork, selflessness, dedication, hard work, loyalty, toughness, and intelligence (to a degree). Though these stereotypes have a long history, they nonetheless were mobilized in response to the very specific cultural, racial, economic, political, and social contexts of the 1970s, and were thus adapted to the purpose of addressing white working-class men’s racial, gender, and class anxieties.

#### Historiography

Few books available deal with the relationship between professional basketball and race, and little of the scholarship that helps provide broader context addresses basketball. Thus the historiography for this project is relatively limited.

*Hoop Lore: A History of the National Basketball Association*, is the sole comprehensive history of the NBA. Authored by freelance writer Connie Kerchberg, *Hoop Lore* is incredibly well-researched and impressive in scope, covering the history of the sport from its invention by James Naismith in the late nineteenth century to the event known as Malice at the Palace (the Pacers-Pistons brawl) in 2004. Kerchberg does an excellent job of explaining the early racial

dynamics of professional basketball and its complicated history of integration. However, while she notes that “racism remained commonplace” off the court immediately following integration, she concludes disingenuously that the rise of black players later in league history conclusively made race a non-issue. “Although the Civil Rights Act had yet to be enacted,” she states, “the success of [Bill] Russell, [Wilt] Chamberlain, and [Elgin] Baylor had made race irrelevant within the confines of the NBA. Players were drafted solely on the level of their talent.”<sup>20</sup> This is a highly specious claim, and one that can only be made by relying on a superficial understanding of racial issues and an overly simplistic understanding of how race and racism operate. Kerchberg later reiterates this claim, stating that “While pro basketball had long abandoned race as an issue—by 1980, more than 80 percent of NBA players were black—it would be naïve to assume the same was true of sports fans across the nation.”<sup>21</sup> Here, Kerchberg makes it explicit that her understanding of racism in sport is solely numerical—if a league is comprised of more black players than white, then race is no longer an issue. Thus, while Kerchberg’s work plays a crucial role in establishing a foundation for further study of professional basketball, her analysis fails to account for the incredibly complex ways racism operates, even in a league quantitatively dominated by African American players. By using a narrow lens and focusing specifically on the 1970s Boston Celtics, I hope to demonstrate the complexity of race, not just in professional basketball, but in society more broadly, and thus to both utilize Kerchberg’s foundational work while simultaneously providing a more nuanced and critical analysis of race in the league.

*Elevating the Game: Black Men and Basketball* provides a fascinating examination of the history of African American professional basketball players, with a particular focus on the powerful ways the “African American athletic aesthetic” shaped the way the game was played

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<sup>20</sup> Conie Kerchberg, *Hoop Lore: A History of the National Basketball Association* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2007), 95.

<sup>21</sup> Kerchberg, *Hoop Lore*, 167.

and marketed. More specifically, the author, cultural critic Nelson George, claims in the introduction that “The Black aesthetic has not only changed basketball but, after a rough period in the seventies, has been the catalytic force behind the sport’s extraordinary growth in popularity and profitability ever since.”<sup>22</sup> The basis of George’s analysis and argument is that there exists a “particular—and shared—African American aesthetic” that can be found not only in cultural productions like rap music or jazz but in a particular “black” style of basketball as well. And while George is seriously troubled by the fact that “black basketball” has been derogatorily labeled “schoolyard,” he otherwise celebrates and helps to construct as a singular entity this particular athletic aesthetic. Black basketball, to George and to others who similarly follow this line of thought, is frequently physical but always aggressive, “in your face,” and epitomized by the physicality and athleticism of the slam dunk.<sup>23</sup> George does note that “black basketball” is frequently demonized as “untutored, undisciplined, [and] immature,” but does not have much to say about the possibility of perpetuating racial-cultural essentialism or of dismissing black athletes’ talent as innate and natural.<sup>24</sup>

*Elevating the Game* displays significantly more nuance in later chapters, particularly Chapter 8: Air Ball. He notes that despite the fact that the league had become “overwhelmingly black” (both quantitatively and qualitatively), “white fans and writers complained that their style was ruining the game.”<sup>25</sup> In the late 80s, George explains, “white stars were few and far between” and television ratings were down, as if “the color of these tank-topped millionaires was simply too much for white ticket buyers to digest.”<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, George remains blind to the probability that the perpetuation of an essentialist notion of what “black basketball” looks like

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<sup>22</sup> Nelson George, *Elevating the Game: Black Men and Basketball* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), xx.

<sup>23</sup> George, *Elevating the Game*, xvi.

<sup>24</sup> George, *Elevating the Game*, xviii.

<sup>25</sup> George, *Elevating the Game*, 190.

<sup>26</sup> George, *Elevating the Game*, 190.

contributed to a popular media trope of the naturally and innately talented but lazy black athlete. Ultimately, this project draws on the important insights produced by George's work while attempting to avoid the reification of the "black athletic aesthetic" and the cultural racial essentialism that usually follows. This essentialism played a key role in the construction and juxtaposition of white and black masculinity in the NBA, and when moral judgments were attached to these different styles, the "black athletic aesthetic" was nearly always found wanting.

Historian Adam J. Criblez's *Tall Tales and Short Shorts: Dr. J, Pistol Pete, and the Birth of the Modern NBA* provides a very useful overview of the NBA during the 1970s, a fascinating era for the league characterized by shifting race relations and an evolution in style, both taking place within the broader tumult of the decade. Though *Tall Tales and Short Shorts* is more concerned with getting down the basic facts of the NBA in the 1970s, including key player trades, the movement of old teams and the creation of new ones, and the outcome of the league playoffs and finals, it nonetheless provides a wealth of information useful for those more interested in the social, political, and racial aspects of the sport. For example, Criblez points out that the descriptors applied to white players and to black players did not operate in a vacuum and were, in fact, loaded with racial meaning. "White players," Criblez explains, "were hard-working, scrappy, and intelligent. African Americans relied on pure athleticism and natural abilities."<sup>27</sup> Thus Criblez's most critical contribution is his thorough and extensive documentation of the racialized media depiction of white and black players. His work provides a critical foundation for understanding the league's history in the 1970s more broadly, but also for moving forward with a careful examination of the media construction of black and white basketball players and its gendered and class dimensions.

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<sup>27</sup> Adam J. Criblez, *Tall Tales and Short Shorts: Dr. J, Pistol Pete, and the Birth of the Modern NBA* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 84.

Perhaps the most powerful contribution to this line of analysis is historian Patrick B. Miller's excellent article "The Anatomy of Scientific Racism: Racist Responses to Black Athletic Achievement." In it, he examines the ways in which racist discourse shifted as a result of the rise of black athletes following the integration of major sports. In doing so, he calls into question "broad generalizations about race and ethnicity: the attributes of *the* black dancer, *the* African American sprinter or boxer."<sup>28</sup> He explains that although biological determinism and scientific racism have largely fallen out of favor, "the *body* continues to loom large in many people's thinking about difference." Specifically, "the trope of the white point guard, court-savvy and the model of discipline and control, has stood in striking contrast to prevailing images of black male athletes, able and all too willing to shatter backboards with their dunks."<sup>29</sup> Crucially, Miller argues that as African Americans started to succeed in the athletic realm, "mainstream commentators effectively abandoned the athletic creed linking physical prowess, manly character, and the best features of American civilization."<sup>30</sup> Whereas previously excellence in athletic pursuits was indicative of civic virtue and manly character, à la Teddy Roosevelt's "strenuous life," racial discourse had to shift to accommodate these new developments or risk implying that African Americans were more virtuous and manly than European Americans. The emphasis on innate, natural athletic ability in African American athletes managed to both reemphasize the stereotype of the physically imposing and unintelligent black man and to position white athletes as hard-working, disciplined, and intelligent. Miller's article ultimately does an excellent job of demonstrating the hierarchy of racialized forms of athleticism constructed as a response to black athletic achievement, and his conclusions are essential to the arguments presented in this paper.

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<sup>28</sup> Patrick B. Miller, "The Anatomy of Scientific Racism: Racist Responses to Black Athletic Achievement," *Journal of Sport History* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 120.

<sup>29</sup> Miller, "The Anatomy of Scientific Racism," 124.

<sup>30</sup> Miller, "The Anatomy of Scientific Racism," 125.

Thus, although there has been a significant amount of work done on the relationship between sport and race, and even some excellent work on race and basketball in particular, there is a significant lack of academic attention paid to the Boston Celtics in the 1970s, and an even more critical lack of work that attempts to address gender and class in addition to race. As this brief historiography demonstrates, there is a general lack of conversation between the secondary sources, especially with regard to theoretical approaches to studying the relationship between sport, race, masculinity, and class. The research presented here will attempt to address this gap in the literature by examining the 1970s Celtics as a rich site for the integration of class, gender, and racial analysis.

Boston, Bill Russell once said, “had all varieties [of racism], old and new, and in their most virulent form. The city had corrupt, city hall-crony racists, brick-throwing, send-’em-back-to-Africa racists, and in the university areas phony radical-chic racists.”<sup>31</sup> Though Russell is one of the most highly-regarded men to ever play professional basketball, black or white, as well as the first African American to coach a professional sports team, he was frequently subjected to racist treatment from the city for which he won 11 NBA championships. While the public consensus tends to argue that sport and racial progress go hand in hand, the surprising disconnect between Russell’s athletic performance and the respect and dignity granted him by the city he played his entire career for clearly demonstrates the necessity of a nuanced, complex examination of the relationship between sports and race.

Although sport in general provides a unique lens through which to investigate race, basketball in particular allows for a careful examination of the relationship between our ideas

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<sup>31</sup> Gregory, “Why Boston’s Sports Teams Can’t Escape the City’s Racism.”

about the mind, the body, masculinity, civic virtue, economic mobility, and class—especially in the tumultuous context of the 1970s. By examining the Boston Celtics during a decade marked by racial, gender, and economic instability, this project will shed light not only on the inextricable relationship between those categories of analysis but also to demonstrate the important ways that the media can mediate and interpret the public’s perceptions through the invocation of powerful racial tropes. Ultimately, I argue that the media, drawing upon the rhetoric widely used to articulate the grievances of white, working-class men in the 1970s, framed the Boston Celtics as a beloved stronghold of “white” basketball, propelled to dynastic success through hard work and selfless teamwork, valiantly battling the onslaught of “black” basketball styles and players, featuring greedy, morally questionable young black men who were blessed with special athletic advantages simply by being black. The striking similarity between this framing and the ways in which the media depicted and conceptualized the victimization of the white, working-class men in general points to the close relationship between sports and politics—racial, cultural, material, and gender—and to the unique usefulness of studying sport as a site where race, class, and gender relations intersect.

## Chapter 1: “A Catalog of Monstrosities”: The Perfect Political Storm of the 1970s

The 1970s, quite unlike the immediately preceding and subsequent decades, largely seem to defy easy classification. Falling between the optimism and radicalism of the 1960s and the powerful conservatism of the 1980s, it is easy to simply categorize the 1970s as a period of transition, important and useful only insofar as the decade can explain how the United States’ political atmosphere underwent such a dramatic change so quickly. And while it is undeniably true that the 1970s are essential in making sense of these rapid shifts in political mood, a careful analysis of the decade inevitably demonstrates that they were an absolutely critical period of US history in their own right. As historian Bruce Schulman argues, “the Seventies transformed American economic and cultural life as much, if not more than, the revolutions in manners and morals of the 1920s and 1960s...In race relations, religious life, politics, and popular culture, the 1970s marked the most significant watershed of modern US history, the beginning of our own time.”<sup>32</sup>

The profound changes the decade wrought are inseparable from the decade’s characterization as an era of crisis—whether real or perceived (and in reality, a combination of both). While it is undeniable that events like the Vietnam War, the Iran hostage crisis, the oil shocks, Watergate, the increase in crime, the tax revolt, the busing crisis, and the economically destructive combination of inflation and unemployment truly did combine to create a dismal picture, many of the crises—especially the “crises” surrounding issues of morality—were overblown and grounded in perceptions and “feelings” more than reality. A thorough analysis of the news media of the 1970s, for example, makes it absolutely clear that much of our current crisis of “fake news” and “post-truth” politics can be traced back to this decade, with its

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<sup>32</sup> Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2002), xii.

increasing emphasis on style over substance, on perception over reality, on feelings over evidence.

This trend of the increasing shallowness of political life is one that I will return to frequently throughout this chapter and the next, as it ultimately served as the foundation for one of the most damaging political legacies of the 1970s: the disappearance of the category and concept of class from the political landscape. “[W]orkers as a subject worthy of political, social, cultural, or economic attention seemed to have been drowned by the crosscurrents, and thus swept from a once-significant place in national civic life,” historian Jefferson Cowie contends.<sup>33</sup> Ultimately, “the very *idea* of workers in civic and popular discourse was defeated,” and we are still suffering the consequences.<sup>34</sup>

The disappearance of class—partially intentional, partially not—changed the landscape of the US political culture in a wide variety of ways: it limited the reach and effectiveness of rights-based social movements, fostered what Sally Robinson calls an “identity politics of the dominant (including the emergence of the white nationalist and white supremacist groups we are currently facing),<sup>35</sup> catalyzed the disintegration of the New Deal coalition, helped usher in neoliberalism and allowed it to be presented as the only possible response to political and economic developments, and led to the steady decline of unionization. By replacing class with largely empty cultural signifiers as well as with race- and gender-based identity politics stripped of an understanding of the material foundation of social hierarchies, shrewd and skilled politicians such as George Wallace, Richard Nixon, and ultimately Ronald Reagan were able to

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<sup>33</sup> Jefferson Cowie, “Vigorously Left, Right, and Center: The Crosscurrents of Working-Class America in the 1970s,” in *America in the Seventies*, eds. Beth Bailey and David Farber (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 101.

<sup>34</sup> Cowie, “Vigorously Left, Right, and Center,” 102.

<sup>35</sup> Sally Robinson, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 3, eBook Comprehensive Academic Collection.

use social issues to stoke the anxieties of the mass of white voters who had traditionally made up a key component of the New Deal coalition and turn them into “Reagan Democrats” instead.

The “feeling” of crisis was crucial to this transformation, as the Wallace, Nixon, and Reagan campaigns all knew, and the decade’s emphasis on style, perception, and (usually empty) symbolism worked to their advantage. In this political climate, the *actual* class position of public figures didn’t matter nearly as much as the ways in which they signaled their class allegiance through culture. “Elites” had long hair, smoked pot, lived on the East Coast, and were too ensconced in the Ivory Tower of academia to develop any common sense, while “the common man” drank beer, cheered for Archie Bunker, spoke plainly, and enjoyed the musical stylings of the “Okie from Muskogee.” These signifiers, of course, said next to nothing about someone’s class *position*, and anyone could adopt the trappings of either of these classes regardless of their economic standing; this meant that class became devoid of any substantive meaning or material foundation, and pushed those who were *actually* members of exploited classes to understand their anxieties in cultural terms rather than economic ones. “Class distinctions,” Adolph Reed argues, “were treated as deriving more from cultural or attitudinal differences than from location in a system of social and economic reproduction.”<sup>36</sup> Race, too, came to be conflated with culture, largely as the result of the increasing popularity of the “Culture of Poverty” school of thought (the idea that racial inequality resulted not from biological deficiencies but from African Americans’ supposed failure to adopt values and behaviors that typically lead to success in American society). Ultimately, the conflation of both race and class with culture was essential to the mobilization of a politics of white identity politics centered around resentment.

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<sup>36</sup> Adolph Reed, “Reinventing the Working Class: A Study in Elite Image Manipulation,” *New Labor Forum* 13, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 21.

The result of all of these conflations and elisions and displacements was a confused and limited political vocabulary available to explain one's social position. Race and class both became conflated with culture, which could be mobilized and weaponized for conservative political ends. The basis of the emerging conservative movement was thus based on “[constructing] a political rhetoric and an agenda that plausibly attracts elements of working-class whites to identify their political and cultural aspirations in ways that preempt solidarity with the programs and concerns of nonwhites and the left.”<sup>37</sup> Thus the political discourse of the 1970s was increasingly dominated by the incoherent and unstable but politically useful concepts of the “white working class,” “white ethnics,” “blue-collar workers,” “hard hats,” or the “Silent Majority.” With culture coming to stand in for both class and race, these terms all came to mean essentially the same thing, and were generally used interchangeably, often within the same article—even though there were, of course, a large number of people of color who were also blue-collar workers.

While “blue-collar” and “working-class” labels came to be conflated and unquestioningly associated with whiteness (even if it was usually “ethnic” whiteness), the terms were also powerfully gendered. The 1970s saw the increasing presence of women in jobs typically held only by men, but in an era characterized by perception and symbolism, this was not enough to destabilize the association of manual labor with men and masculinity. In his exploration of the infamous “hard hat” pro-Vietnam War rally in 1970, for example, Joshua Freeman contends that “the multiple symbolic meanings of the hardhat—both the piece of apparel and the person wearing it—were intensely gendered. The manliness of construction workers was so taken for granted by imagemakers and their audiences that the hardhat was treated as a magical object,

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<sup>37</sup> Reed, “Reinventing the Working Class,” 24.

conferring masculinity on its wearer.”<sup>38</sup> Thus the hardhat/blue-collar worker became indelibly racialized as (ethnically) white and gendered as male, all the while the actual class position of such workers fell to the wayside.

The point of all of these conceptual confusions and conflations is that when the economy started to fall apart in the mid-1970s, white male workers no longer had class exploitation as an explanation for their economic anxieties and their declining material well-being. Instead, they turned to the identity-based rights language popularized by the civil rights movement and encouraged by right-wing populists as a replacement for class analysis. The result was a mass of economically exploited white (assumed to be) male workers who perceived, articulated, and behaved as though their declining quality of life was the result of their status as white males, rather than as workers in a capitalist system predicated on their subordination. Here, too, we can see the early origins of the current white identitarian movements emboldened by the Trump administration’s combination of George Wallace-like “common man” rhetoric with Richard Nixon’s manipulation of social issues to stoke division and resentment. People will use the analytical frames, concepts, and vocabulary available to them to rationalize their position and articulate their grievances, and once class fell out of the picture, all that remained was a politics of identity devoid of material foundations.

The city of Boston, the “Cradle of Liberty,” provides an immensely useful example of the way these forces played out. If busing for school desegregation was the racial issue that most captured the nation’s attention in the 1970s, as some have argued, it was undeniably the event that defined race (and class) relations in Boston for the decade. In fact, one of the most iconic photos of the 1970s, the Pulitzer prize-winning “The Soiling of Old Glory,” was captured during an anti-

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<sup>38</sup> Joshua B. Freeman, “Hardhats: Construction Workers, Manliness, and the 1970 Pro-War Demonstrations,” *Journal of Social History* 26, no. 4 (Summer, 1993): 725.

busing protest in Boston and featured white teenager Joseph Rakes attacking black civil rights activist and attorney Ted Landsmark with an American flag.

Forced to desegregate by Judge Arthur Garrity's 1974 ruling that found the Boston School Committee guilty of persistent and intentional racial discrimination, Boston quickly became the face of the anti-busing protests that spread across the country, from Los Angeles to Detroit to Charlotte, North Carolina. A variety of factors combined to make Boston's protests particularly dramatic and newsworthy, but one of the most important was the pairing of the high schools in largely low-income, Irish Catholic South Boston and largely low-income, black Roxbury. The busing issue in Boston combined the racial politics of desegregation with the economic anxiety produced by the rapidly declining economy, class resentment directed against white liberal elites such as Judge Garrity, and distinctly gendered roles—while most of the violence that made the newspaper headlines was committed by men, women were largely the leaders of the protests themselves. As such, a full understanding of the “Boston busing crisis,” as it came to be known, requires careful attention to all of these issues—while the racism-fueled acts of violence were undeniable, ignoring the class and even gender components of the ordeal presents only a partially accurate account.

The following pages are devoted to attempting this delicate analytical balancing act in the context of the 1970s in general, and Boston in particular. By refusing to isolate issues of race, class, and gender, I aim to provide an accurate picture of the political landscape of the pivotal decade that functioned not as a nondescript era of transition but as a chaotic period of fundamental political evolution, the effects of which are still shaping politics to this day.

#### “America Amok”

“In an era when the belief that the individual and collective selfishness are the highest form of morality seems to be pandemic,” wrote Philip Green in a 1979 issue of *The Nation*, “the

honorable notion of ‘rights’ is in danger of declining to an ignoble status, so multifold is the assault upon our sensibilities of everyone’s ‘right’ to do what they damn well please without giving a fig for anyone else’s needs or concerns.”<sup>39</sup> Though many observers may disagree with his ideological leanings, few would disagree with the general tone of pessimism and political exhaustion Green put into words. Historian Bruce Schulman asserts that “Americans developed a deeper, more thorough suspicion of the instruments of public life and a more profound disillusionment with the corruption and inefficiency of public administration”<sup>40</sup> in the 1970s, while Philip Jenkins contends—in his aptly-titled work *Decade of Nightmares*—that there was “a real sense of despair about the nation’s future.”<sup>41</sup>

Much of the country’s gloominess was clearly the product of *actually occurring* events, such as the declining economy and stagflation, Watergate, the oil shocks, and the Vietnam War. A column in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1970, for example, contended that the Nixon administration’s policies in Southeast Asia had led to a “growing crisis of confidence in our leadership” and “deepened the question in the minds of millions of Americans as to whether they can believe the promises of their leaders.”<sup>42</sup> Perhaps confirming this view, a 1971 Harris Survey found that “there was very great doubt about the President in the minds of voters.” Specifically, “fifty-one percent of those polled said the President had not told the people the truth about the war in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam and only 33 percent felt the President had been frank and straightforward.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Philip Green, “America Amok,” *The Nation*, March 31, 1979, 337.

<sup>40</sup> Schulman, *The Seventies*, xv.

<sup>41</sup> Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 69, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>42</sup> John W. Gardner, “Growing Crisis,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 17, 1970, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Healy, “Why doubts plague the nation,” *Boston Globe*, March 15, 1971, ProQuest Archiver.

Watergate was a particularly alienating issue, and its effects were not limited to the party of the offenders. A 1973 poll found that voter identification in both the Republican and Democratic Party was at a record low,<sup>44</sup> and even in 1975 the TV-radio critic Gary Deeb found that “the United States government, formerly the darling of prime-time pulp TV, suddenly finds itself being portrayed as the occasional villain.” After Watergate, he claimed, “the public holds a much more cynical...view of the federal government.”<sup>45</sup> More so than any of the other wide-ranging crises the country faced, Schulman argues, Watergate “forever altered the way Americans understood politics and the presidency, the way they reported and discussed national politics, the way they conceived, investigated, and understood wrongdoings by government officials.”<sup>46</sup>

However, much of the rhetoric surrounding the nation’s mood in the 1970s indicated that this atmosphere of crisis was also psychological. The early 1980 article published in the *Los Angeles Times*, “Sign of the Times: Frustration Goes Public in a Climate of Crises,” for example, quoted a professor of human behavior who believed there was a marked uptick in “signs of individual frustrations that, so far, seem unsolvable.” He worried about the “anxiety and anger and resentment” and “high level of frustration” he believed characterized the national mood.<sup>47</sup> Even as early as 1972, an article in the *Wall Street Journal* strikingly titled “Aimless America: Affluent, Poor, Old and Young All Turn Inward, Grow Moody,” found the president of Grinnell College depressed and bewildered at the atmosphere of apathy that had overtaken the school. “I’m really very concerned about what’s happening,” he said. “I don’t know how to put my finger on it, but I know it’s there. We’ve had a big switch in attitudes and sentiment. The kids just aren’t

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<sup>44</sup> Jon Katz, “Watergate Has Hit Democrats as Well as GOP, Poll Says,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 16, 1973, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>45</sup> Gary Deeb, “Feds lose sainthood in Watergate backlash,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 17, 1975, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>46</sup> Schulman, *The Seventies*, 43.

<sup>47</sup> Lynn Simross, “Frustration Goes Public in a Climate of Crises,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 23, 1980, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

interested in much of anything...”<sup>48</sup> Another columnist, writing in 1970, observed that “we are all a little readier to grow angry, a little readier to identify villains, a little readier to resort to violence ourselves,” and worried that “the erosion of spirit that we have experienced is beyond calculation.”<sup>49</sup>

This vague, foggy, sense of a national “feeling” is not surprising, given the decade’s decided shift toward the murky politics of shallow symbolism and emphasis on style over substance. As I will discuss in a later section, political discourse in the 1970s emphasized and even prioritized “feelings,” frequently even in the face of evidence to the contrary.<sup>50</sup> However, that’s not to say that the over-inflated atmosphere of panic, frustration, and alienation was *less real* simply because it was over-inflated. As Sally Robinson points out, “a crisis is ‘real’ when its rhetorical strategies can be discerned and its effects charted; the reality of a particular crisis depends less on hard evidence of actual social trauma or do-or-die decision-making than on the power of language, of metaphors and images, to convincingly represent that sense of trauma and turning point.”<sup>51</sup> In the end, moods and feelings *are* real, regardless of the causes, and the noticeable shift in atmosphere had actual, concrete implications for the politics of the decade—specifically, the nebulous feeling of anxious resentment fueled more specific morality crises, all of which had clear effects on the racial, gender, and class-based politics of the decade.

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<sup>48</sup> Everett Groseclose, “Aimless America: Affluent, Poor, Old And Young All Turn Inward, Grow Moody,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 16, 1972, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>49</sup> John W. Gardner, “Growing Crisis,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 17, 1970, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>50</sup> I also do not want to imply that politics in the decades preceding the 1970s was entirely devoid of empty symbolism or substanceless posturing, but the relationship between the general public memory of the 1970s as a decade of shallowness, the cultural turn away from confronting problems and instead focusing on the inner self, and the replacement of substantive class politics with cultural signifying seems noteworthy here.

<sup>51</sup> Robinson, *Marked Men*, 10.

“Will the new feminism kill off dear old mom?”

A significant portion of the “crisis atmosphere” was a product of the changes brought about by the women’s liberation movement and, more generally, anxieties about the integrity and stability of the family as the primary social unit of American life. There were widespread fears about not just the changes to women’s roles and their increasingly emboldened attitudes, but about the inevitable emasculation of men and subsequent detonation of the nuclear family.

According to the media, women’s liberation was the culprit behind a wide-range of societal ills and concerns, such as an increase in female suicide, female baldness, an increase in smoking among women, a surge in aggressive behavior by women and thus a correspondingly higher imprisonment rate, and in Italy, women’s lib was thought to be responsible for gang rapes perpetrated by men who were suffering from a feeling of “collective insecurity.”<sup>52</sup> The laundry list of ludicrous and bizarre harms done by the women’s movement was not just limited to self-inflicted harm done to the female gender—it extended to men as well. For example, a Columbia University psychiatrist believed that men were experiencing a rise in “premature ejaculation, sexual withdrawal, and an indifference to sex” as a result of the women’s liberation movement, the *Chicago Tribune* reported.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> “Women’s Lib Cited in Suicide Rise, *Newsday*, May 5, 1973, ProQuest Historical Newspapers; “Women’s Lib May Increase Baldness,” *Newsday*, June 2, 1971, ProQuest Historical Newspapers; Ronald Kotulak, “Expert Deplores Trend: Women’s Lib Hit for Smoking Rise,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 29, 1972, ProQuest Historical Newspapers; Karen Peterson, “More women in jail a by-product of Lib?,” *Boston Globe*, March 3, 1972, ProQuest Archiver; Kay Withers, “Women’s liberation is driving men in Italy to gang rape,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 9, 1977, ProQuest Historical newspapers.

<sup>53</sup> Ronald Kotulak, “Will the new feminism kill off dear old mom?,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 17, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

Though the women's liberation movement was accused of being made up of "shrill, castrating females"<sup>54</sup> who published "shrill, hysterical tracts,"<sup>55</sup> the critics of movement themselves were noticeably prone to dramatics and rarely grounded in reality. The International Anti-"Women's Liberation" League, for example, argued that the Equal Rights Amendment was "a weapon by the women's liberationists to destroy the family structure, like termites eating away at wood or like Communists undermining democracy," and that it would "lead to marriage among homosexuals, the drafting of women in the Army, and the crumbling of the American family as a way of life."<sup>56</sup> A columnist for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* characterized the "ponderous, unlovely movement" as being led by "braless Amazons" and "a few loudmouths...who missed their true profession when hog-calling went into eclipse."<sup>57</sup> The prominent academic and columnist for the *Chicago Tribune* Andrew Greeley believed the members of the women's liberation movement to be "like the concentration camp trustees during the second World War who...modeled their behavior after the SS guards."<sup>58</sup>

In addition, there were a number of panics over the supposed emasculation of language, including a Rhode Island town's proposal to rename manholes as "personholes"<sup>59</sup> and a melodramatic response to a speech given by Senator Edmund Muskie in which he used gender-neutral words such as "individual" in lieu of "man." "...in order to avoid offending the modish militants of the Manhattan magazine marketplace," David B. Wilson wrote in the *Boston Globe*,

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<sup>54</sup> Harriet Van Horne, "Men Are OK the Way They Are," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 4, 1971, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>55</sup> Harriet Van Horne, "Women's Lib Fritters Away Chances for Real Progress," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 18, 1970, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>56</sup> Rick Soll, "New Gals Group Sees Lib As One Big MStake," *Chicago Tribune*, August 3, 1972, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>57</sup> William A. Rusher, "Cheers for Bobby: Riggs takes on Women's Lib," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 19, 1973, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>58</sup> Andrew Greeley, "The feminists who envy men," *Chicago Tribune*, January 5, 1978, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>59</sup> "City won't neuter manholes after all," *Boston Globe*, September 20, 1978, ProQuest Archiver.

“the front-running candidate for the Democratic nomination for the Presidency of the United States substituted a clumsy four-syllable Latin derivative for a noble three-letter word whose etymological roots go back through Sanskrit into prehistory.”<sup>60</sup> Another target of public ire, for *Newsday* columnist George Will, was the document “Guidelines for Equal Treatment of the Sexes in McGraw-Hill Book Company Publications,” which Will characterized as a “linguistic pogrom” motivated by an “ideological sense of self-pity.” The column itself was titled “Gender on Endangered Species List,” a rather sensational take on a relatively short (and obscure) business document.<sup>61</sup>

Not all of the criticisms of the movement were as dramatic as these panicked columns, and many were grounded in real, observable trends backed up by studies and surveys. Divorce rates, for example, really were on the upswing. 1969 was a record year for divorces, for example, and that number got higher with each passing year. By 1974, one in every three marriages ended in divorce,<sup>62</sup> and a children’s psychiatrist believed that divorce was “among the most difficult crises a child may face in his formative years, perhaps next to the death of his parents.”<sup>63</sup> Additionally, drug use was growing increasingly prevalent, including in the suburbs, which were previously thought to be safe havens of healthy families and traditional values. “Across the nation,” the *Wall Street Journal* reported in 1970, “a soaring number of teen-agers regularly use marijuana, hashish or other drugs almost as casually as their parents sip a before-dinner martini.” More worryingly, “suburban police say they have noted alarming increases in the number of arrests and overdose cases—including some deaths—involving hard drugs in their areas

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<sup>60</sup> David B. Wilson, “Rewriting the language, Lib style,” *Boston Globe*, January 2, 1972, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>61</sup> George F. Will, “Gender on Endangered Species List,” *Newsday*, September 19, 1974, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>62</sup> Wayne King, “Today’s Divorce: Now splitting’s an easier way out,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 2, 1974, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>63</sup> Joan Beck, “Divorce: Crisis for Children,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 19, 1971, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

recently.”<sup>64</sup> In terms of actual changes in gender roles, women really were increasingly entering the workplace and even being hired for “traditionally-male blue collar jobs,”<sup>65</sup> and a new federal policy required that businesses with more than 50 employees and \$50,000 in federal contracts implement affirmative action plans.<sup>66</sup> On the male side of the issue, an increasing number of academics and public figures were highlighting the “strong gender anxiety” felt by men,<sup>67</sup> and a Harvard professor of psychiatry argued in the *Boston Globe* that “the cult of macho is greatly overrated and does more harm than good in today’s society.”<sup>68</sup>

These developments spurred an outpouring of concern in the nation’s newspapers, with housewives and other concerned citizens writing in to express their disgust for the “liberated woman” and her role in society’s imminent collapse. “We have problems with drugs and crime today because children are not being brought up by their mothers,” claimed a spiritual leader. “From this comes broken families and from broken families comes a broken society and a broken federal government.”<sup>69</sup> One woman wrote to the *Chicago Tribune* to argue that the movement was “contributing to separations, divorces, and general family unrest” and that “children no longer know who wears the mantle of authority.”<sup>70</sup> Other letter writers were concerned about the “many unhappy husbands and children this ‘New Woman’ has made” and believed that “women

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<sup>64</sup> “Drugs in Suburbia: Children of Affluence, Bored and Disillusioned, Turn to Pot and Pills,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 12, 1970, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>65</sup> Carol Kleiman, “New jobs for women: Their white collars turned blue,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 7, 1973, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>66</sup> Katherine Knorr, “Women win one in equality fight,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 7, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>67</sup> Fred Bruning, “Male and Female: The Differences Are Changing,” *Newsday*, July 8, 1974, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>68</sup> Gloria Negri, “Drop ‘this macho stuff,’ educator says,” *Boston Globe*, April 22, 1979, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>69</sup> Marjorie Hyer, “Women’s Lib Held Great Conspiracy,” *The Washington Post*, September 23, 1972, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>70</sup> E.O.H., “The Goal of Women’s Lib,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 11, 1972, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

no longer respect strong family ties” and instead “take advantage of [their] husband[s] and children to do housework...”<sup>71</sup>

In the context of the rising rates of unemployment and inflation and the deindustrialization of the economy, concerns about the emasculation of men were particularly prevalent. These concerns powerfully contributed to what Sally Robinson calls the “dominant or master narrative of white male decline in post-sixties America,”<sup>72</sup> and ultimately allowed the figure of the working-class white man to mobilize an identity politics based on “a felt experience of disempowerment.”<sup>73</sup> Since the working-class version of masculinity (also implicitly a *white* version of masculinity since the working-class was assumed to be white) came to be tied to the “man as breadwinner” concept *and* the “man as tough, physical laborer” concept, the combination of the women’s liberation movement and the collapsing economy made for powerful expressions of anxiety over men’s status. More specifically, Stephen Meyer notes in *Manhood on the Line: Working-Class Masculinities in the American Heartland* that the “decades of automation, plant relocations, de-industrialization, de-unionization, and globalization” meant that working-class men “lost a fundamental element of their manhood—their jobs that allowed them to fulfill their roles as responsible and respectable providers for their families.”<sup>74</sup>

A *Chicago Tribune* column called “Blue-collar views,” for example, spoke of some workers’ “horrible visions of a chaotic, matriarchal society of indulgent women and *unemployed feminized men*” (emphasis mine).<sup>75</sup> Others worried that women’s lib would bring about “male

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<sup>71</sup> “Our Readers Sound Off on Women’s Lib,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 28, 1972, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>72</sup> Robinson, *Marked Men*, 2.

<sup>73</sup> Robinson, *Marked Men*, 7 .

<sup>74</sup> Stephen Meyer, *Manhood on the Line: Working-Class Masculinities in the American Heartland* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 209, eBook Comprehensive Academic Collection.

<sup>75</sup> King, “Today’s divorce.”

dependence and cry-babyism”<sup>76</sup> and that as a result of the increasing presence of women in the workplace, “the man in the house becomes superfluous.”<sup>77</sup> The consistent association between emasculation and the loss of economic status demonstrated in these articles makes it clear that masculinity and class were mutually constitutive; the specific brand of masculinity developed by working-class men as a response to the changes brought by the Industrial Revolution made a man’s masculinity inseparable from his ability to provide for his family through difficult, manly, manual labor. Thus, these writers expressed fears about the “‘failed’ masculinity of the downwardly mobile individual whose failure in class terms may be read as an indication of a weakness of character...”<sup>78</sup> “Joshua Freeman’s excellent analysis of the infamous pro-Vietnam War “hard hat” demonstrations provides a more concrete example of what these working-class gender anxieties could look like. He explains that “the hardhat persona...developed against the background of sweeping changes in the place of men and women in the society. The whole structure of patriarchy was seemingly at stake. Exaggerated assertions of masculinity, like those associated with the hardhats, were one reaction.”<sup>79</sup>

The revolt against perceived emasculation also merged with the anti-elitism of the growing conservative backlash to the cultural changes brought by the 1960s. Robinson points out that the “liberal elite” was “constructed as feminized, and symbolic constructs of femininity are marshalled to complete the portrait of all what the Middle American stands against.”<sup>80</sup> Looking at the rhetoric used in the print media throughout the 1970s, it is also clear that the categories of

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<sup>76</sup> William S. White, “Women’s Lib is Backfiring,” *The Washington Post*, January 15, 1972, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>77</sup> Patrick J. Buchanan, “Where women’s lib is offensive,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 17, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>78</sup> David Morgan, “Class and Masculinity,” in *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities*, eds. Michael Kimmel, Jeff Hearn, and R.W. Connell (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), 171, eBook Comprehensive Academic Collection.

<sup>79</sup> Freeman, “Hardhats,” 735.

<sup>80</sup> Sally Robinson, “‘Unyoung, Unpoor, Unblack’: John Updike and The Construction of Middle American Masculinity,” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 44, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 335.

liberal, elite, and academic became blurred so that one necessarily indicated the others; this semantic slippage is another clear example of the shallowness of political rhetoric during the decade, as the question of *actual* political or economic power never really entered into these denunciations of elites.

Perhaps the clearest, most forceful, and most popular articulation of this construction of the “elite” (cultural, media, or academic but always liberal) as effeminate came from Nixon’s fiery vice president, Spiro Agnew. The *Wall Street Journal* favorably reported that he referred to the press as “effete snobs,”<sup>81</sup> while Robinson notes a lengthier invective attributed to the vice president in which he condemned the “effete corps of impudent snobs who characterize themselves as intellectuals.”<sup>82</sup> The Democratic party, too, came under fire from Agnew, as when he accused Congressional Democrats of “a whimpering isolationism on foreign policy, a mulish obstructionism in domestic policy and a pusillanimous pussyfooting on the critical issue of law and order.”<sup>83</sup>

This disdain was not solely gendered, and it was reportedly shared by a wide swath of the “silent majority.” A 1970 *Los Angeles Times* article, for example, titled “Academia vs. the Outside World--Superiority Challenged,” noted that a Gallup poll found that college campuses were “described as the most serious problem the country faces, bar none” and argued that “to the world outside, the academic missionary looks intolerant, reactionary, authoritarian, hypnotized by his own rhetoric, and ignorant of political reality.”<sup>84</sup> The Dean of Notre Dame Law School asserted that “the great majority of the American people are sick and tired of the soft,

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<sup>81</sup> “The Vice President’s Rhetoric,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 1, 1970, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>82</sup> Robinson, “Ungyoung, Unpoor, Unblack,” 335.

<sup>83</sup> John Elmer, “Agnew Hits Liberals In U.S. Senate,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 11, 1970, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>84</sup> Andrew M. Greeley, “Academia vs. the Outside World - Superiority Challenged,” *Los Angeles Times*, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

unprincipled, materialistic humanism that has given us crime without punishment, rights without responsibilities, rewards without risks, wages without work, and war without victory,”<sup>85</sup> while a 1970 *Wall Street Journal* editorial argued that the only thing that had the “strength and self-confidence to displace the elite” and their “permissiveness” was the Nixon administration’s apparently masculine approach to governance.<sup>86</sup> This is entirely unsurprising, as Nixon himself “detested the eastern elite, whom he saw as impotent and effete.”<sup>87</sup> A union leader who threw his support behind Nixon justified this unconventional move by claiming that Nixon’s masculinity was deeply appealing to blue-collar voters. “The ‘hard hats,’” he explained, “who are a tough breed, have come to respect you as a tough, courageous man’s man.”<sup>88</sup> This hated, pampered elite even found itself publicly blamed for the “headlong retreat” of Western civilization, as when Patrick Buchanan castigated them in a 1979 column titled “The elite are guilty of treason.” “The West is losing the struggle for the world,” he wrote, “not because of the failure of its *men of action*, but because of the failure of its *men of words*...” (emphasis mine).<sup>89</sup>

Further strengthening the relationship between this distinctly working-class form of masculinity and the type of manual labor done by these men was rhetoric that cast the vaguely-defined academic-cultural-liberal elite as unproductive wimps who couldn’t cut it in the rough-and-tumble “real world” ruled by the market. The *Boston Globe* ran an opinion piece titled “A new class of privileged drones” that not only repeated Vice President Agnew’s “effete” comment but asserted that “faculty and students have become major clients of the welfare state, utterly

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<sup>85</sup> “New Congress Expected to Take Anti-Liberal Turn,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 4, 1968, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>86</sup> “Nobody Here but Us Chickens,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 2, 1970, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>87</sup> Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: the New Press, 2010), 125.

<sup>88</sup> Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*, 137.

<sup>89</sup> Patrick Buchanan, “The elite are guilty of treason,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 2, 1979, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

dependent upon public and private beneficence for their bread and circuses.” It went on to note that the academic elites set themselves apart with their “exemption from common labor” and asserted that colleges performed a “babysitting function” by withholding “from the labor market and the military great numbers of persons whom neither system could otherwise absorb.” The problem, however, was that “Harvard Square and Berkeley do not seem to be sitting the babies very well.”<sup>90</sup> In another example, a 1970 letter to the editor published in the *Chicago Tribune* referred to the academic elites who were indoctrinating the nation’s youth as “men who sought refuge in the academic world because they feared to compete in the struggle for economic success or political eminence in the outside world” and found them “unwilling to concede even to themselves that it is not the system that is at fault but merely their inability to compete in that system...”<sup>91</sup> This mocking, condescending tone is a clear example of Ava Baron’s assertion that manual laborers frequently ridiculed middle-class men “for engaging only in ‘brain work,’ and labeled them effeminate. Middle-class men’s bodies and dress became the butt of working-class men’s humor.”<sup>92</sup> By deriding the soft, non-productive academic-cultural-liberal elite for their participation in a field of work they considered to be worthless and wimpy, they strengthened the association between working-class status and manliness. “While the work itself was often boring, unpleasant, and dangerous,” Sherry Lee Linkon points out, “the mythology surrounding productive labor with its associated benefits of the family wage, labor solidarity, and physical prowess, has long played a key role in defining working-class and masculine identities.”<sup>93</sup>

Despite the fact that more and more women were entering blue-collar careers, the popular notion of the working-class remained implicitly male. As David Morgan puts it, “the connection

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<sup>90</sup> David B. Wilson, “A new class of privileged drones,” *Boston Globe*, August 2, 1970, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>91</sup> “Worth Saving?,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 16, 1970, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>92</sup> Ava Baron, “Masculinity, the Embodied Male Worker, and the Historian’s Gaze,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 69 (Spring 2006): 149.

<sup>93</sup> Sherry Lee Linkon, “Men without Work: White Working-Class Masculinity in Deindustrialization Fiction,” *Contemporary Literature* 55, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 148.

between class and masculinity is an intimate one.”<sup>94</sup> However, as has been alluded to multiple times throughout this chapter, the working-class was also strongly racialized as white, again despite the reality that it was made up of a sizeable number of workers of color. Thus, “despite the diversity of the working class...the iconic image of the American working class remains white, male, and industrial.”<sup>95</sup> The relevance of this specific construct and its relationship to the broader political landscape in the 1970s is the subject of the next section.

#### Putting the “White” in “Working-Class”

In the 1970s, a new, volatile group of Americans began to dominate the political conversation. They are “the niggers of the 1970s,” according to one columnist.<sup>96</sup> Another lengthy exploration of their grievances called them “the most abused group in American society” and “the most exploited class in the United States.”<sup>97</sup> They were, of course, working-class, white ethnic men. “What the blacks and the poor and the young were to the ‘60s lower middle-class white will be to the ‘70s,” Michael Novak confidently forecasted in a 1972 *Newsday* opinion piece.<sup>98</sup>

Novak would have a prominent role—if not *the most* prominent role—in making this statement come true with his extremely influential book, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*. He didn’t mean just any lower middle-class white, however; poor, rural, Southern, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon whites were largely left out of the discourse of the forgotten white worker. In the onslaught of articles depicting, theorizing, sympathizing, and critiquing the plight of this downtrodden figure, it became clear that the working-class as a whole was not being talked about, nor were white ethnics as a group, or even men. Instead, all of these characteristics became melded

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<sup>94</sup> Morgan, “Class and Masculinity,” 172.

<sup>95</sup> Linkon, “Men without Work,” 149.

<sup>96</sup> Andrew Greeley, “Of course, that’s it - blame Catholics,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 12, 1974, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>97</sup> Joseph Antonio Raffaele, “Why the Ethnic Working Man is so Damned Mad,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 2, 1974, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>98</sup> Michael Novak, “Blue Collar Power,” *Newsday*, April 9, 1972, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

together so that a variety of phrases like working-class, white ethnic, hard hat, blue-collar, or even “silent majority” came to operate as shorthand for a very specific intersection of these categories. The news media—and broader culture, to a certain degree as well—became obsessed with the lives, values, and concerns of the male, working-class, white ethnic man. The result is that when class started to subside as a politically relevant category (in public discourse and the media, not in reality), white working-class ethnics came to adopt the identity-based language of the social movements of the 1960s, and ultimately concluded that they were oppressed not as members of an exploited economic class, but as members of an exploited race/ethnic group and gender.

The concept of working-class, white ethnic oppression and victimhood is dubious at best, but nonetheless, their concerns were addressed and taken seriously by the news media, and almost exclusively on cultural or racial terms rather than class terms. In what came to be known as the “Ethnic Revival “ of the 1970s, white ethnics seized upon the language of identity and “roots” espoused by the Black Power movement, the American Indian Movement, and the Chicano movement in order to articulate their own grievances and general, vague dissatisfaction with life. The result was the increasing popularity of the figure of the “white ethnic” in “sociology and history textbooks, in Hollywood blockbusters, in the national passion for genealogical research, in the heritage industries devoted to ‘ethnic’ merchandise and marketing strategies, in the public discussions of citizenship and social policy, and in the shifting racial politics of ‘we’ and ‘they’ ...”<sup>99</sup>

Matthew Frye Jacobson argues in *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* that this movement gained steam in the wake of the civil rights movement not only

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<sup>99</sup>Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 15-16, ProQuest Ebook Central.

because of the increasing emphasis on multiculturalism and recognition of difference, but because identification with whiteness began to have a connotation of guilt. “The sudden centrality of black grievances to national discussion prompted a rapid move among white ethnics to disassociate themselves from white privilege,” he argues. “The popular rediscovery of ethnic forebears became one way of saying, ‘We’re merely newcomers; the nation’s crimes are not our own.’”<sup>100</sup> As George Lipsitz puts it in *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, “The claim that one’s own family did not own any slaves is intended to end the discussion.”<sup>101</sup>

The primary proponent of the notion of the oppressed white ethnic man, Michael Novak, returned to this argument frequently throughout the 1970s. “As long as blacks were slaves in America, Poles were serfs,” he explained to the *Chicago Tribune* in 1972. “The peasant class hasn’t been free in Italy as long as the blacks have been free here. To blame them, as we blame Anglos, for 300 years of slavery misses the point. The immigrants hadn’t instituted slavery.”<sup>102</sup> In a 1976 column, Novak explained that “The immigrants who came to America after 1870 feel no guilt for slavery. They were serfs as long ago as blacks were slaves.”<sup>103</sup> A different 1976 column featured what is probably Novak’s most historically illiterate version of this argument, when he argued that “Blacks were not the only people broken by slavery. Serfdom broke many peoples of Eastern and Southern Europe.” His ignorance of the difference between racialized chattel slavery and serfdom is particularly ironic, given that he complains, in the very same article, that “too often, blacks do not know the history of other people; they feel more alone than they are.”<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Jacobson, *Roots Too*, 21.

<sup>101</sup> George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 21, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>102</sup> Robert Cross, “He’s Proud to Be One of the PIGS,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 9, 1972, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>103</sup> Michael Novak, “...And Misunderstood Northern Attitudes,” *The Washington Post*, June 29, 1976, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>104</sup> Michael Novak, “The Wrong Use of a Proud Word,” *Newsday*, April 21, 1976, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

Novak wasn't the only one to find this line of argument appealing, of course. The infamous 1969 Pete Hamill article "The Revolt of the White Lower Middle Class" featured a blue-collar worker exclaiming "If I hear that 400-years-of-slavery bit one more time...I'll go outta my mind!"<sup>105</sup> Andrew Greeley, another prominent expounder of the notion of the oppressed white ethnic male, explained that "To be told that [white ethnics] are responsible or ought to feel guilty for the plight of blacks puzzles them." He conceded that while they "may not like blacks—they may fear them," it is important to note that "it seems to them that they are being asked to pay the heaviest price for social wrongs for which they have little responsibility."<sup>106</sup> In a particularly hostile, resentful example of this argument, the *Boston Globe* reported on the worker-author Eric Hoffer's rant at UC Berkeley in 1970. "The Negroes say they created the wealth in this country...The hell they did. While they were dragging their asses around picking cotton, my ancestors were working 80 hours a week in the factories and mills. They were creating the goddam wealth of this country, and you're not going to inject us with any sense of guilt about the Negro. We don't feel guilty, because our white face didn't give us any advantage, goddamit. What advantage did our white face give us, goddamit?"<sup>107</sup>

The assertion of racial innocence evident in these arguments does quite a bit of political and ideological work. For one, it denies the ongoing legacy of slavery and racism, instead freezing it in the past as though history has no bearing on the present. As Lipsitz puts it, "the disavowal of responsibility for slavery never acknowledges how the existence of slavery and the exploitation of black labor after emancipation created opportunities which penalized blacks and benefited whites who did not own slaves."<sup>108</sup> It also operates under a definition of whiteness that

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<sup>105</sup> Pete Hamill, "The Revolt of the White Lower Middle Class," *New York Magazine*, April 14, 1969.

<sup>106</sup> Andrew Greeley, "Loyal—But Not Understood: America's Not-So-Silent Minority," *Los Angeles Times*, December 7, 1969, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>107</sup> Richard Lemon, "The young, Negroes, the ethnics - the melting pot is simmering," *Boston Globe*, November 24, 1970, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>108</sup> Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, 21.

many would argue had long ago been eclipsed by a more expansive version that included the so-called ethnics—the Poles, Irish, Italians, Greeks, etc. These arguments “wrongly dragged the regime of Nordic-supremacism into the present, as though whiteness and the category ‘Caucasian’ had no purchase at all upon the nation’s political life.”<sup>109</sup> In addition, the argument established the white ethnics in a position where they were able to benefit from the structural, economic, and psychological benefits of whiteness without the attached guilt, shame, or culpability. Jacobson refers to this as “an ideological sleight of hand” in which “‘ethnic’ history [is] uncoupled from its most salient structural features.”<sup>110</sup>

A similarly ahistorical argument was at work in the public discourse surrounding affirmative action and other forms of government intervention for women and minorities in general, but black people in particular. These arguments centered around a variety of claims comparing the black experience and the white ethnic experience in America: that white ethnic immigrants were able to achieve the American dream without any help; that the white ethnic experience upon arrival in America was somehow comparable to the experience of African Americans; that white ethnics were not *really* white and therefore didn’t benefit from the oppression and exploitation of African Americans; that affirmative action and other more targeted programs were addressing *past* injustices, as though discrimination was not a still-occurring phenomenon; that there were no current programs addressing the needs of the white ethnics, but there were a wealth of governmental resources available to black people; that black job applicants were obviously unqualified and of lesser quality than white applicants; that the acquisition of jobs, prestige, political power, recognition, respect, housing, education, and promotions was a zero-

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<sup>109</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 276.

<sup>110</sup> Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 279.

sum game. The result, according to Jacobson, was “a politics of white grievance that pitted itself against unfair black privilege...”<sup>111</sup>

The notorious champion of white ethnics Michael Novak complained in a 1972 column for *Newsday* that liberal elites were demanding that these working-class, white ethnic (men) “share *his* jobs, *his* neighborhoods, *his* schools, *his* children’s opportunities for the limited number of college scholarships, with those who are poor.”<sup>112</sup> Another columnist explained the white ethnic’s feeling that “opening up the crafts to an uncontrolled apprenticeship program without creating new jobs means unemployment for him,” simultaneously articulating the claim that these were jobs that the white ethnics were rightfully *entitled* to and that, in a zero-sum game, advancement for black workers necessarily meant that white workers were taking a hit.<sup>113</sup> Similarly, California Republican (and John Birch society member) John G. Schmitz complained about affirmative action as “racism in reverse” that had “all the evil effects of the original racism” while clearly operating under the assumption that minority job candidates were necessarily inferior to the white ones, who were clearly entitled to those jobs. He pledged to his constituents that he would “criticize at any opportunity the firing of competent personnel and hiring of inexperienced, less competent minority-group members as replacements.”<sup>114</sup> Similarly, a column titled “Why the Ethnic Working Man is so Damned Mad” argued that white ethnics “[feel] that the little remaining skill in his work is being destroyed by pressures from government to open up jobs for blacks.”<sup>115</sup> The clear implication that the entrance of black workers into the workplace degrades the sanctity of the work is stated as though it is an obvious, self-evident conclusion.

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<sup>111</sup> Jacobson, *Roots Too*, 22.

<sup>112</sup> Novak, “Blue Collar Power.”

<sup>113</sup> Michael M. Schneider, “The White Working Class - Insecure, Unhappy,” *Newsday*, November 20, 1970, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>114</sup> “Schmitz Hits Forced Hiring of Minorities,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 11, 1970, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>115</sup> Raffaele, “Ethnic Working Man Mad.”

The claims that 1) only black people received welfare or benefitted from government programs; 2) the story of the white ethnic immigrant experience is one of rugged individualism and hard work overcoming hardship and prejudice, with no help from anyone; and 3) affirmative action and other government programs were addressing *past* racial injustices for which white ethnics were blameless—were all intertwined, and centered around a general historical short-sightedness.

The claim that white ethnics saw little to no benefits from their burdensome taxes—that the benefits went primarily if not strictly to blacks—was one of the most commonly occurring grievances in the slew of articles discussing his plight. “People are paying too much money in taxes, don’t see or feel the benefits...” one column said.<sup>116</sup> Another detailed recommendations made to the Nixon administration to “ease the economic plight of blue collar workers who say they ‘help pay the freight for free riders and get none of the apparent help’ provided the poor and disadvantaged.”<sup>117</sup> Michael Schneider argued in the *Washington Post* that white ethnics “are excluded from social programs directed toward the so-called disadvantaged: medical aid, job training, head-start programs, and legal aid. As taxpayers they support these programs but they see no share for themselves in the services they provide.”<sup>118</sup> A 1970 opinion piece in the *Los Angeles Times* explained that white ethnics “are surrounded by poverty and welfare programs which seem designed for blacks and Puerto Ricans only.”<sup>119</sup> In a series of comments that can only be described as sensational attempts to garner more press, Michael Novak claimed in a 1972 interview that “programs such as Head Start and other poverty programs...[seem] to carry a

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<sup>116</sup> Novak, “Blue Collar Power.”

<sup>117</sup> “Our Readers Sound Off on Women’s Lib.”

<sup>118</sup> Schneider, “White Working Class - Insecure.”

<sup>119</sup> Nick Thimmesch, “The GOP and the Ethnics,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 2, 1970, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

symbolic message: ‘For blacks only’<sup>120</sup> and in a 1976 column described “welfare, affirmative action, and government intervention” as “social helps for blacks no other groups received.”<sup>121</sup> Barbara Mikulski, one of the few prominent white ethnic women outside of Boston’s anti-busing movement, argued that “the last thing anyone did for the workingman...was the GI Bill of Rights after World War II. Federal, state, and local programs are not helping the working-class guy. He gets no subsidies, no tax loopholes. Yet he is the one who is paying for the programs.”<sup>122</sup> A Chicago reverend told the *Chicago Tribune* that there was “a generation of poor whites” that was “getting the message that the government has no programs for them.”<sup>123</sup> The result of this recurring theme was that “the black man is becoming the stereotype of the Welfare System, that shiftless ogre which, as [the white ethnic] sees it, devours the taxes and doesn’t work.”<sup>124</sup>

Intimately related to this argument was the insistence that white ethnic immigrants, through hard work, toughness, dedication, and moral virtue, achieved success in America with no help from anyone. This was used to denigrate black appeals for “special advantages” and necessarily implied that laziness and lack of sufficient willpower were the reasons for continued black poverty. For example, Jacobson notes a 1972 speech by President Nixon that embodied this argument. “The immigrants ‘believed in hard work,’ [Nixon] declared, encoding a racial comparison that could hardly have been lost on his listeners. ‘They didn’t come here for a handout. They came here for an opportunity and they built America.’” Jacobson explains that “Nixon here annexes the European immigrants to the national legend of rugged individualism, even as he redefines the legitimate national community itself to exclude the supposed welfare-

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<sup>120</sup> James P. Gannon, “What Ethnic Voters Really Want...,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 12, 1972, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>121</sup> Novak, “Wrong Use of a Proud Word.”

<sup>122</sup> Kevin Lahart, “The anger of the ethnics,” *Boston Globe*, July 11, 1971, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>123</sup> Mike LaVelle, “Blue-collar views: Poor whites who don’t expect help,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 18, 1978, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>124</sup> Bill Moyers, “The Plight Of The Not-So-Poor,” *Newsday*, May 24, 1969, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

mongers of the present-day ghetto.”<sup>125</sup> A 1976 column by Michael Novak titled “Jobs for the Black Ghetto: The Immigrant Example” made strikingly similar claims. After noting that menial jobs increasingly seem to be held by immigrants and that “migrants still select America as the world’s greatest ‘land of opportunity,’” he contended that this is a “striking contrast” to the 21 percent black male unemployment rate and wonders why “no one dares ask why.” Further, “the availability of jobs raises a very difficult question for blacks in America.” Ultimately, he concluded that the *obviously* fatherless black family unit does an insufficient job of instilling “toughness and self-reliance” in their youth and that they are failing to “inculcate in them habits of work and thrift and investment.” “We must pay American blacks the compliment of being cynical about any and all excuses for not doing what others continue to do,” Novak said.<sup>126</sup> Likewise, Nathan Glazer’s 1975 book *Affirmative Discrimination* painted a “group portrait of European immigrants [that] is highly sympathetic, stressing that from their point of view they ‘entered a society in which they were scorned; they nevertheless worked hard, they received little or no support from government or public agencies, their children received no special attention in school or special opportunity to attend college, they received no special consideration from courts and legal defenders.’” Most damningly for blacks, Glazer argued that the European immigrants “came to a country which provided them with less benefits than it now provides the protected groups.”<sup>127</sup>

Adding to the claims about white ethnic innocence with regards to slavery was the argument that affirmative action was intended to address *past* discrimination, which necessarily implied that discrimination was *solely* a problem of the past. A 1973 article detailing white male grievances about affirmative action, for example, defined it as “efforts to put a stop to inequitable

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<sup>125</sup> Jacobson, *Roots Too*, 65.

<sup>126</sup> Michael Novak, “Jobs for the Black Ghetto: The Immigrant Example,” *Newsday*, March 7, 1976, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>127</sup> Jacobson, *Roots Too*, 197.

practices of the past,”<sup>128</sup> while a 1977 *Wall Street Journal* column explained the argument for affirmative action as centering on “whether and to what extent employers, educators and others should make up for past discrimination against minorities and women by giving them priority over those who were previously favored—typically white males.”<sup>129</sup> All of these short-sighted and ahistorical arguments essentially meant that “only the distant past needs to be redressed in American social policy, not the present: if slavery, conquest, and extermination are the only markers of historic white privilege—as opposed to persistent racial discrimination in hiring, housing, and education, for example—then the whiteness of the European immigrant is hardly worth remarking.”<sup>130</sup>

One argument that cropped up with remarkable frequency in this public discourse was the claim that white ethnics were too proud to accept welfare. This coexisted, sometimes even in the same article or same paragraph, with the previously noted assertion that government programs were closed to whites. Thus the proponents of the white ethnic grievance discourse simultaneously argued that they were excluded from government intervention and the “special advantages” given to minorities *and* that they were too proud for these interventions and advantages because of their distinct ethnic culture. A low-income working class man, for example, wrote to *Newsday* and defined himself as a member of the “silent suckers, the dumb blue-collar workers” who “are too proud to accept handouts.”<sup>131</sup> Another article, “Our 40 Million Ethnics,” claimed that “a dominant value that prevails in ethnic communities is self-reliance,” and that as a result, they firmly believe that “the government should not provide giveaways.” This, the author stated, “explains the ethnic community’s hostility to the poverty program; to welfare (poor

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<sup>128</sup> “White males fear for their future,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 2, 1973, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>129</sup> Carol H. Falk, “The ‘Benign Discrimination’ Issue,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 1, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>130</sup> Jacobson, *Roots Too*, 197.

<sup>131</sup> Moyers, “Plight of Not-So-Poor.”

whites are known to reject welfare even when they meet the requirements of need), and to Negro demands for ‘preferential’ treatment.”<sup>132</sup> A 1977 article in the *Washington Post* about the plight of the “forgotten minority,” Italian-Americans, argued that “if they are poor enough for welfare, they won’t get that either. First of all their culture teaches them that to accept welfare is to lose face. As a result, there are probably more undernourished, poverty-stricken old Italians who are eligible for welfare but are not getting it than among any other ethnic group.”<sup>133</sup> The point of these claims, when combined with the complaint that white ethnics were ignored by the government, is unclear.

When all of these arguments are looked at in relation to the concrete, measurable reality of the situation, it becomes clear that very little of the white ethnic grievance was grounded in fact. So here again we see the vague, shallow rhetoric of overblown grievance that characterized the gender-related panics but also the decade as a whole. Historian Dennis Deslippe, for example, notes that “in an environment of uncertainty and distrust...information about affirmative action was, as Jonathan Rieder put it in his history of white backlash in Brooklyn’s Canarsie neighborhood, ‘an amalgam of fantasy, truth, and rumor.’”<sup>134</sup> Andrew Greeley wrote, in the *Los Angeles Times*, that while the claims of the white ethnics may be “wrong,” the important thing was that “they don’t think they are wrong.” Further, “it will not help to lecture them about their prejudices.”<sup>135</sup> Bill Moyers noted that “like almost everyone else, in this surrealistic age, the working-class white man lives with images, opinions that have become fact, illusions that like the

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<sup>132</sup> Richard J. Krickus, “Our 40 Million Ethnics,” *The Washington Post*, August 31, 1969, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>133</sup> Charles Guzzetta, “Italian Americans: The Forgotten Minority,” *Newsday*, November 15, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>134</sup> Dennis A. Deslippe, “‘Do Whites Have Rights?’: White Detroit Policemen and ‘Reverse Discrimination’ Protests in the 1970s,” *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 3 (December 2004): 945.

<sup>135</sup> Greeley, “America’s Not-So-Silent Minority.”

Greek myths become ‘true’ in the telling.”<sup>136</sup> Pete Hamill, after extensively quoting a working-class white ethnic angrily denouncing black welfare-abusers, explained that:

...it is very difficult to explain to these people that more than 600,000 of those on welfare are women and children; that one reason the black family is in trouble is because outfits like the Iron Workers Union have practically excluded blacks through most of their history; that a hell of a lot more of their tax dollars go to Vietnam or the planning for future wars than to Harlem or Bed-Stuy; that the effort of the past four or five years was an effort forced by bloody events, and that they are paying taxes to relieve some forms of poverty because of more than 100 years of neglect on top of 300 years of slavery.<sup>137</sup>

A *Washington Post* article asserted that, while the ethnics’ “perception of capitalism does not conform to reality” and “their tendency to accept noncapitalistic principles while rejecting others is inconsistent,” “it matters little to point [it] out.”<sup>138</sup>

A key component of the argument that the facts of the political situation don’t matter was a remarkable focus on the *feelings* of the white ethnics. In writing about the supposed blue-collar white ethnic man’s plight, it was as though these journalists and opinion-makers—people who are, by definition, members of the hated media *elite*—recognized that the decade’s increasing emphasis on shallowness, symbolism, and valuing of style over substance now applied to the articulation of political grievance as well. Novak wrote that the white ethnics “don’t like the *feel* of things” (emphasis his),<sup>139</sup> while others noted the white ethnics’ “vague concerns”<sup>140</sup> and “unclearly defined grievances.”<sup>141</sup> They were described as tending to “feel economically insecure,”<sup>142</sup> as “[feeling] alienated, isolated, and neglected,” as “feeling they are being unjustly

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<sup>136</sup> Moyers, “Plight of Not-So-Poor.”

<sup>137</sup> Hamill, “The Revolt of the White Lower Middle Class.”

<sup>138</sup> Krickus, “Over 40 Million Ethnics.”

<sup>139</sup> Novak, “Blue Collar Power.”

<sup>140</sup> Michael M. Schneider, “The White Worker: A Study in Frustration,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 17, 1971, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>141</sup> Lahart, “Anger of the ethnics.”

<sup>142</sup> Greeley, “America’s Not-So-Silent Minority.”

treated in the job game,”<sup>143</sup> as “[feeling] cut out of the action” and “deserted.”<sup>144</sup> The fact that these feelings of injustice were almost always unsupported by reference to any kind of report, statistic, fact, or concrete example was beside the point. Sally Robinson’s point that “a crisis is ‘real’ when its rhetorical strategies can be discerned and its effects charted; the reality of a particular crisis depends less on hard evidence of actual social trauma or do-or-die decision-making than on the power of language, of metaphors and images, to convincingly represent that sense of trauma and turning point” is once again relevant here.<sup>145</sup> So, through the media popularization of the white ethnic working-class man’s grievances, the *felt* oppression, injustice, and exploitation was assumed to be *real* oppression, injustice, and exploitation.

The specific ethnic-ness of these white working-class men, in this context, is particularly important. Jacobson notes that these grievances centered around the fact that “the emergent ethnics are white without actually *feeling* white; they are alienated from other whites, and are beginning to identify the reasons why.”<sup>146</sup> Further, he argues that “it is at once the brilliance and damning limitation of *Unmeltable Ethnics* (like the ethnic revival in general) that the psychological dimension of identity politics and struggle—Novak’s ‘inner conflict between one’s felt personal power and one’s ascribed public power’—takes precedence over structural features of the political landscape like legal codes, housing covenants, or Jim Crow practices. If one has not been allowed to *feel* ‘white,’ then one’s whiteness does not amount to privilege.” “In this formulation racial hierarchy has less to do with power than with self-esteem,” Jacobson argues. He goes on to further dissect Novak’s role in untethering race from its relationship to structural power: “...re-marking upon a distinct ‘uneasiness in the eyes’ that he has observed among people of various backgrounds in certain social situations, Novak notes, ‘You can generate in the eyes of

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<sup>143</sup> “White males fear.”

<sup>144</sup> Lahart, “Anger of the ethnics.”

<sup>145</sup> Robinson, *Marked Men*, 10.

<sup>146</sup> Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 276.

almost any American, except a wealthy WASP: in Poles, Italians, Chicanos, Blacks, in Greeks, Armenians, the French...Unworthiness is stamped upon their souls.” However, Jacobson points out, “this line can only work where race is presumed to translate primarily into feelings of relative ‘worth’ rather than into real power differentials. Only where whiteness has been rejected out of hand as an insignificant detail can grievances reduce to a matter of ‘unworthiness’...”<sup>147</sup> The fact that the primary complaint that the white ethnic man directs against the so-called WASP elite was that they deride him as “racist” further confirms Jacobson’s point. Most references to any kind of structural, material power possessed by elites—WASP or non-WASP—are beside the point when the grievance is articulated in religio-ethnic terms rather than class ones. Novak, Greeley, et al argued that the white ethnic has been turned into the “icon” of racism while overlooking the arguably *more* common trope of the backwards, racist, uneducated Southern redneck, because the non-ethnic whiteness of that figure would undermine their claims of religio-ethnic oppression and would instead re-focus the discussion on class. And so in a political climate that was constantly rejecting the salience of class as a crucial factor in determining Americans’ life chances, the *legitimate* grievances of the white ethnic working-class man that resulted from his class position were ignored in favor of highlighting imagined (or *felt*) injustices based on his status as outside the WASP mainstream.

#### An Analytical Sleight of Hand: Conflating Class and Culture

The growing popularity of white ethnic working-class grievance discourse coincided—or precipitated—a movement away from perceiving class as a relevant feature of Americans’ lives. This didn’t make it true, of course; class was arguably more relevant than ever, given the deteriorating economy, unemployment, deindustrialization, off-shoring, and automation. But, almost simultaneously, the media pushed a narrative that framed the declining quality of life and

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<sup>147</sup> Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 279.

the increasing economic insecurity of the working-class as prejudice against (ethnic) whites produced by dangerous blacks and their effete white liberal backers *and* a narrative that dismissed class as a relic of the past. The conflation of the working-class with whiteness and maleness, and specifically white *ethnic* maleness, was a key component of this ideological reshuffling. If it was acknowledged that not all white ethnic men were working-class, then all that was left of white ethnic grievance media was vague, confused references to *feelings* of oppression. And if the existence of poor, white, non-ethnics—Protestant whites in the South, for example—was acknowledged, then it would have to be conceded that the perceived liberal condescension toward the white ethnic was not about their religio-ethnic otherness but about their class position. These discourses made a perfect complement to Nixon, Wallace, and later Reagan's employment of cultural issues to lure working-class voters away from the Democratic party and gave cover to their dismantling of the New Deal coalition and the welfare state policies that went along with it.

Reviewing the rhetoric surrounding white ethnic oppression in the major newspapers during the 1970s—and comparing it to articles that focused instead on the *working class* specifically instead—it becomes ever clearer that white ethnic grievance posturing played a significant role in undermining the perception of the role of class in American life. Articles, columns, and editorials centering on the oppression of the white ethnic man in particular almost always conflated this group with the working-class, yet largely focused on vague, unclearly articulated complaints about feelings of exclusion or lack of recognition. When actual economic problems were referenced, however, their causes were attributed to the WASP elite's obvious bias against the gauche and unseemly white ethnics rather than the structural position imposed on them by the capitalist system. Those articles that focused on blue-collar workers, however, would occasionally make references to the white ethnic—understandable given the popularity of the white ethnic revival—but largely centered on clearly defined economic problems, almost always backed up with statistics, surveys, or studies. These articles, too, were less likely to dismiss white

ethnic bigotry as natural and expected, and instead seemed to acknowledge the fact that the working-class and white ethnics were not interchangeable. The existence of a non-ethnic white working-class and of minority members of the working-class helped to reiterate that the problem was the structural violence waged against the poor due to the nature of the capitalist system rather than some ill-defined, ahistorical WASP bigotry. This kind of analysis, however, was strikingly scarce, and grew more so as the decade wore on and class slipped out of the picture.

While in the previous section, the ill-defined, overblown, and vague articulations of the grievances of white ethnics were noted, it is absolutely crucial to point out that the *working class*—which did include some white ethnics but also included racial minorities and non-ethnic whites and women—truly did suffer during the economic downturn of the 1970s. A car repairman explained to the *Wall Street Journal* that what was “really bothering the working man” was the fact that while “Ford and GM both set records for profits,” his “wages are frozen.”<sup>148</sup> The *Washington Post* noted in a 1972 article that “160,000 fewer production workers turn out more autos than in the past. In the steel industry, 250,000 workers now do the same work as 500,000 did in the early 1950s.”<sup>149</sup> Further, the state of the economy meant that “the average US worker in private industry by some calculations is slightly worse off today than he was four years ago.”<sup>150</sup> A 1977 *Newsday* article pointed out that the economic gap between the suburbs and the central cities was growing rather than decreasing: “The median income of families in the suburbs in 1964 was \$14,007, 23.5 per cent higher than the average of \$11,343 for central-city families. In the 1972-75 period, suburban incomes rose 4.6 per cent while central-city incomes dropped .3 per cent.”<sup>151</sup> Other bad news-bearing headlines included “Family Earnings Rise 8% But Buying

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<sup>148</sup> Groseclose, “Aimless America.”

<sup>149</sup> Dennis Weintraub, “The Unemployment Crisis,” *Newsday*, November 8, 1972, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>150</sup> Robert E. Walsh, “Workingman’s No. 1 concern: Inflation,” *Boston Globe*, March 30, 1970, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>151</sup> “A Widening Economic Gap,” *Newsday*, August 18, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

Power Falls,”<sup>152</sup> “Living Costs in 1978 Rose for a Family With a ‘Low Budget,’”<sup>153</sup> “US Jobs Vanish in Flood of Imports,”<sup>154</sup> and “Nationwide, 7.1% Are Out of Work.”<sup>155</sup>

Adding to the working-class’s problems was the shifting public perception of unions. A *Washington Post* poll, for example, surveyed “elites” in US society and found that “every elite group questioned thought that labor unions were one of the most powerful two or three groups at the country. At the same time, every elite group but one felt that labor’s influence should be much less than they perceived it to be. Many said labor should be stripped of any real influence.” This was clearly bad news for the future of unions, but also confirmed what many suspected to be an anti-working-class bias among elites—always presumed to be liberal. Solidifying this perception, the leader of an anti-labor faction of the Democratic Party in San Francisco proudly declared that “liberal and labor aren’t synonymous anymore.”<sup>156</sup> In addition, unions were widely blamed, in the media and by politicians from both parties, for the inflation crisis. An editorial in the *Chicago Tribune* happily reported the President’s suspension of the Davis-Beacon law, which required contractors on all federal construction projects to pay the prevailing wages in the area, and concluded that labor laws, while originally “enacted to protect workers from unscrupulous employers,” now “enable big unions to exploit both employers and the public.”<sup>157</sup> Another *Chicago Tribune* editorial expressed disdain for the “number of alleged statesmen in the legislatures who are willing to take orders from the unions when it is clearly not in the public

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<sup>152</sup> “Family earnings rise 8%, but buying power falls 5%,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 30, 1980, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>153</sup> “Living Costs in 1978 Rose for a Family With a ‘Low’ Budget,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 30, 1979, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>154</sup> Bill Neikirk and R. C. Longworth, “U.S. jobs vanish in flood of imports,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 3, 1978, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>155</sup> “Unemployment: Nationwide, 7.1% Are Out of Work,” *Newsday*, January 4, 1975, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>156</sup> Robert G. Kaiser, “Labor movement is on the defensive with general public, rank and file,” *Boston Globe*, September 6, 1976, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>157</sup> “Dropping a Feather on the Hard Hats,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 25, 1971, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

interest to do so.”<sup>158</sup> The *New York Times* joined in on the sharp critique of unions, arguing in a 1976 editorial that “an important part of the explanation for the industry’s depressed state lies in the inflationary wage standards and restrictive work rules enforced by the monopolistic building trades unions, especially in the big urban centers.”<sup>159</sup>

In addition, seemingly valid worker complaints—discussed in the news media with the catchy name “blue-collar blues”—were frequently dismissed or downplayed, and one study even attributed workplace discontent to mental instability. A Rutgers Medical School study, for example, found that “95% of the workers surveyed reported being satisfied with their job,” while “71% reported no part of their work was tiring or upsetting.” Those who *did* respond to the survey negatively, however, were found to “experience depression and dissatisfaction,” with the report concluding that people who are dissatisfied with their tedious, frequently dangerous work were “drawn largely from those who would be considered emotionally disturbed.” A *Wall Street Journal* editorial that reported these numbers also dismissed other reports of widespread worker dissatisfaction as typical complaining that could be found at any workplace. “Some people will probably always try to get by on as little effort as possible,” they continued. “But many people still take pride in the work they do for a living and most people would seem to be reasonably satisfied.” The editorial concluded by asserting that “what is probably more prevalent than ‘blue collar blues’ is the alienation from middle class values of certain social critics, especially those who project their own dissatisfaction onto reasonably contented workers.”<sup>160</sup> Mike LaVelle, the worker behind the recurring *Chicago Tribune* column “Blue-collar views,” was skeptical. “95 per cent of anything on any subject...is just too much to ask to be believed,” he wrote, referring to the study’s findings. The rest of the column was dedicated to a blistering (and comical) critique of the

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<sup>158</sup> “The Hard-Hat Lobby At Work,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 18, 1971, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>159</sup> “Hard-Hat Moderation,” *New York Times*, August 9, 1976, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>160</sup> Novak, “Wrong Use of Proud Word.”

implication that anyone who is dissatisfied with his tedious, dangerous, increasingly sped-up work was “emotionally ill.”<sup>161</sup>

Contrary to the assertions of the media and politicians on both sides of the aisle, blue-collar workers had plenty of reasons to be “blue.” There were broad economic problems, as discussed previously, but also valid critiques specific to the nature of their work. *Time* magazine pointed out that “a great many workers have lost any sense of control over what they are doing and often have to move so fast and steadily on assembly lines or at piecework that there is hardly time even to go to the toilet.” Further, 28% of all industrial workers had no medical coverage, 38% were lacking life insurance, and 39% had no pension beyond Social Security. In addition, “14,000 [industrial workers] were killed in on-the-job accidents” in 1969, “more than the number of US servicemen who died in Viet Nam” that same year.<sup>162</sup>

The articles that detailed the degraded state of blue-collar work, with hard facts and widely-reported studies, rarely, if ever, related it to the prevalence of white ethnics among the working class. Those articles that centered around white ethnic grievances, on the other hand, conflated that religio-ethnic (and gender) group with the working-class while focusing almost entirely on vague *feelings* of injustice, alienation, and oppression. Andrew Greeley’s 1969 article, “America’s Not-So-Silent Minority,” for example, centered almost entirely around cultural and ethnic issues. There was a brief, vague mention of their “economic insecurity,” but ultimately, his analysis centered around “the white ethnic’s commitment to his family, home and neighborhood,” their fear of violence, and their guiltlessness with regards to race relations because—as white ethnics—they were not responsible for slavery.<sup>163</sup> A 1970 article in the *Washington Post*, after

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<sup>161</sup> Mike LaVelle, “Blue-collar views: How to end worker blues,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 11, 1974, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>162</sup> “The Blue Collar Worker’s Lowdown Blues,” *Time* 96, no. 19, November 9, 1970, Academic Search Complete.

<sup>163</sup> Greeley, “Not-So-Silent Minority.”

slyly starting out referring to “lower middle class white workers” and then smoothly transitioning to a discussion of white ethnics, seemed to imply that white ethnics were disproportionately affected by the economy because of their status as white ethnics. “Living just above the poverty level,” author Colman McCarthy wrote, “ethnics are ignored by federal assistance programs designed for the ladder-rung below...The ethnics are victimized by inflation—his money buys less—and by anti-inflation moves, because layoffs hit him first.” In another paragraph, McCarthy once again surreptitiously moved the conversation from one of class to religio-ethnic culture: “The recent report from the Labor Department on the *working class*,” he wrote, “says that economically the *ethnic* is squeezed...”<sup>164</sup> Obviously, the economic problems McCarthy pointed out were real and in need of a solution, but by moving the conversation from discussing the ways in which the working-class was suffering by virtue of their *class position* to discussing these problems as though they were targeting white ethnics in particular, articles such as this contributed to the replacement of class, with its very real material foundations, with much more flexible (and politically exploitable) notions of religio-ethnic cultural identity. Again returning to one of the chief adherents to the “economic issues are caused by anti-white ethnic bias” school of thought, Andrew Greeley, in a 1974 editorial in the *Wall Street Journal*, titled “A Catholic Manifesto,” featured Greeley arguing that anti-Catholic bigotry was the real problem. The *Wall Street Journal* editors apparently agreed, concluding by noting that Catholics “have as legitimate a gripe as anyone else” despite the fact that they were “less trendy as a demographic sub-group” than “blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, [and] women.”<sup>165</sup> What is likely the most astonishing example of the replacement of structural class violence with vague notions of anti-white ethnic bigotry was Michael Novak’s book, *The Guns of Lattimer*. Despite the fact that employing

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<sup>164</sup> Colman McCarthy, “40 Million Americans and a Broken Odyssey,” *The Washington Post*, July 13, 1970, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>165</sup> “A Catholic Manifesto,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 12, 1974, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

violence against striking workers was one of the primary ways 19th and 20th century robber barons protected their profits and maintained their vise-like grip on their workers, Novak concluded that the 1897 shooting of striking coal miners was really about Anglo-Saxon bias against the largely-Slavic miners. “The Anglo-Saxons who ran the coal mines and formed the murderous posse,” Novak claimed, “were so condescending toward the ‘foreign element’ that the shootings were almost inevitable...they believed force and violence were the only language the ‘foreign element’ could understand.” Further, he argued that the miners were “unintelligible and untouchable to the Yankees” because “that generation of Slavic immigrants did not seek affection and was not easy to like.” The article concluded by asking: “Are we still capable of the intolerance and violence toward outsiders that was exhibited 80 years ago towards Slavic miners in Pennsylvania?”<sup>166</sup> This incredibly misguided analysis of one of many examples of violence against rebellious workers throughout US history denies entirely the importance of class to what is obviously a confrontation between labor and capital. While it is likely that the “otherness” of the miners may have meant that the Lattimer massacre received less attention or outcry than acts of violence against more “Americanized” strikers, Novak seemed to be arguing that this entire episode could have been avoided if the Anglo-Saxon mine owners had made an attempt to understand the unique culture of the Slavic miners. Thus not only were contemporary examples of structural inequality and class-based oppression cast as anti-ethnic bigotry or prejudice, but *past* examples are rewritten as well.

With the rhetoric of grievance shifting from class to ethnicity and culture, soon the proposed solutions started to emphasize culture as well. A column by Mike Barnicle in the *Boston Globe* deridingly noted that Novak—who he characterized as a “semi-prominent essayist and

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<sup>166</sup> Bernard Wysocki Jr., “The Day the Unmeltable Ethnics Revolted,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 13, 1978, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

foundation grant groupie”—suggested that newspapers “inaugurate a ‘blue collar page’ so that the general public could gain insight into the lives of working people.” “It could be a truly significant development toward bridging the class gap in America,” Barnicle wrote, with no small amount of biting sarcasm. “Surely, hundreds of mortgage bankers and the entire American Medical Association would change their policies and their viewpoints once they read an op ed page piece entitled ‘Why It’s Fun To Be Polish.’” He concluded by arguing that “to think that a ‘blue collar page’ is going to change any of the economic facts of life is to live in a reservoir of self delusion. It will not happen.”<sup>167</sup> Barnicle erred, however, in assuming that Novak was concerned about the economic status of the working class. His suggestion that the government “[resurrect] old-world craftsmanship through tax-breaks to stonecutters and the like” as a potential solution to the anger of the white ethnics seems to prove otherwise.

“The appeal to the ‘ethnic vote,’” wrote Ellen Goodman in the *Washington Post*, is “typically American. It helps the candidates avoid mentioning a non-no like the class structure of our society, or even using the phrase ‘working class,’ let alone white working class.”<sup>168</sup> She wasn’t wrong, although few writing at the time seemed to be willing to acknowledge this sleight of hand. Nixon’s 1972 landslide victory over George McGovern, thanks in large part to his efforts to “[make] workers’ economic interests secondary to an appeal to their moral backbone, patriotic rectitude, whiteness, and machismo,” further cemented the replacement of class with culture in broader American political discourse.<sup>169</sup>

The fact that these cultural appeals were incredibly successful in breaking the New Deal coalition and forcing an electoral realignment, however, does not mean that the working-class

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<sup>167</sup> Mike Barnicle, “Why readers hate editors,” *Boston Globe*, April 23, 1975, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>168</sup> Ellen Goodman, “What ‘Ethnic Vote’?,” *Washington Post*, October 11, 1976, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>169</sup> Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*, 127.

ethnic demographic was in any way lacking agency. At any point, they could have resisted the appeals to their fears, resentments, and anxieties—and many did. Dennis Deslippe’s article “‘We Must Bring Together a New Coalition’: The Challenge of Working-Class White Ethnics to Color-Blind Conservatism in the 1970s,” for example, highlights attempts to unite working-class white ethnics with poor minorities who, by and large, shared their economic concerns. He describes a “melding of civil rights advocacy, ethnic politics, and support for the poor and working-class...that challenged prevailing liberal and conservative wisdom.”<sup>170</sup> Additionally, a 1976 article in the *Chicago Tribune* described the activities of an organization called National People’s Action, “a federation of some 300 organizations in 50 cities whose members are mostly ethnics, Latins, and blacks.” Their concerns centered around *specific* economic grievances, such as actions taken by “the banks and savings and loan associations” that were “starving their communities.” These are just two examples that demonstrate that although the working-class may have lacked the kind of influence, power, or wealth necessary to shift the direction of the country, they possessed more than enough agency to resist the thinly-veiled appeals put forward by conservative politicians that played to their resentment and fear. Some mobilized to resist this turn, but many willingly aligned themselves with the party that had, for decades, been stridently opposed to their class interests.

As a result, Jefferson Cowie argues, “the blue-collar strategy offered the worst type of identity politics—place of pride but place without economic substance.”<sup>171</sup> The damaging result of the decline of class as a useful analytical category in political discourse, Wendy Brown argues, is that “other markers of social difference may come to bear an inordinate weight; indeed, they may bear all the weight of the sufferings produced by capitalism in addition to that attributable to

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<sup>170</sup> Dennis Deslippe, “‘We Must Bring Together a New Coalition’: The Challenge of Working-Class White Ethnics to Color-Blind Conservatism in the 1970s,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* no. 74 (Fall 2008): 149.

<sup>171</sup> Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*, 160.

the explicitly politicized marking.”<sup>172</sup> The Boston busing crisis provides a powerful demonstration of what this might look like.

#### Race Without Class: The Case of Boston School Desegregation

On June 21, 1974, Judge Arthur Garrity ruled that the Boston School Committee “took many actions in their official capacities with the purpose and intent to segregate the Boston public schools and that such actions caused current conditions of segregation in the Boston public schools.” Further, “in five of the categories of [Boston School Committee’s] activities...the court concludes on the basis of evidence within each category that the defendants were acting with segregative intent.”<sup>173</sup> Judge Garrity continued:

On the issue of whether substantial portions of the system have been intentionally segregated by the defendants, the court concludes that they have. Plaintiffs have proved that the defendants intentionally segregated schools at all levels...built new schools for a decade with size and locations designed to promote segregation; maintained patterns of overcrowding and underutilization which promoted segregation at 26 schools; and expanded the capacity of approximately 40 schools by means of portables and additions when students could have been assigned to other schools with the effect of reducing racial imbalance.<sup>174</sup>

Throughout the 1960s the School Committee had resisted pressure from civil rights activists, state education officials, and federal agencies to come up with effective plans for desegregating the city’s schools. When the BSC once again failed to submit an acceptable plan, Garrity ordered one that had been drawn up by the state board of education to go into effect for the 1974–1975 school year. According to Gregory Coffin, this plan largely reflected the ideas of a nationally renowned desegregation expert, John Finger of the University of Rhode Island, who was unfamiliar with the specific characteristics of Boston neighborhoods.<sup>175</sup> “Its most provocative feature,” Ronald

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<sup>172</sup> Quoted in Cowie, *Staylin’ Alive*, 240.

<sup>173</sup> Tallulah Morgan et al. v. James W. Hennigan, 379 F. Supp. 410 (D. Mass. 1974).

<sup>174</sup> *Morgan v. Hennigan*.

<sup>175</sup> Gregory C. Coffin, “For city’s schools, it’s time to move on with a fair plan,” *Boston Globe*, June 28, 1989.

Formisano argues, “was its pairing of Roxbury High School, in the heart of the black ghetto, with South Boston High, the pride of the Irish-dominated white enclave most associated with hard-core anti-busing passion.”<sup>176</sup> In accordance with the decade’s reluctance to consider class issues as inseparable from racial ones, the first phase of the state plan essentially paired two of the schools least likely to peacefully integrate in a plan that would, for all intents and purposes, be trading low-income white students for low-income black students while also generating significant backlash. Meanwhile, Garrity appointed four court masters to review the state plan as well as proposals from the plaintiffs, the School Department, and various other parties with the goal of devising improvements for the second phase of implementing the court order. It is crucial to point out that Phase II of the plan, which went into effect during the 1975–1976 school year, did attempt to implement more substantive provisions that would, ideally, improve education for all of Boston’s students, including ordering new and renovated facilities, closing unsafe buildings, implementing a redesign of vocational education, the implementation bilingual instruction programs, reformed special education services, the provision of transportation, and the creation of eight magnet schools.<sup>177</sup> But while such provisions were clear attempts to address educational quality in addition to racial segregation, it’s worth noting that they still aligned with the racial liberalism of *Brown v. Board* and were rather limited in terms of political vision, i.e. they continued to exclude transformative or redistributive policies from the range of possible remedies. In addition, the Boston desegregation process was hampered at all stages by a range of factors coming from a variety of sources, and the question of whether Boston’s desegregation was a success or a failure continues to be debated to this day.

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<sup>176</sup> Ronald P. Formisano, *Boston Against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 70.

<sup>177</sup> Robert A. Dentler, “School Desegregation in Boston: A Successful Attack on Racial Exclusion or a Bungle?” *Readings on Equal Education, Volume 12: Civil Rights in Schools* (1994): 28.

Firstly, a variety of scholars have questioned the venerated status of the Supreme Court case from which these desegregation processes sprang: *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. Lani Guinier for example, has argued that with *Brown v. Board*, “the tactic of desegregation became the ultimate goal, rather than the means to secure educational equity.” Further, “the upshot of the inversion of means and end was to redefine equality, not as a fair and just distribution of resources, but as the absence of formal, legal barriers that separated the races.”<sup>178</sup>

Ultimately, Guinier argues that:

*Brown*'s legacy is clouded at least in part because post-World War II racial liberalism influenced the legal engineers to treat the symptoms of racism, not the disease. Their strategy was to eliminate segregation, which they assumed would strike a fatal blow to racialized hierarchies. The lawyers' assumption and its corollary remedial emphasis were limited by the nature of their allies, who wanted to do good without sacrificing any of their own privileges, believing integration was possible without significant resource redistribution.<sup>179</sup>

Similarly, critical race theorist Derrick Bell has argued that “*Brown*...served to reinforce the fiction that, by the decision's rejection of racial barriers posed by segregation, the path of progress would be clear. Everyone can and should make it through individual ability and effort.”<sup>180</sup> By orienting the case around the framework of racial liberalism, which Guinier characterizes as perpetuating a notion of racism that emphasizes individual prejudice over structural inequality or the material foundations of racial inequality, both the NAACP and the Supreme Court established a framework under which future court decisions and desegregation plans would operate—a framework that was limited in its scope and political vision, and that would ultimately severely limit the range of options available to address educational inequality, racial and otherwise. The Supreme Court cases *San Antonio Independent School District v.*

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<sup>178</sup> Lani Guinier, “From Racial Liberalism to Racial Literacy: *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Interest-Divergence Dilemma,” *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 1 (June 2004): 95.

<sup>179</sup> Guinier, “From Racial Liberalism to Racial Literacy,” 99.

<sup>180</sup> Derrick Bell, *Silent Covenants: Brown V. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7, eBook Comprehensive Academic Collection.

*Rodriguez* and *Milliken v. Bradley*, for example, were shaped by both the NAACP's rhetoric and the framework provided by the court's articulation of the *Brown v. Board* decision, and drastically curtailed the ability of school desegregation orders to implement more transformative, redistributive plans.

Just as important to the outcome of Boston's busing ordeal were the actions of the Boston School Committee. As noted earlier in this section, the BSC left a long and rather shameless trail of intentional racial discrimination in their wake, and they were justly found guilty of acting to perpetuate separate and unequal school systems in Boston. They regularly refused to devise their own plans that would meet constitutional requirements, and they consistently sabotaged any attempts to ensure that the busing plan that did get implemented would be responsive to the community's needs, unobtrusive, and effective. They insisted that desegregation would turn Bostonian's lives upside down, would result in violence and disrupted education, and would ultimately "fail," and then they set out to ensure that that was the case. Members of the BSC were able to build political careers out of their positions on the committee, and an important part of building support, for members like Louise Day Hicks and Joe Kerrigan, was pandering to the fears of the constituents and encouraging their continued resistance, despite the fact that they very likely knew that vocal and violent protest had little to no chance of overturning a court ruling.

Thus, a combination of the racial-liberalist desegregation framework instituted by *Brown v. Board* and the actions of the BSC circumscribed the possibilities of school desegregation and virtually ensured that there would be significant backlash and resistance. This means that a full accounting of Boston's busing "crisis" requires an examination of both national trends and court decisions—such as *Milliken v. Bradley*—and more local, Boston-specific circumstances, such as the poverty of South Boston and

the influence of the BSC. Ultimately, it is clear that the way Boston's busing ordeal played out can be understood, at least in part, as a product of the decline of the significance of class in the American political landscape.

To say that the Boston desegregation issue was racially-charged is to put it mildly. "Militant activists," Formisano argues, "too often expressed hostility, or at a minimum, insensitivity to the just demands of black citizens for a full share of their rights. Fear of blacks, specifically of poor ghetto blacks, fed antibusers' feelings of being trodden on, while their outrage at injustice and feelings of powerlessness often fed their hostility to blacks."<sup>181</sup> The *Los Angeles Times* reported that "buses were stoned by white youths" during the first day of the desegregation plan, which resulted in three to five children suffering injuries. Earlier in the day, "about 500 white teen-agers and adults booed and chanted as 56 black children arrived by bus for morning classes."<sup>182</sup> In the first two months of the 1974 school year, the first year of Boston's school desegregation plan, "68 persons—both black and white—have been injured in fistfights and stone-and-bottle throwing frays between students. Two men—both motorists jeered from their cars and beaten—have been hurt seriously. Over the same period, 131 persons have been arrested." In addition, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that "on the first day of busing, a large crowd of Southies gathered outside the gates of South Boston High...members of the crowd began to hurl stones and bottles toward the entering students. The whites taunted them with chants of 'Hey, nigger, hey, nigger,' and a three-foot length of pipe went flying toward the school door."<sup>183</sup> In the country at large, a Harris Survey captured the racially-charged nature of the issue by asking parents who have children bused for reasons unrelated to desegregation what they thought of

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<sup>181</sup> Formisano, *Boston Against Busing*, 4.

<sup>182</sup> "Several Black Children Injured on First Day of Busing in Boston," *Los Angeles Times*, September 12, 1974, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>183</sup> Robert A. Jones, "Boston Busing: 10 Bitter Years of School Woes," *Los Angeles Times*, October 14, 1974, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

busing. “By an overwhelming 9 to 1 margin, parents report that daily busing of their children to school works out highly conveniently,” the report found. However, when asked “Would you favor or oppose busing school children to achieve racial balance?” the numbers were almost the exact opposite: 78% percent opposed, 17% in favor.<sup>184</sup> A writer for the *Boston Globe*, himself an opponent of busing, felt “ill” when he saw “The Ku Klux Klan is Coming” painted on a housing project.<sup>185</sup>

Cultural racism played a significant role in shaping the rhetoric used to oppose school desegregation in general, and was often deployed by the school committee to defend their schools. Louise Hicks, for example, “denied that blacks received an inferior education and pointed instead to blacks’ advantages in having extra expenditure for remedial programs. She argued that the problem was not with the schools but with black pupils who were poorly equipped by their families and culture to learn.”<sup>186</sup> Hicks’s fellow Boston School Committee member William O’Connor expressed similar sentiments, claiming that “We have no inferior education in our schools. What we have been getting is an inferior type of student.”<sup>187</sup> Michael Novak marshalled the same type of cultural racism in a *Wall Street Journal* column in which he argued that “the ‘street culture’ of poor black students is of a different moral and emotional ‘life style’ from that of both middle-class black and white ethnic students. In particular,” Novak continued, “incidences of premarital sexual expression, illegitimate birth, hustling, intimidation, and disruptive behavior are significantly different.”<sup>188</sup> These kinds of arguments were ostensibly

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<sup>184</sup> Louis Harris, “Increasing Controversy Hardens Opinions Against Racial Busing,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 10, 1972, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>185</sup> Jeremiah V. Murphy, “The parental influence is beginning to be felt,” *Boston Globe*, September 19, 1974, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>186</sup> Formisano, *Boston Against Busing*, 30.

<sup>187</sup> Formisano, *Boston Against Busing*, 41.

<sup>188</sup> Michael Novak, “Busing - The Arrogance of Power,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 25, 1975, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

intended to avoid charges of racism, as they asserted out that the problem was cultural, not racial; in Novak's case, he even uses value-neutral language, describing these are mere lifestyle differences, even though it is clear that one group is being condemned as morally deficient in order to bolster the argument against school desegregation. Thus these moral, cultural differences were marshalled as evidence not only of the irrationality of busing but of the moral threat black children posed to white children should busing succeed in desegregating schools.

As with the general discourse surrounding white ethnics, the champions of the group vigorously denied their racism, insisting instead that it was an issue of economic anxiety, or arguing that they were acting out to defend their ethnic enclaves. The notion that the residents of South Boston could be economically anxious *and* racist seemed to escape most observers and commentators. That is a shame, because there were genuine economic concerns with busing as it was implemented in Boston. But the language used by white ethnics and their defenders described desegregation orders as punishment, and their (valid) point that the judges and politicians who handed down desegregation orders lived in all-white suburbs outside the jurisdiction of the orders usually sounded more like “of course you're in favor of segregation-- you don't have to sit next to the blacks at school!” rather than a more nuanced, reasonable argument about the suburbs' status as bastions of class privilege.

Phase I's narrow focus on race did indeed severely curtail its effectiveness, if effectiveness is determined by whether or not educational outcomes were improved. The problem in Boston, as many moderate politicians and members of the media argued, was that the white schools were *also* poorly performing and underfunded. One columnist pointed out, for example, that “it makes little practical sense to desegregate a school when the only thing to be gained by it is the simple numerical mixing of black and white students.” A Boston School Committee member—“easily the most liberal member of the group”—argued that “to assume that you're

going to solve that problem in the North by desegregating poor, urban school systems is incorrect.” She, like many others, both white and black, believed that “any effective plan for desegregated education has to include those suburban communities.”<sup>189</sup>

However, the limitations of the busing plan cannot be laid solely at the feet of Judge Garrity or even the state plan he instructed Boston to implement. Working within the racial liberalist framework instituted by *Brown v. Board*, a slew of Supreme Court decisions dramatically restricted the options available to achieve school desegregation that would also improve educational outcomes for *all* students. *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*, for example, ruled that dramatically unequal funding of school districts was not a violation the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. Justice Thurgood Marshall’s dissenting opinion criticized his fellow justices for deciding that “a State may constitutionally vary the quality of education which it offers its children in accordance with the amount of taxable wealth located in the school districts within which they reside.” This, he declared, was “a retreat from our historic commitment to equality of educational opportunity.” “It is difficult to believe that, if the children of Texas had a free choice, they would choose to be educated in districts with fewer resources, and hence with more antiquated plants, less experienced teachers, and a less diversified curriculum,” Justice Marshall concluded. Perhaps even more damaging to busing plans’ ability to substantively address educational inequality, *Milliken v. Bradley*, decided a mere month after Garrity’s decision, ruled that “a federal court may not impose a multidistrict, area-wide remedy for single-district *de jure* school desegregation violations where there is no finding that the other included school districts have failed to operate unitary school systems...” Thus the burden of proof required to implement metropolitan busing plans was prohibitively high, and the Court’s decision essentially ruled out the inclusion of the suburbs into busing orders, something

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<sup>189</sup> Charles T. Powers, “Boston Busing Strife: Roots Deep in Past,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 16, 1975, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

that would have dramatically improved the outcome of school desegregation actions. Justice William Douglas argued in his dissenting opinion that “when we rule against the metropolitan area remedy, we take a step that will likely put the problems of the blacks and our society back to the period that antedated the ‘separate but equal’ regime of *Plessy v. Ferguson*.” Justice Byron White, who joined Douglas in dissenting, castigated his fellow justices for “[fashioning] out of whole cloth an arbitrary rule that remedies for constitutional violations in a single Michigan school district must stop at the school district line,” despite the fact that “a metropolitan remedy...would more effectively desegregate the Detroit schools, would prevent resegregation, and would be easier and more feasible from many standpoints.” “Apparently,” White pointed out, “no matter how much less burdensome or more effective and efficient in many respects, such as transportation, the metropolitan plan might be, the school district line may not be crossed.”<sup>190</sup>

Nor can the implementation of desegregation as a catchall solution be attributed to the activism of black Bostonian parents. Their organization and agitation for better schools for their children predated the district court’s decision by decades, and their demands only included desegregation when the BSC stubbornly refused to implement or even consider their much more moderate and unburdensome requests, many of which would have improved all of Boston’s schools, not just those in black neighborhoods. In June of 1963, for example, Ruth Batson, a leading figure in black Bostonian parents’ push for improved education for their children, presented a list of fourteen demands to the Boston School Committee. “Nine of the demands were not specific to the black community,” historian Jim Vrabel points out. “They called for improving the curriculum, providing more and better materials, improving teacher training, and increasing maintenance in schools throughout the city.” Four of the remaining demands concerned eliminating the inequality between schools in black neighborhoods and white neighborhoods,

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<sup>190</sup> *Milliken v. Bradley*, 418 U.S. 171 (1974).

while the last demand called for “an immediate public acknowledgment of the existence of De Facto Segregation in the Boston Public School System.”<sup>191</sup> The Committee adamantly rejected the charge, despite all evidence to the contrary. It also became obsessed with the spectre of busing, even though “neither the NAACP, black parents, the state board, nor anyone else was suggesting extensive two-way busing” at the time. Nonetheless, the committee “consistently refused to do simple acts that might have reduced racial imbalance” and “acted as if [busing] was the threat, or if they gave an inch, it soon would be.”<sup>192</sup> During reelection campaigns, anti-busing members of the Boston School Committee, according to the *Boston Globe’s* political editor, “waged a ‘campaign of distortion [so] busing was the issue [even though] Negro leaders never asked the school board to bus Negro students to other sections of the city [but only] that district lines be redrawn and new schools located so as to diminish racial imbalance.’”<sup>193</sup>

Although racist resentments and the deliberate actions of the BSC were of central importance to the busing crisis, the poverty of South Boston was also a crucial factor. In 1974, South Boston had an unemployment rate of 9.9%, higher than both the city of Boston as a whole and the state of Massachusetts more broadly. South Boston’s dropout rate was 12.3%, compared to 6.3% for the rest of the city. South Boston had a higher percentage of residents on social security and public assistance, the median family income was 5% below the city’s average, 22% of South Boston’s population lived in three housing projects, and the South Boston Health Center reported “a high incidence of alcoholism, a growing positive reaction to TB tests, and a high incidence of malnutrition.”<sup>194</sup> South Boston, and similarly-situated Charleston and East Boston,

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<sup>191</sup> Jim Vrabel, *A People’s History of the New Boston* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 52, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>192</sup> Formisano, *Boston Against Busing*, 45.

<sup>193</sup> Vrabel, *A People’s History of the New Boston*, 57.

<sup>194</sup> Alan Lupo, “South Boston-Symbol of Urban Resistance,” *Boston Globe*, June 2, 1974, ProQuest Archiver.

was not facing as dire of a situation as Boston's black neighborhoods, like Roxbury, but the crisis they faced was nonetheless very real and valid.

The descriptions of Southie, which quickly became seen as either a beacon of hope for white ethnics who felt resentful of the changes inflicted on them by wealthy white liberals or a sign of reactionary white backlash to any perceived gains in status made by blacks, tended to either focus on its uniquely Irish ethos *or* its high levels of poverty and deprivation. Such a juxtaposition further suggests that the "ethnic pride" of Boston was at least partially a defense against its residents' bleak economic outlook. For example, an article in the *Los Angeles Times* titled "Boston Busing: 10 Bitter Years of School Woes," started out by noting a sign above the door of South Boston High that read "Little Belfast," then delved into a description of South Boston as a "tough working-class district of frame houses and decaying apartments" where there was a "dogged intransigence of the Irish 'Southies'" and a noticeable "Celtic lilt in the people's voices." "Almost entirely Irish since the days of immigration," the article said, "south Boston has never diluted; it loves and hates with one voice." But aside from the description of the housing, there was no real mention of the fact that South Boston was one of Boston's poorest neighborhoods.<sup>195</sup> Another *Los Angeles Times* article focused on Boston's "uniquely and stubbornly Irish" politics, and noted that the people have South Boston have "the tenacity of their cousins overseas in the Irish Republican Army" in their "[refusal] to let go what they perceive to be their 'traditions' and their last hopes of controlling their lives." Almost entirely absent, however, was a reference to the fact that Boston's wealthy, white suburbs were excluded from the desegregation orders, or that the plans were essentially calling for an exchange of poor black students for poor white ones with little apparent effect on the actual quality of education.<sup>196</sup> Even

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<sup>195</sup> Jones, "Boston Busing."

<sup>196</sup> Charles T. Powers, "Boston's Bleak Future - More Busing," *Los Angeles Times*, July 6, 1976, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

articles that focus on Boston's backwards Irish while also acknowledging the economic component of the situation took a tone that is more condescending than anything else. *Los Angeles Times* reporter Jimmy Breslin, for example, noted that the Boston situation was pitting two impoverished groups against each other, only he referred to them as "doomed." And these "doomed" groups refused to "stop clawing long enough to see that all they accomplish is to make things even easier for the eternal opponents." After describing an expensive private school in a nearby white suburb, he juxtaposed the "relaxed, casual,...articulate" students he encountered with women in Charlestown who "were out in the street saying hail Marys against the opponent most terrible, other poor people." In addition, Breslin described the Irish-Catholic Bostonians as "[steering] away from thinking as if it were a disease."<sup>197</sup> And that was really the ultimate implication of his article—that the impoverished residents of Boston who were caught up in the struggle over desegregation were just too backwards and dumb to realize where their true interests lie.

The concept of Southie "pride" was a recurring theme throughout much of the media rhetoric surrounding the desegregation crisis as it unfolded in South Boston in particular. Southie pride was sometimes associated with a charming but tragic defense of a neighborhood with little to be proud of, and sometimes perceived as a commendable quality characteristic of the resilient Irish Catholics who lived there, but either way, it was clearly framed as something unique to South Boston. One Southie resident interviewed in the *Boston Globe* asserted that "The Irish, particularly, have a strange pride about poverty,"<sup>198</sup> while *The Nation's* Martin Nolan repeatedly characterized Southie as "a place of pride, loyalty and warmth."<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Jimmy Breslin, "In Boston, the Poor Fight the Poor," *Los Angeles Times*, September 14, 1975, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>198</sup> Betty Murphy, "Southie still a home town," *Boston Globe*, September 14, 1969, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>199</sup> Martin F. Nolan, "'Southie' against the world," *Boston Globe*, October 18, 1974, ProQuest Archiver.

On the other hand, an article in the *Washington Post* noted that many of Boston's poor neighborhoods—Italian, Irish, and black—“there are still bad schools, poverty and joblessness and the belching of smokestacks of those factories and shipyards that didn't move away long ago.” Further, it pointed out that “in Irish Charlestown and Italian East Boston”—other neighborhoods eventually brought into the city's desegregation plan—“one in five families makes less than what the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates is necessary to maintain a modest standard of living. In Black Roxbury, nearly one in three families is similarly poor.” Also important to the bigger picture in Boston, “suburbanites have gotten most of the jobs produced by the revival, picking up three of every five new positions...the educated elite lives outside the city except for the relative few who live in the restored downtown neighborhoods. There are no affluent family neighborhoods here...” What *was* missing from the article, however, was the condescension that frequently accompanies depictions of the ethnic neighborhoods as quaint but tragically backwards and uniquely racist. The racism of the white ethnic neighborhoods was not excused, as others had done (as though racism borne out of economic insecurity doesn't count as racism), but an attempt was made to explain it through a thorough description of the neighborhoods' disproportionate poverty.<sup>200</sup>

While BSC members like Louise Day Hicks were the public faces of Boston's busing crisis, it was a true grassroots movement. Formisano calls it a “reactionary populist” movement, meaning that “it sprang from the bottom half of the population, from working-, lower-middle, and middle-class city dwellers who felt their children, neighborhoods, and status to be threatened.” “Most analysts of the Boston school controversy,” Formisano points out, “have given much emphasis to Hicks's role, as if she single-handedly created the white backlash...[but] Hicks was

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<sup>200</sup> Herbert H. Denton, “In Reborn Boston, Race Hatred Still Festers,” *The Washington Post*, December 7, 1980, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

just as much a creature of the backlash as she was one of its creators.”<sup>201</sup> Additionally, “antibusing exuded the same anti-elitism and fierce class resentments that had erupted in...earlier struggles of neighborhood defense.”<sup>202</sup> Those struggles were centered around resistance to urban renewal programs, and allowed working-class Bostonians to flex their political muscle and to develop an understanding of what they could accomplish through dogged loyalty to their neighborhood. These struggles were powerful examples of working-class Bostonian agency, and while many failed to prevent urban development plans from tearing down parts of the neighborhoods, a few were successful.<sup>203</sup> These struggles provided a crucial foundation for Boston’s anti-busing movement.

While the presence of racism in Boston’s anti-busing movement was both obvious and undeniable, the argument that race should be given primacy over class in an analysis of the Boston desegregation crisis, as Jeanne Theoharis claims when she accuses Formisano’s nuanced analysis that gives equal weight to both race and class as “[deemphasizing] the centrality of race and racism in favor of class,”<sup>204</sup> mystifies race by detaching it from its material foundations and ignores the very real suffering of poor white Bostonians. Again, this analysis is not an *excuse*, but an *explanation*, because the alternative is to misunderstand racism as “[operating] independently of economic exploitation [which] not only obscures the cause of inequities,” but engages in a “mystification of race [that] permits no tangible solutions.”<sup>205</sup> Such an understanding of race also precludes the possibility of poor white and poor black Bostonians forming an alliance based on a recognition of their shared oppression at the hands of Boston’s wealthy. An analysis that refuses

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<sup>201</sup> Formisano, *Boston Against Busing*, 29-30.

<sup>202</sup> Formisano, *Boston Against Busing*, 3.

<sup>203</sup> See Vrabel, *A People’s History of the New Boston*.

<sup>204</sup> Jeanne F. Theoharis, “‘We Saved the City’: Black Struggles for Educational Equality in Boston, 1960-1976,” *Radical History Review* 81 (Fall 2001), 63.

<sup>205</sup> Touré F. Reed, “Between Obama and Coates,” *Catalyst* 1, no. 4 (Winter 2018), <https://catalyst-journal.com/vol1/no4/between-obama-and-coates>.

to separate race and class would conclude that white Bostonians' economic precarity was a crucial factor in their violent responses to busing—a violence that took on a distinctly racial angle partially because the language of class was no longer presented as a possible explanation for their declining life chances—and that both white and black Bostonians' *real*, material, economic needs were ignored by the elites in favor of shallow attempts at symbolic integration. Focusing on race over class, however, can only yield a conclusion that Boston whites were—for whatever reason—driven primarily if not solely by an irrational, pathological hatred of blacks.

Such an analysis also discounts the alternative solutions to busing put forward by white Bostonians who were opposed to the district court's decision. I have already noted the argument by the media and more moderate Boston politicians that mere numerical desegregation of equally poor schools would be ineffective and even counterproductive, but the very same white Bostonians who were frequently cast as being motivated solely by an unexplainable, virulent racism had their own reasonable, practical proposals for improving the education of all of Boston's poor. A white South Boston parent who was refusing to participate in the city's busing plan, for example, explained that "if there was a good reason for it—a reason that would mean Michael got a better education, maybe it'd be okay. But this, no. He's being sent to one of the schools that is supposed to be inferior. They say they're busing because some schools are inferior. Well my son is not going to an inferior school. Why should he?" Educational quality, rather than race, was clearly the motivating force behind this parent's rejection of busing. It's entirely possible, of course, that there was a racially-tinged component as well, but his reluctance to send his son to a supposedly inferior school is understandable. Similarly, a South Boston mother whose son was stabbed during one of the violent outbreaks in the schools proposed magnet schools as a solution that would improve educational quality and achieve integration without force. "Magnet schools are supposed to have a special curriculum. They're supposed to offer something that a student would find attractive," Lorraine Faith explained. "Why go to another

place, a place you don't know, to get the same thing you get right here? The magnet schools could change that. Some people—the liberal kind of people—would volunteer to send their children to neighborhood schools outside their own neighborhood schools outside their own neighborhoods strictly for integration purposes. The magnet schools would create vacant seats for these volunteers, and then neighborhood schools and magnet schools could all be integrated without forced busing.” Her daughter supplied a real-world example as evidence that her plan could work. The Occupational Resources Center, Barbara Faith pointed out, was in a black neighborhood, but its programs were “attracting white kids from all over the city” because “there was something there that was worth going for.” Further, she believed that “white kids from Southie High would volunteer to go to English High, too, even though it is predominantly black. It's a new school, they have good programs there, and if a Southie kid wants to go to MIT or some place like that he has a much better chance of getting there from English High than from Southie High.”<sup>206</sup> John Hurley, a lifelong Southie resident and busing opponent, said “students would have been better off had Boston schools been improved in all neighborhoods.”<sup>207</sup> The suggestions of magnet schools and general school improvement would be attempted and implemented in Phase II of the plan, and the fact that some white Bostonians, who opposed Phase I, were arguing in favor of these remedies before the second phase was implemented seems to indicate that white opposition to busing could feasibly be grounded in something other than racism (or could be grounded in something *in addition* to racism).

The argument that opposition to busing was primarily if not solely motivated by racism, and that historical analysis of the issue should reflect that, also discounts the opposition to busing expressed by black parents who argued that the point of integration was improved educational opportunities for their children, not integration for integration's sake. William Raspberry argued

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<sup>206</sup> Charles A. Radin, “The Faiths of South Boston,” *Boston Globe*, December 7, 1974, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>207</sup> Timothy Dwyer, “TV Looks at Southie,” *Boston Globe*, March 16, 1978, ProQuest Archiver.

in the *Washington Post*, for example, that the central issue when it comes to school desegregation is “how to improve to the greatest extent possible the education of our children,” and pointed out that “aside from the leadership of the NAACP, it is hard to find black Americans who consider racial integration *per se* as of overwhelming importance.”<sup>208</sup> A black mother in North Carolina explained to the *Wall Street Journal* that “black people didn’t ask for busing. We didn’t ask for the white kids in the black schools. We asked for equal schools, equal facilities, equal everything.” The same article noted that a 1978 nationwide survey found that “43% of blacks opposed busing and 42% approved it.”<sup>209</sup> Black Boston families were similarly ambivalent, indicating support for busing *if* it achieved quality education, but they were largely convinced that the conditions in South Boston would make that highly unlikely.<sup>210</sup> Law professor Derrick Bell had similar critiques of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court case that started it all. While working for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund in 1976, Bell argued that his clients’ “aims for better schooling for their children no longer meshed with integrationist ideals.” He believed that “civil rights lawyers were misguided in requiring racial balance of each school’s student population as the measure of compliance and the guarantee of effective schooling” and “urged that educational equity rather than integrated idealism was the appropriate goal.”<sup>211</sup>

A busing plan that “offered elites an important means of exercising social control over poor and working-class whites as well as a means of dominating or disadvantaging blacks,” combined with a growing political discourse that emphasized individual, identity-based rights over redistributive policies, collective material gains, or class analysis, meant that the poor whites

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<sup>208</sup> William Raspberry, “The Goal Is Fairness, Not Busing,” *The Washington Post*, January 6, 1975, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>209</sup> Anthony Ramirez, “Mixed Emotions: Charlotte’s Blacks View Nine Years of Bussing As a ‘Necessary Evil,’” *Wall Street Journal*, November 6, 1979, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>210</sup> Francis Ward, “Boston Blacks Shaken, Angry, Deeply Divided,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 28, 1975, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>211</sup> Bell, *Silent Covenants*, 4.

of Boston increasingly saw their situation in purely racial terms. “Although working-class whites initially saw this ‘experiment in interracial education’ in class terms,” Guinier points out, “a racially polarized contest was easily manufactured using antebellum conceptions of race and class that had crystallized under segregation.” Now “lacking a vocabulary of either class or structure,” they took their frustration and resentment out on their fellow victims.<sup>212</sup> “Racism normalizes these racialized hierarchies,” Guinier argues. “It diverts attention from the unequal distribution of resources and power they perpetuate. Using race as a decoy offers short-term psychological advantages to poor and working-class whites, but it also masks how much poor whites have in common with poor blacks and other people of color.”<sup>213</sup> Formisano reaches a similar conclusion, noting that “radical critics of desegregation” have argued that:

...school desegregation has been incomplete and floundering not only because most white Americans do not want it, but also because it is intended by elite decisionmakers to be incomplete. Elites make choices...that result in a little desegregation for nonelites but avoid subjecting society to fair and universal integration. If pushed too far, desegregation would undermine ‘the hidden but pervasive class structure’ and would attack not only the precarious position of poor whites—as it usually does not—but also the privileges of rich whites.<sup>214</sup>

Thus the way in which the 1970s emphasis on shallow, symbolic politics in place of substantive analysis of economic status, material conditions, or structural power relationships contributed to the “identity politics of the dominant”—an increasing focus on perceived or felt white victimization—became painfully clear during Boston’s school desegregation ordeal.

#### Conclusion: The Aggrieved White Working-Class Underdog

We are, unfortunately, still living with the consequences of the disappearance of class from American political discourse. By reorienting articulations of injustice away from material

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<sup>212</sup> Guinier, “From Racial Liberalism to Racial Literacy,” 105.

<sup>213</sup> Guinier, “From Racial Liberalism to Racial Literacy,” 114.

<sup>214</sup> Formisano, *Boston Against Busing*, 232.

conditions, structural power, or calls for substantive, redistributive justice and toward individualistic, identity-focused rights (and the shallow, empty symbolic politics that frequently accompanies this orientation), this development limited the effectiveness of the civil rights movement and contributed in no small way to the collapse of the New Deal coalition, the rise of the New Right, the decline of unionization, and the increasing prominence of white identity politics. With no framework with which to understand or articulate their declining quality of life with regard to class position or the structural power wielded by elites—white and black, Catholic and Protestant, ethnic and non-ethnic—the white working-class came to understand themselves as victimized purely by virtue of being white. And given the almost total association of working-class status with masculinity, they also came to understand their victimhood as a product of their specific white (ethnic) maleness.

Building off of this exploration of the way class, race, and gender dynamics interacted and played out in Boston in the broader context of the 1970s, the next chapter will examine the media's framing of the Boston Celtics, both in Boston and across the country, as a bastion of a distinctly white, working-class notion of masculinity. The Celtics were upheld as the ultimate Great White Hopes, a reminder of the power and virtue of white, working-class male virtues, especially in a league (and world) increasingly dominated by lazy blacks who “had it made.”

## Chapter 2: “Motherhood, apple pie and the Boston Celtics”

“On top of all the other things the Boston Celtics have going for them, there exists a highly-emotional quality, a mystique that possesses the hearts and drives every man in Kelly green and white to the utmost,” Thom Greer wrote for the Chicago Sun-Times in 1976. “They refer to it reverently as Celtic Pride. You can’t see it. You can’t touch it. You can’t take it to the bank. But the words become meaningful once you enter the rickety, old Boston Garden and walk into the shadows cast by the 12 National Basketball Assn. championship flags which are strung across the ceiling.”<sup>215</sup> That Greer’s adoring words were published in multiple rival cities’ newspapers is a strong indicator of exactly how powerful the legend of the Boston Celtics was, how widely revered the Celtics, their tradition, and their “style” were. Teams from every corner of the country fully bought into the “Celtics mystique” (one paper reported that “Tradition seeping from the Boston Garden rafters put the Denver Nuggets in awe”<sup>216</sup>), but none more than the Celtics themselves. Paul Silas, a forward widely considered to epitomize the Celtic spirit, admitted that he didn’t buy it at first. ““It was something you heard a lot about at first and found amusing,” Silas said. ‘But when I got here, I found it wasn’t a myth. It’s part of this club. The Celtics are different.’”<sup>217</sup> John Havlicek, the player who likely embodied the Celtics’ values more than any other player on the roster, declared them to be “a team with a great deal of pride,”<sup>218</sup> and insisted that “We’ve always been a close team and there has been no hassling. We have no clicks and everybody gets along with each other. It’s been that way for as long as I’ve been here.”<sup>219</sup> Additionally, Havlicek’s “fiery” counterpart, Dave Cowens, was said to be attempting to “rebuild

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<sup>215</sup> Thom Greer, “Pride Is Key to Celtics’ Success,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 27, 1976, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>216</sup> “Nuggets dumbstruck by Boston Celtics, Garden,” *Biddeford-Saco Journal*, November 20, 1976.

<sup>217</sup> Greer, “Pride is Key to Celtics’ Success.”

<sup>218</sup> Thomas Rogers, “Havlicek, Cowens Get 28 Each in 96-87 Victory,” *New York Times*, May 8, 1974, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>219</sup> Larry Whiteside, “Hondo: Like a bridge over troubled waters, he has carried the Celtics through...,” *Boston Globe*, December 30, 1973, ProQuest Archiver.

the Celtics in the image of their former selves, when talk of a 41-41 record would have been disgraceful to the team's honor"<sup>220</sup> during his brief tenure as player-coach.

The nostalgia and emphasis on tradition, history, and established ways of doing things demonstrated by Cowens's coaching approach are perhaps the most common themes that run throughout media discourse surrounding "Celtics pride." Teams were consistently held up to and measured against teams of the past, and the idea of adapting team strategy and style to a rapidly changing game was a foreign concept that would likely be received with no small amount of hostility. Coaches, players, and the general manager were consistently referred to as "throwbacks" to simpler, more conservative eras, when the values the Celtics held in such high regard were much more commonplace. If the team did well, they were regularly seen as living up to the standards set by past teams rather than moving the team forward into the future.

Of equal importance to the Celtic mystique is the Celtics' style of play—a style that is widely regarded to be a distinctly "white" style. Compared to the "black" style, the juxtaposition usually was articulated as "the city game and the noncity game," "one-on-one play versus team play, individualism versus conformity, finesse versus muscle."<sup>221</sup> Of course not *all* white players played "white" basketball and not *all* black players played "black" basketball—in fact, the existence of players who could be framed as adopting the values of the style opposite their race was essential to maintaining the ostensibly color-blindness of this dichotomy. The racial connotations were very, *very* thinly veiled, however, and many spoke openly about "white" versus "black." Nonetheless, the Celtics, with their emphasis on teamwork, passing, and strong defense, were believed to be one of the finest examples of the "white" style of basketball.

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<sup>220</sup> Paul Attner, "An Image of Celtic Past Guides Cowens in Task," *Washington Post*, November 22, 1978, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>221</sup> David DuPree, "It's City Finesse Vs. Hard Workers," *Washington Post*, February 8, 1978, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

The goal of this chapter is not to dispute the existence of these distinct styles of basketball, but rather to suggest that the moral values associated with them had distinctly racialized connotations. Further, by examining the sports media's role in establishing and perpetuating the discourse surrounding the juxtaposition of these styles during a difficult transition decade in the NBA's history, I argue that sportswriters and their publications presented a distinctly mediated image of the players and teams, thus perpetuating damaging racial stereotypes that continue to belittle and demean the achievements of black athletes. Ultimately, my contention is not to deny the fact that some players had different styles than others, but that the specific language used to frame these styles and present them to the sports-watching public both reinforced racial stereotypes *and* attached moral judgments to those styles.

Racialized conceptions of gender are also an essential component of understanding the media framing, as the notion of "masculinity" is by no means universal or distinct from class or racial considerations. With a political climate that was purporting to value blue-collar men while simultaneously turning their class identity into a cultural identity that could be flexibly applied and discarded when convenient and an economy that was making everyday existence increasingly difficult for such workers, the media framed white basketball players as hard-working, gritty, tough, and dependent upon overcoming pain, and thus conceptualized an increasingly black sport in a way that valorized white working-class masculine values and held them up as a moral safeguard against the threat of lazy, spoiled black basketball players who threatened to take over the league with their flashy moves and disdain for teamwork.

This framing of white basketball was particularly potent and notable in Boston. Given the racially charged atmosphere of 1970s Boston, the loss of blue-collar jobs, the rise of the women's movement, and the apparent growing power of blacks—achievable thanks to the special advantages given to them by the government—the Boston Celtics and their astonishing success in

a league increasingly dominated by black players, both numerically and stylistically, were held up as an undeniable example of the ability of white, working-class masculine values to achieve success in a confusing, chaotic, threatening world. And with the decline of a class-based politics grounded in the material reality of the working-class and the subsequent rise of white identity politics, this media framing was particularly appealing as a psychological salve for white working-class men who saw themselves as being on the losing side of the changes to society brought about by the cultural, political, and social revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s.

### Celtics Pride: Nostalgia and the Shaping of a Boston Tradition

Any account of the development of the notion of “Celtics Pride” must go back to the 1960s, when the team won the championship title nine times, seven of them consecutively (ten times, eight of them consecutively if you include 1959). A 1974 *Los Angeles Times* article claimed that “the Celtics ruled the league in the 1960s in possibly the greatest dynasty in pro sports history.”<sup>222</sup> In 1969, it was said that the 1960s Celtics “have dominated pro basketball...like the New York Yankees did in baseball.”<sup>223</sup> Another article called them “the team that has always meant basketball.”<sup>224</sup>

The team was lead by such Hall of Famers as Bob Cousy and Bill Russell, and the latter later became the first black coach of a professional sports team in the United States. The *Los Angeles Times* called him “the king of basketball, a man who has dominated this sport more than any other major league professional sports star since anyone can remember.”<sup>225</sup> He was a five-time league MVP, a 12-time All-Star, and has had the NBA Finals MVP trophy named after him.

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<sup>222</sup> “Celtics Ponder Strategy,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 26, 1974, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>223</sup> Mal Florence, “Lakers Coach Impressed But Not Awed by Celtics,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 22, 1969, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>224</sup> Bob Verdi, “Celtics flying high on wings of a Bird,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 11, 1979, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>225</sup> Mal Florence, “Lakers Rally Too Late and Too Short,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 6, 1969, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

Cousy, called “Mr. Basketball” at Boston Garden, was a 13-time All-Star and the first president of the National Basketball Players Association.

It was during this decade, under the leadership of Cousy, Russell, and coach Red Auerbach, that the values and style of the Celtics came to take on a mythical aspect. The *Boston Globe* argued in 1977 that Celtic players were “governed by a set of values popularized in the 1960s,”<sup>226</sup> while a letter to the editor published in the *Globe* explained that “the Celtic fast-breaking, defensive style of play was molded long ago” and that it “survives from a dynasty of Celtic supremacy through the revolutionary genius of Auerbach.”<sup>227</sup> In the post-1960s era, a sportswriter asserting that the team “looked like the Celtics of the Bill Russell-dynasty” was one of the highest compliments imaginable.<sup>228</sup> Meanwhile, player-coach Dave Cowens saw the Celtics’ “long winning tradition” as “an emotional rudder for him during his first seven seasons in Boston, a kind of psychic automatic pilot. ‘Anytime you have a tradition like the Celtics have,’ he says, ‘you get so you do things without question, because that’s the way they’ve always been done. It’s like a religion.’”<sup>229</sup>

The nostalgia for a romanticized past carried throughout the decade, especially when the team started to sharply decline in the late 1970s. One sportswriter declared that “the Old Celtics are dead,” and mourned the fact that “in the very recent past, being a Celtic meant hating to lose and vowing to make the next opponent pay. Now it means saying, ‘That’s the way it goes,’ or the equivalent.”<sup>230</sup> Another complained that the changes in the NBA “threaten to make the old Celtics and men like Auerbach anachronisms.” “The Celtics are a special team, with a special history,”

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<sup>226</sup> Larry Whiteside, “This myth dies hard,” *Boston Globe*, December 2, 1977, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>227</sup> “The Fan’s View,” *Boston Globe*, May 19, 1974, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>228</sup> Mal Florence, “Celtics 119-111 Winners, Sweep Laker Series,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 10, 1973, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>229</sup> Bruce Newman, “Boston is Winging Once More,” *Sports Illustrated*, December 3, 1979, 22.

<sup>230</sup> Ray Fitzgerald, “Remember when you couldn’t wait to see Celtics? Not now,” *Boston Globe*, January 15, 1979, ProQuest Archiver.

the article declared.<sup>231</sup> Havlicek explained the team's sorry state as the result of a lack of patience and discipline. "That's something that Celtic teams have always had," he explained.<sup>232</sup> *Boston Globe* sportswriter Ray Fitzgerald wondered "where were the Celtics we've come to know, those poised, patient characters who withstood fire and famine, pestilence, disease and the loose ball foul with such coolness that they became the standard for NBA excellence?"<sup>233</sup> The *Globe's* Bob Ryan declared that "for over 20 years the Celtics have stood for something. The only thing they stand for now is the anthem,"<sup>234</sup> and complained in October of 1978 that "there hasn't been a real Celtics performance" since April of the previous year.<sup>235</sup>

As these examples demonstrate, there was little to no discussion of moving the Celtics forward, of adapting to the new styles and demographic changes that were shaping the league. The Celtics were constantly being compared to teams of the past, and discussion of how to improve the team almost always centered around rediscovering the old ways and old values. Jeffrey Lane argues that this kind of rhetoric and media framing was indicative of an omnipresent "white nostalgia," a "rampant paranoia that white society has relinquished too much." By constantly comparing the current team the legendary, mythical Celtics of old, the media—and the players, coaches, and administrators—were applying white nostalgia to the realm of basketball, where it "manifests itself both as a sentimental sense of bewildered deprivation ('What happened to the white guys?') and an impassioned devotion to the fair-skinned few who hold the key to white inclusion and the preservation of control."<sup>236</sup> The anxieties expressed by working-class

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<sup>231</sup> "Selling the Celtics," *Boston Globe*, July 5, 1978, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>232</sup> Larry Whiteside, "Havlicek: No longer No. 1, he'll fill any role to help team win," *Boston Globe*, November 9, 1977, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>233</sup> Ray Fitzgerald, "Celtics' poise misplaced," *Boston Globe*, May 12, 1975, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>234</sup> Bob Ryan, "Celtics: No offense, no defense, no nuthin'," *Boston Globe*, November 11, 1977, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>235</sup> Bob Ryan, "Celtics have talent but not a team—yet," *Boston Globe*, October 29, 1978, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>236</sup> Lane, *Under the Boards*, 115.

white Bostonians over the changing values and political climate discussed in the previous chapter intersected with a storied team that epitomized “white basketball” and produced a powerful nostalgia laced with resentment and bitterness. “True Bostonians,” Lane explains, “love throwback players—those who offer a glimpse of an earlier time—precisely because of this romance with the past.”<sup>237</sup>

The values supposedly embodied by the Celtics—and the “white” style of basketball— included “unselfishness, cooperation, hard work, intelligence, and defense.”<sup>238</sup> The *Boston Globe* frequently spoke of “those little intangibles that are reputed to make up Celtic pride” like “desire, determination, and...concentration.”<sup>239</sup> *Globe* sports reporter Bob Ryan frequently commented on the teams’ all-out enthusiasm and sometimes borderline-reckless efforts to win at all costs. “Say what you will about the efficiency of the Old Celtics,” he wrote, “what people most liked about those teams was the nightly effort. The willingness to get dirty instantly makes a player popular in Boston.”<sup>240</sup> The *New York Times* attributed the Celtics’ winning ways to their “hard work and stirring display of team talent,”<sup>241</sup> while *Sports Illustrated* was impressed by the team’s balance and selflessness. “Through last Saturday, Boston led the Atlantic Division with a record of 41 and 18, second-best in the NBA,” they reported in a 1975 article titled “A Green Machine With Six Gears.” “Yet not one Celtic is among the top five in rebounds, assists or steals. And you have to go far down the list of scorers before you’ll find Havlicek, the Celtics’ top point maker. Everybody scores, everybody rebounds, everybody steals, everybody has assists.”<sup>242</sup> This was a particular point of pride for the Celtics and their adoring fans in the media. “On the great Boston

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<sup>237</sup> Lane, *Under the Boards*, 120.

<sup>238</sup> Colás, *Ball Don’t Lie*, 65.

<sup>239</sup> John Powers, “The Celtics’ task: Pride in that green jersey just may be the key factor,” *Boston Globe*, April 10, 1977, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>240</sup> Bob Ryan, “Without Havlicek, it’s different game,” *Boston Globe*, December 31, 1978, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>241</sup> Rogers, “Havlicek, Cowens Get 28 Each in 96-87 Victory.”

<sup>242</sup> Pat Putnam, “A Green Machine With Six Gears,” *Sports Illustrated*, March 3, 1975, 21.

teams, there were always a number of players who, on their own merit, would have had trouble lasting long enough in the NBA to collect a pension,” the *Washington Post* reported in 1978. “But in a green-and-white uniform, folks like Jim Loscutoff, Tom Sanders, K.C. Jones and Don Chaney were transformed into semistars because they were never asked to do more than they were capable.”<sup>243</sup>

These descriptions of the “Celtic spirit” are completely consistent with historical descriptions of white teams, styles, and players, regardless of the sport. Laurel Davis and Othello Harris’s overview of the academic literature addressing racial representation in US sports media finds that white players are regularly defined by their hard work, mental astuteness, leadership, and their ability to be a team player, for example,<sup>244</sup> while Adam J. Criblez notes in “White Men Playing a Black Man’s Game: Basketball’s ‘Great White Hopes’ of the 1970s” that they were “praised for displaying unquantifiable attributes like hustle, heady play, and teamwork to overcome physical limitations.”<sup>245</sup> Patrick B. Miller makes similar arguments in “The Anatomy of Scientific Racism: Racialist Responses to Black Athletic Achievement,” pointing out that the “racialized view of excellence defined the physical accomplishments of Europeans in terms of diligence and forethought, the application of the mind...to the movements of the body,”<sup>246</sup> and John Hoberman argues in *Darwin’s Athletes* that white athletes are routinely associated with “attributes such as mental dexterity, integrity, tenacity, and willpower.”<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> Attner, “An Image of Celtic Past Guides Cowens in Task.”

<sup>244</sup> Laurel R. Davis and Othello Harris, “Race and Ethnicity in US Sports Media,” in *MediaSport*, ed. Lawrence Wenner (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1998), 159.

<sup>245</sup> Adam J. Criblez, “White Men Playing a Black Man’s Game: Basketball’s ‘Great White Hopes’ of the 1970s,” *Journal of Sport History* 42, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 372.

<sup>246</sup> Miller, “The Anatomy of Scientific Racism,” 125.

<sup>247</sup> John Hoberman, *Darwin’s Athletes: How Sport Has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1997), 50.

Related to this popular rhetoric surrounding white athletes is the idea that they are lacking in natural athletic ability—hence, the importance of things like hard work, dedication, and determination. They are presented as crucial to white athletic ability, as these athletes have genetic athletic deficiencies to compensate for in order to remain competitive. White basketball player Mike Riordan, for example, was described by another player as “probably the player with the least amount of natural talent who ever made it in the league.”<sup>248</sup> White Celtics players Dave Cowens and Larry Bird were similarly described as possessing one athletic deficiency or another, and the way in which this deficiency was framed as a moral virtue will be discussed in later sections.

The notion of white athletic inferiority was dependent upon its opposite—the notion of black athletic superiority. This was nearly always framed as innate, biological ability that black athletes were born with, and thus did not have to work for, and was closely related to popular definitions of the “black style” of basketball. The *Washington Post* described “black” basketball as possessing “soul” or “pizzazz,”<sup>249</sup> and argued that “style and flair [was] the most important thing” to this style. “If it looks good and feels good and the fans like it, then do it. It is a game of improvisation. The emphasis is on the individual. Everyone can leap and everyone can run.”<sup>250</sup> Philadelphia 76ers center Darryl Dawkins, a player and team widely considered to fully embody the “black” style, defined it as “the city guys vs. the country guys.” “The city guys have a lot more moves,” Dawkins explained. “They know how to razzle-dazzle the crowd, go between their legs with the ball, slam-dunk and get nice.”<sup>251</sup> Others have described the black style, as defined in the sports media, as emphasizing “physical prowess, natural talent, selfishness, laziness, and

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<sup>248</sup> Criblez, *Tall Tales and Short Shorts*, 84.

<sup>249</sup> John Schulian and David DuPree, “The Black Majority: The Game Adjusts to a New Reality,” *Washington Post*, February 1, 1976, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>250</sup> DuPree, “It’s City Finesse Vs. Hard Workers.”

<sup>251</sup> “City Vs. Country,” *Boston Globe*, March 10, 1978, ProQuest Archiver.

egotism.”<sup>252</sup> The combination of unthinking instinct, flair for the dramatic, emphasis on individual achievement, and unmatched physical prowess were thought to be the keys to the successful practice of “black” basketball.

There are, of course, multiple problems with the black basketball-white basketball dichotomy and the way it was used to frame players and teams in the sports media, but the primary issue was that it became inseparable from moral judgments and that it reinforced long-standing black stereotypes while simultaneously entertaining ideas derived from scientific racism. Again, the point here is not that players developed and practiced different styles of playing, but that those styles were presented as distinctly racialized and were not, in any way, presented as of equal moral worth. One particularly notable example featured the *Washington Post*’s Paul Attner describing the two styles as comparable to Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. “Dr. Fundamental tells him to play the game as simply and efficiently as possible,” Attner explained. “Nothing fancy, please. Just get the job done economically by utilizing the talents of your teammates.” On the other hand, “Mr. Flair is handing out a different message. Toss in a little pizzazz, please. Mix in a spin move or maybe a little Ali shuffle or a few behind-the-back dribbles. And don’t just do a plainlayup; make it a dunk so the fans will ooh and ah.”<sup>253</sup> Alternative framings were always possible, but at a time when TV coverage was still marginal, sports fans relied heavily upon the sports press to interpret and explain the games, players, and happenings to them. These framings invoked, perpetuated, and shaped long-standing racial stereotypes about both whites and blacks and reified the idea of distinct biological races with measurable differences.

In 1971, *Sports Illustrated* ran a now-notorious article titled “An Assessment of ‘Black is Best’” in which Martin Kane explored a variety of theories and explanations—some sociological,

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<sup>252</sup> Colás, *Ball Don’t Lie*, 65.

<sup>253</sup> Paul Attner, “Layup vs. Slam-Dunk: Two Ways to the Hoop,” *Washington Post*, February 11, 1978, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

but mostly scientific—for the dominance of black athletes in sports. “It is clear that the black community in the US is not just contributing more than its share of participants to sport. It is contributing immensely more than its share of stars,” Kane posited. Further, he argued that “there is an increasing body of scientific opinion which suggests that physical differences in the races might well have enhanced the athletic potential of the Negro in certain events.” The possible scientific explanations covered in the article include the assertion that blacks have “a shorter trunk, a more slender pelvis, longer arms (especially forearms) and longer legs (especially from the knees down),” that “his bones are denser, and therefore heavier, than those of whites,” that “he has more muscle in the upper arms and legs, less in the calves,” that “his fat distribution is patterned differently from that of the white man—leaner extremities but not much difference in the trunk,” that “the black man’s adrenal glands...are larger than the white man’s,”<sup>254</sup> that black athletes have hyperextensibility, that blacks have “more tendon and less muscle than white,” that “the black man’s heel doesn’t protrude as much and his leg and foot give him tremendous leverage for jumping,” and that black athletes “have a distinctive ability to relax under pressure.”<sup>255</sup> The sheer number and variety of the suggested scientific explanations alone renders them absurd, but the ideas were largely developed and put forward by academics and were published in well-respected publications. *Ebony* magazine ran a similar in-depth article in 1974, titled “Are Black Athletes Naturally Superior?” “Just about everybody—scholars, coaches, the athletes themselves, and guys in the barber shops and pool halls—talk about the phenomenon,” author Bill Rhoden wrote, “and there are those who have tried to ‘analyze’ and ‘explain’ it: *just why is there so much black excellence in so many sports?*”<sup>256</sup> The author cited scientists who made claims similar to those in the *Sports Illustrated* article, while also including the perspective

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<sup>254</sup> Martin Kane, “An Assessment of Black is Best,” *Sports Illustrated*, January 18, 1971, 74.

<sup>255</sup> Kane, “An Assessment of Black is Best,” 75.

<sup>256</sup> Bill Rhoden, “Are Black Athletes Naturally Superior?,” *Ebony*, December 1, 1974, 136-38.

of the black professor of sociology and academic of sport Harry Edwards. He explained that “‘innate capacity’ ‘implies that blacks need only exercise their innate physical abilities to become successful athletes.’” Further, “‘by being physically inferior, whites lose nothing,’ says Edwards. ‘Any number of *animals* are physically superior to whites. On the other hand, technology has made intellectual capabilities the highest-priced commodity on the market today.’” Even worse, he believed that black acceptance (and sometimes even celebration of) the theory of innate black athletic superiority can “‘inadvertently [accept] an ideology that has rationalized the existence of slavery, degradation, and general racial oppression.’”<sup>257</sup> Additionally, both articles included experts who described these supposed innate, natural abilities as special advantages, invoking language remarkably similar to that used to attack affirmative action policies for blacks.

Aside from the inherently problematic invocation of racial science, this kind of rhetoric “[discounts] the hard work and discipline, as well as the creativity” necessarily exhibited by black athletes in their pursuit of athletic excellence.<sup>258</sup> As David K. Wiggins points out in his article “‘Great Speed But Little Stamina:’ The Historical Debate Over Black Athletic Superiority,” “the implication in any discussion of black athletic superiority was that blacks achieved success in sport by virtue of their naturally endowed physical skills and not through hard work, sacrifice, self-discipline, and other admirable character traits.”<sup>259</sup> This supposedly scientific explanation for black athletic achievement, Wiggins argues, was not at all a stretch for whites to believe, given that “the dominant culture’s stereotype of blacks was traditionally opposite to the protestant ethic.”<sup>260</sup> Yago Colás examines this dynamic at work in the media’s perpetuation of the “Myth of the Rivalry”—the supposed competition between Bill Russell and Wilt Chamberlain, two

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<sup>257</sup> Rhoden, “Are Black Athletes Naturally Superior?,” 142.

<sup>258</sup> Miller, “Anatomy of Scientific Racism,” 120.

<sup>259</sup> David K. Wiggins, “‘Great Speed But Little Stamina:’ The Historical Debate Over Black Athletic Superiority,” *Journal of Sport History* 16, no. 2 (Summer 1989): 165.

<sup>260</sup> Wiggins, “Great Speed But Little Stamina,” 182.

extraordinary black basketball players. Demonstrating the flexibility and political usefulness of the juxtaposition between cerebral white basketball and physical black basketball, Colás argues that Russell was framed by the media as exemplifying the characteristics of the “white” style in order to “[allow] the white basketball unconscious simultaneously to accept and to deny that a racial, stylistic, and tactical revolution had taken place in basketball.”<sup>261</sup> More to the point, “The Rivalry” relied upon reducing Chamberlain’s considerable skill and numerous achievements to his size and “supposedly *natural* physical talent,” thereby solidifying his reputation as lazy and lacking work ethic.<sup>262</sup>

John Hoberman makes the crucial point that “stereotypes of black athletic superiority are now firmly established as the most recent version of a racial folklore that has spread across the face of the earth over the past two centuries, and a corresponding belief in white athletic inferiority pervades popular thinking about racial difference. Such ideas about the ‘natural’ physical talents of dark-skinned peoples, and the media-generated images that sustain them,” he argues, “probably do more than anything else in our public life to encourage the idea that blacks and whites are biologically different in a meaningful way.”<sup>263</sup> Ultimately, Hoberman claims that “sport functions as a principal medium in which racial folklore flourishes.”<sup>264</sup> Similarly, Miller describes the media and the general public’s continued obsession with explaining and accounting for black athletic excellence as “pernicious as well as foolish if conceived as measures of innate racial difference”<sup>265</sup> and argues that through sports, “the discourse of innate and immutable racial difference still looms large in the popular consciousness.”<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>261</sup> Colás, *Ball Don’t Lie*, 67.

<sup>262</sup> Colás, *Ball Don’t Lie*, 58.

<sup>263</sup> Hoberman, *Darwin’s Athletes*, xiv.

<sup>264</sup> Hoberman, *Darwin’s Athletes*, xv.

<sup>265</sup> Miller, “The Anatomy of Scientific Racism,” 123.

<sup>266</sup> Miller, “The Anatomy of Scientific Racism,” 140.

The other problem was that these racialized conceptions of different styles of basketball were not described in value-neutral terms. Instead, they were deeply imbued with moral judgments that are embedded within the Western intellectual tradition. Miller, for example, argues that “the insistent contrast between body and mind within the Western tradition renders black physicality as a kind of compensation for the absence of cerebral qualities and the traits of a purportedly advanced, or advancing, culture,”<sup>267</sup> and Colás claims that this tradition “stretches backwards from the seventeenth-century French philosopher René Descartes through medieval Christian theologians to the Greek philosopher Plato.” In this tradition, Colás argues, “the dominant position has been to consider the mind more important than the body.”<sup>268</sup> Similarly, with the media’s framing of “white” basketball, “defense...becomes the primary site of moral virtue in basketball, the place where differences in putatively natural talent can be leveled by the virtues of hustle, effort, and hard work.”<sup>269</sup>

The frustration expressed in the sports media, and by those involved in the league, over the perceived changes to the NBA (and to the Celtics) that took place throughout the 1970s capture the moral judgments attached to differing styles very clearly. Celtics general manager Red Auerbach, for example, in a 1977 column he wrote for the *Chicago Tribune*, complained that “by and large, we’re seeing an erosion of basic values—things like pride and integrity and dedication—and this upsets me tremendously. You can talk all you want about new breeds and changing lifestyles and the rest of it. But damn it, some things should never change. They should not be allowed to change.”<sup>270</sup> In 1979, at the nadir of one of the Celtics’ worst seasons ever, the *Boston Globe* went all-in on the team, calling the season as a whole “sad, and occasionally

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<sup>267</sup> Miller, “The Anatomy of Scientific Racism,” 121.

<sup>268</sup> Colás, *Ball Don’t Lie*, 57.

<sup>269</sup> Colás, *Ball Don’t Lie*, 58.

<sup>270</sup> Arnold ‘Red’ Auerbach, “Pride, integrity spurred Celtics,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 17, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

pathetic” and calling the previous night’s game “the single darkest hour in the club’s history” and a “reprehensible affair.” Further, the team was characterized as “morally bankrupt” and “a parody of a professional sports team.”<sup>271</sup> Another article in the *Globe* mourned the loss of the team that was “built on 1960s values of teamwork, discipline and unselfishness” and lamented the fact that “it is now full of 1977-style players, overpaid, often thinking of themselves first and the kind of money available; players who many nights lack the kind of desire and dedication of previous eras.”<sup>272</sup> One particularly harsh Bob Ryan article castigated the Celtics for “[taking] 21 years worth of class and [tossing] it into the incinerator.” “Where once a group of inspired professionals dedicated to winning roamed,” Ryan declared, “there now exists a pathetic collection of self-centered All-Americans, just like those on practically every other team.” “Of course, the Celtics won those 13 championships because they knew the value of defense,” he continues, “which this team apparently thinks is something that surrounds de yard.”<sup>273</sup> The fact that these media condemnations were particularly dramatic and imbued with moral judgment is closely related to the city’s reverence for “Celtic Pride,” for the traditions and spirit and mystique of the team that brought so many championships to the city through their emphasis on working-class values like hard work and grit. But nonetheless, this rhetoric makes it clear that a team that lacked those values associated with “white” basketball—and demonstrated those associated with “black” basketball—were not merely seen as athletically deficient but morally deficient as well.

The following sections of this chapter will develop these themes in a more concrete manner, by examining the racial climate in Boston sports, media framing of particular Celtic players, and the Philadelphia 76ers, the Celtics’ rivals and stylistic opposite, and finally, the

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<sup>271</sup> Bob Ryan, “Celtics’ pride goeth before their 160-117 fall,” *Boston Globe*, March 10, 1979, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>272</sup> Larry Whiteside, “Fire Heihnsohn? It would be fairer to give him a big raise,” *Boston Globe*, May 13, 1977, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>273</sup> Ryan, “Celtics: No offense, no defense, no nuthin’.”

arrival of Larry Bird. By placing the sports media's description of these players, teams, and events in the broader political, cultural, social, and economic contexts of the 1970s in general and Boston in particular, the following sections will make clear the ways in which this media discourse can operate as part of a racial project responding to and addressing the anxieties of white, working-class men.

### "Up South": The Racial Sport Climate in Boston

A full understanding of how and why the media framed the Boston Celtics and its players the way they did necessitates a brief examination of the intersection between the racial tensions of 1970s Boston and its sports teams. With the busing crisis fueling numerous acts of racially-charged violence and the combination of economic, cultural, racial, and political anxieties vaguely articulated by the white working class and their self-appointed media representatives, Boston became known as a city that was not entirely welcoming to black athletes.

While the Celtics were the team to first break the color barrier with their drafting of Chuck Cooper in 1950, as well as the first team in professional sports to hire a black coach, the Red Sox were the last team in Major League Baseball to integrate, and were persistently known as a stubbornly white team.<sup>274</sup> Adam Criblez argues that "Boston sports...had a long history of problems with race," and that "the racial problems persisted and perhaps even intensified in the late 1970s." General manager Red Auerbach referred to the mostly black, poorly-performing players of the late '70s as "monkeys," and one-time Celtic player Bob McAdoo believed Boston to be "a place that destroyed black careers. It was a graveyard for blacks."<sup>275</sup>

Bill Russell, widely regarded as one of the best basketball players in the history of the league, was one of the primary reasons the Celtics won 11 championship titles in 13 years. Yet he

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<sup>274</sup> Marc Onigman, "Facing the race factor," *Boston Globe*, October 27, 1978, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>275</sup> Criblez, *Tall Tales and Short Shorts*, 214.

called his experience in Boston a “traumatic experience,” declared that he didn’t care if he ever returned to the city,<sup>276</sup> and refused to attend the ceremony at Boston Garden when his number was retired by the team.<sup>277</sup> Ten years after his retirement, in 1979, he told the *Boston Globe* that “if Paul Revere were riding today it would be for racism. ‘The niggers are coming! The niggers are coming!’”<sup>278</sup> During his legendary career in Boston, he received hate mail, had his house burglarized, and even suffered the indignity of having an unknown racist break into his house, defecate on his bed, spread the feces on the wall, and then leave without taking anything.<sup>279</sup> While to many, he exemplified the virtues of “white” basketball, he was also an outspoken advocate of civil rights and was never one to hold his tongue when faced with racial prejudice. Sportswriters described him as “sullen” and “gruff,” even while recognizing that his anger “was born of artistic frustration” and moral outrage.<sup>280</sup> One article in the *Boston Globe*, titled “Haughty Russell hard to fathom,” referred to him as foreboding and menacing, and accused him of “[building] a cover of aloofness and [calling] it ‘dignity.’” Bostonians disliked him, according to sportswriter Leigh Montville, “because he was the way he was, not because of the color he was.”<sup>281</sup> The year after Russell’s retirement, the team’s win record nosedived, but they drew 1,000 more fans per game than the previous year. “During the years the Celtics were cluttering Boston Garden’s rafters with championship banners,” the *Los Angeles Times* wrote, “Bostonians were selling out the Garden—to see the struggling Boston Bruins of the National Hockey League.”<sup>282</sup> A 1991 *Sports Illustrated* article, titled “Beantown: One Tough Place to Play,” featured a black sports fan making a similar

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<sup>276</sup> Nathan Cobb, “Bill Russell...without apologies,” *Boston Globe*, October 17, 1979, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>277</sup> Steve Marantz, “Celtics were integration model, yet...,” *Boston Globe*, August 5, 1979, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>278</sup> Cobb, “Bill Russell...without apologies.”

<sup>279</sup> Lane, *Under the Boards*, 124.

<sup>280</sup> Cobb, “Bill Russell...without apologies.”

<sup>281</sup> Leigh Montville, “Haughty Russell hard to fathom,” *Boston Globe*, June 7, 1973, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>282</sup> “Boston Loves Loser: Cellar Celts’ Crowds Up 1,000 Per Game,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 29, 1969, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

observation. “Those teams were putting up the flags every year and nobody came,” he said, referring to the highly successful Russell-era Celtics. “Only time they’d sell out was in the playoffs. Any other time, you could walk right in. Then Russell leaves and the fair-haired boy, Dave Cowens, comes in...and you can’t get a seat.”<sup>283</sup>

Other players shared Russell’s evaluation of Boston’s racial climate, including Tom Sanders, who played for the Celtics for 13 years and coached for one. He described his housing options being limited to the low-income, black neighborhood of Roxbury, being turned away from nightclubs, and almost being jumped by a group of white men—they backed off when they realized who he was. “My experience is basically the same as any black man’s,” Sanders said. “Any athlete who doesn’t see this is kidding himself...No matter how well you’re doing, in the eyes of most Americans, you’re still a black guy that should be abused, or not allowed to step out of line.”<sup>284</sup> Celtics player Cedric Maxwell, probably for the reasons outlined by Sanders and Russell, said that “plain and simple, black people didn’t like the Celtics.”<sup>285</sup>

However, it is important to note that sport-related racism was not limited to the Celtics, or even to the NBA. For example, in 1968, *Sports Illustrated* ran a series of articles spread across five issues called “The Black Athlete.” Commendably progressive for its time, Part 4 featured an in-depth investigation of racism in professional sports. The black athlete, author Jack Olsen wrote, “watches helplessly as bigotry and discrimination on and off the field erode his earning power, restrict his opportunities for success and deny him part of the reward for his achievements.” Further, “he must be measurably better than a white man playing the same position.” Due to the racial stereotypes discussed in the previous section, black athletes were

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<sup>283</sup> Leigh Montville, “Beantown: One Tough Place to Play,” *Sports Illustrated*, August 19, 1991, 45.

<sup>284</sup> Steve Marantz, “Settling in Boston: the pros and cons,” *Boston Globe*, July 15, 1979, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>285</sup> Criblez, *Tall Tales and Short Shorts*, 214.

forced to “accept the stacking of Negroes at certain positions in order to keep other spots open. He must face up to quota systems—only so many blacks per backfield or per infield or per team.”<sup>286</sup> An anonymous black NFL cornerback put it this way: “Yassuh, white man, boss. We ain’t got the brains to play center, ‘cause we can’t count, but we can follow that flanker’s ass all the way down the field, *yuck, yuck*.”<sup>287</sup>

That same article argued that racial quotas were widespread in professional sports, and a 1978 *Washington Post* article interviewed a wide swath of NBA players and agents and found that “most are sure that, all other things being equal, a white player will win a job over a black player for the 10th or 11th spot on the roster.” Lawyer Larry Fleisher, who was the lawyer for the players’ association, argued that the NBA used a “negative quota system” that “deprives deserving people of playing...It’s a concern. The livelihood of everyone is involved.”<sup>288</sup>

Thus, given the widespread racism that operated regardless of the sport or the league, Boston’s distinction as “one of the most despised franchises in all of professional sports” is particularly noteworthy.<sup>289</sup> While mistreating, degrading, and belittling its black athletes, regardless of their skill level, Boston media valorized white athletes like John Havlicek and Dave Cowens, holding them up as exemplary athletes and human beings, respectable basketball players who unfailingly upheld the Celtic spirit by working hard and playing selflessly.

#### “Paul Revere Reincarnate”: The Tireless John Havlicek

A 1978 *Boston Globe* article made the case that John Havlicek, Celtic captain and 8-time NBA champion, was the man who “symbolized Celtic spirit” more than anyone else. The article

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<sup>286</sup> Jack Olsen, “In the Back of the Bus,” *Sports Illustrated*, July 22, 1968, 28.

<sup>287</sup> Olsen, “In the Back of the Bus,” 31.

<sup>288</sup> Jane Gross, “Racial Quotas in the NBA?,” *Washington Post*, December 27, 1978, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>289</sup> John Garrity, “Black and White and Green,” *Sports Illustrated*, March 23, 1992, 88.

described him as “the lunchpail-toting kid from Lansing, Ohio, who lacked Oscar Robertson’s grace and Julius Erving’s high rise tendencies and Jerry West’s scoring touch, but who parlayed a matchless combination of stamina, determination and intelligence into the formation of the consummate basketball player.”<sup>290</sup> Another article in the *Globe*, published soon after Havlicek announced his upcoming retirement, declared him to be “the embodiment of a tradition that may never be seen again.”<sup>291</sup> In John Havlicek, the Celtics and the Boston sports media had an athlete who represented everything good in sports: he was white, a clean-cut family man, humble, and hard-working. In addition, despite his remarkable athleticism, he was frequently depicted as possessing athletic deficiencies that allowed the media to frame him as achieving success solely as the result of hard work, especially by juxtaposing him with “innately talented” black basketball players. And his ability to play through any number of injuries was similarly upheld as an example of his extraordinary moral virtue, as well as his ability to embody white working-class masculine values.

Havlicek, Criblez explains in *Tall Tales and Short Shorts*, was “the poster boy for the NBA ideal: a humble family man who hustled his way to superstardom.”<sup>292</sup> General manager Red Auerbach once said “John Havlicek is what I always thought a Celtic should be,” and a rival player said that Havlicek and the Celtics “are one and the same. He gives them leadership and inspiration, and their style of play is his style. It is a rare, beautiful thing.”<sup>293</sup> Celtics center Dave Cowens saw him as an excellent role model, a superstar who wasn’t moody and didn’t pout, but who “goes about his job, accepts criticism and doesn’t complain.”<sup>294</sup> The *Boston Globe*, who frequently complained of running out of new ways to heap praise on Havlicek, described him as

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<sup>290</sup> Bob Ryan, “Without Havlicek, it’s different game,” *Boston Globe*, December 31, 1978, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>291</sup> John Powers, “Havlicek turns rumors to fact,” *Boston Globe*, January 30, 1978, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>292</sup> Criblez, *Tall Tales and Short Shorts*, 105.

<sup>293</sup> John Underwood, “The Green Running Machine,” *Sports Illustrated*, October 28, 1974, 54.

<sup>294</sup> Whiteside, “Hondo: Like a bridge over troubled waters, he has carried the Celtics through...”

“a super human being, and a super team man.”<sup>295</sup> He was held in high regard by the Celtics organization, the sports media, and the city as a whole for his loyalty to the Celtics, having turned down a million-dollar offer to move to the NBA’s rival league, the ABA. “Havlicek’s high principles,” the *Globe* gushed, “as well as his refusal to double cross the Celtics has won [Red] Auerbach’s lasting respect.”<sup>296</sup> This oft-repeated anecdote was a particularly crucial component of the Havlicek legend when compared to the supposedly selfish, greedy, unfaithful behavior of the black athletes who negotiated higher salaries. Upon his retirement in 1978, *Sports Illustrated* described him as “one of the few remaining links to American pop culture past.” “Havlicek’s retirement,” author Curry Kirkpatrick explained, “is a watershed on our domestic sports calendar.”<sup>297</sup> Kirkpatrick’s article continued with the nostalgic framing of Havlicek’s character and playing style, claiming that “perhaps more than any of the stars, more than anybody, period, Havlicek has always related to the masses, and they to him” (until Larry Bird came along, at least). “Havlicek is the quintessential throwback to the old days,” Kirkpatrick explained, “to the pre-trillionaire days, to the days when players cared about such trivial items as pride, teamwork, and the difference between winning and losing.”<sup>298</sup> John Havlicek, the media argued, was one of the last good ones. He was a dying breed.

In terms of his playing style and ability, the sports media—despite the existence of a massive number of glowing, complimentary articles—believed that he was underappreciated and did not receive the amount of coverage he deserved because of his remarkable consistency. The *Los Angeles Times* called him “predictable,” and explained that “you expect an ultimate effort out

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<sup>295</sup> Neil Singelais, “Weakened Havlicek giving all,” *Boston Globe*, April 10, 1973, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>296</sup> Neil Singelais, “Havlicek says he’ll sign another 3-year contract,” *Boston Globe*, November 3, 1971, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>297</sup> Curry Kirkpatrick, “It’s the End of a Long, Long Run,” *Sports Illustrated*, April 10, 1978, 29.

<sup>298</sup> Kirkpatrick, “It’s the End of a Long, Long Run,” 29.

of him in the playoffs.”<sup>299</sup> A 1971 article in the *Boston Globe* argued that “John Havlicek’s performance is never mentioned this year. It is a fact of life, it is a constant. No one mentions that the uniforms are green and white, the basketballs round, the backboard glass, the rims orange, the popcorn cold, the Cokes warm. No one mentions John Havlicek’s performance. It is just something that is there, something that has been there every day of this long NBA season.”<sup>300</sup> In addition, he was widely commended for his leadership abilities, and headlines almost always featured rhetoric that highlighted this. Whereas other players’ stellar performances were said to dominate the game, Havlicek’s exceptional games “lead,” “directed,” “boosted,” “rallied,” “guided,” “paced,” or “sparked” his team to victory. The fact that he never led the league in any of the major statistical categories—scoring, rebounds, assists—was held up as evidence of his selflessness, of his exceptional ability to contribute to a balanced, team-oriented approach to the game.<sup>301</sup>

Havlicek and his approach to the game were regularly described as “tireless.” The *Los Angeles Times*, a fan of developing epithets for Celtics players, described him with that exact word with remarkable frequency. The *New York Times* called him “indefatigable,” and the *Sports Illustrated* article commemorating his career described his “unique game” as being characterized by “relentless all-court activity based on intellect and hustle and execution.”<sup>302</sup> In an earlier article, *Sports Illustrated* wrote that “playing to the edge of exhaustion is the part of the old Boston style that Havlicek made famous.”<sup>303</sup>

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<sup>299</sup> Mal Florence, “Celtics Run Away and Hide, Remain Very Much Alive,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 28, 1969, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>300</sup> Leigh Montville, “John Havlicek,” *Boston Globe*, February 28, 1971, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>301</sup> Criblez, *Tall Tales and Short Shorts*, 105.

<sup>302</sup> Kirkpatrick, “It’s the End of a Long, Long Run,” 29.

<sup>303</sup> Peter Carry, “A Matter of Celtic Pride,” *Sports Illustrated*, May 20, 1974, 24.

Perhaps above all else, Havlicek was noted for his great ability to play—and usually play well—through pain, injury, and illness. “Havlicek Brilliant Despite Virus,” read a 1970 *Boston Globe* headline.<sup>304</sup> “Weakened Havlicek giving all,” another reported in 1973.”<sup>305</sup> A 1976 *Washington Post* article declared “Ailing Havlicek Heart of Celtics, and NBA.”<sup>306</sup> Leigh Montville gushed in a 1975 *Boston Globe* article that “his wrist has been hurt, his knees have been hurt, he has switched subtle gears and kept going. No problem. He almost helped the Celtics win the NBA title two years ago lefthanded when his right shoulder was hurt.”<sup>307</sup> A 1978 *Globe* article highlighting his career upon his retirement relayed the “Tale of the Turquoise Basin,” the “ultimate Havlicek-as-Spartan anecdote.” According to this legend, Havlicek suffered a painful foot injury and was told that *maybe* he could play if he iced it down. Havlicek purchased a cheap, plastic basin, iced his foot for six times as long as the doctor suggested, and then proceeded to play 53 minutes en route to his third championship title. “That was the idea, wasn’t it? You did what was necessary, no matter how unorthodox,” the *Globe* explained.<sup>308</sup> After playing with an intestinal virus that had put him out of commission for nearly a week and caused him to lose 10 pounds, the *Globe* complimented him for his “determination to play,” which had “commanded the respect of everyone.” Celtics coach Tom Heinsohn remarked that “There are a lot of athletes who would duck playing if they were in John’s situation because they don’t want to look bad. They’d throw up their hands, and quit.” “Havlicek,” Heinsohn continued, “has the most guts of any player I’ve ever seen. There should be more guys like him in sports.”<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>304</sup> Will McDonough, “Havlicek Brilliant Despite Virus, *Boston Globe*, January 19, 1970, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>305</sup> Singelais, “Weakened Havlicek giving all.”

<sup>306</sup> Kenneth Denlinger, “Ailing Havlicek Heart of Celtics, and NBA,” *Boston Globe*, March 15, 1976, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>307</sup> Leigh Montville, “Wind him up—watch in awe,” *Boston Celtics*, January 5, 1975, ProQuest Archver.

<sup>308</sup> John Powers, “The man...,” *Boston Globe*, April 7, 1978, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>309</sup> Singelais, “Weakened Havlicek giving all.”

Another notable characteristic of the media framing of John Havlicek was the implication that he was somehow an underdog, that he was lacking the innate natural ability of some of his (black) peers. This, as discussed earlier, helped establish Havlicek as the paragon of “white” basketball, and happened despite the fact that he was widely regarded as an exceptional athlete. “When you think about it,” Leigh Montville wrote in the *Boston Globe*, “he never has been the fastest, the tallest or the strongest player on the team. He never has been the best shooter, the best ballhandler, the best anything. He simply has been the best everything.”<sup>310</sup> Teammate Jim Ard described him as “one of the few guys who doesn’t have the natural talent,” while Havlicek himself explained that “there are many more people with natural abilities... There are those who are quicker, there are those who can jump higher. I play with my head, though. I learned the fundamentals in college. I learned defense.”<sup>311</sup> In another instance, Havlicek lamented that increasingly in the NBA, “there is so much individual talent, often a player can get by and make a great play without paying attention to fundamentals. He can rebound or block a shot on sheer talent alone.”<sup>312</sup> This was, of course, the *wrong* way to play basketball—it was antithetical to the structured, textbook style Havlicek and the Celtics prided themselves on. In addition, *Boston Globe* writer Harold Kaese argued that “basketball discriminates in favor of exceptionally tall men,” and thus “Havlicek—a relatively small 6-5—has to compete for fame against a 7-2 Jabbar, a 7-2 Chamberlain, a 6-11 Thurmond, as well as against men his own size...”<sup>313</sup> Teammate Kermit Washington explained that “a lot of people have trouble identifying with the great talents like Dr. J and Kareem and the rest. But they know and love Havlicek because John wasn’t born the best. He had to depend on hustle and determination and guts to get through all those years and

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<sup>310</sup> Montville, “Wind him up—watch in awe.”

<sup>311</sup> Pete Alfano, “John Havlicek: He’s not the Boss, but He Runs the Team,” *Newsday*, February 29, 1976, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>312</sup> Larry Whiteside, “Havlicek goes on—and on—and on,” *Boston Globe*, February 1, 1976, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>313</sup> Harold Kaese, “Orr, Havlicek: Two of a kind,” *Boston Globe*, February 7, 1972, ProQuest Archiver.

win all those games. Fans relate to that.”<sup>314</sup> A 1974 *Sports Illustrated* article on Havlicek, “The Green Running Machine,” favorably compared Havlicek to the 7-2 Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, a center most sportswriters consider to be comparable to Bill Russell in talent and career achievement. Author John Underwood called Havlicek “the Best Athlete the NBA has ever had,” even though Havlicek “doesn’t shoot as well as the best, isn’t strong enough to smother a backboard, doesn’t have breathtaking speed, can’t dribble behind his back and isn’t 7 feet tall” and despite the fact that “Kareem Abdul-Jabbar is alive and living on the basket rim.” While acknowledging Abdul-Jabbar’s “preeminence,” Underwood argued that “inevitably he will make way for another,” while “it is altogether unlikely that you will ever see another Havlicek.”<sup>315</sup> Driving home the idea that Havlicek’s ability came from hard work and effort and not innate ability, Underwood said that “it would be reassuring for those who become melted butter in his wake that Havlicek is some kind of genetic fluke who grew into a large pair of lungs connected to a long pair of legbones...but in Havlicek’s case his particular style was charted by him as surely as if it were a sea voyage.”<sup>316</sup> Even Havlicek’s remarkable stamina, something that could easily be attributed to genetic luck, was instead framed as the product of intentional effort by Havlicek.<sup>317</sup> And while Havlicek’s athletic excellence was usually attributed to old-fashioned hard work, the trope of the cerebral white athlete was occasionally applied to Havlicek as well. The *Boston Globe*, for example, in an article that called him the Celtics’ “quarterback, the coach on the floor for the rookies, the thinker, the doer, the tireless,” explained Havlicek’s infamous game-winning steal as the product of intentional calculation. “The thing to remember about that

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<sup>314</sup> Kirkpatrick, “It’s the End of a Long, Long Run,” 29.

<sup>315</sup> Underwood, “The Green Running Machine,” 47.

<sup>316</sup> Underwood, “The Green Running Machine,” 48.

<sup>317</sup> Alfano, “John Havlicek: He’s not the Boss, but He Runs the Team.”

play,” the *Globe*’s Francis Rosa declared, “was that Havlicek thought his way to that interception.”<sup>318</sup>

As these examples make abundantly clear, John Havlicek fully and completely embodied nearly every single value associated with “white” basketball. He made up for a supposed lack of innate athletic ability through sheer force of will and remarkable amounts of hard work and dedication. He was humble, exhibited leadership skills, was everyone’s ideal of an all-American athlete. He played through pain and always strove to uphold Celtic traditions and old-school ways of doing things. In the media’s framing of Havlicek, we can see the already-referenced Bostonian “love [for] throwback players,”<sup>319</sup> white players who fed into white nostalgia and a reactionary longing for a romanticized past. Havlicek, like Larry Bird would later do in the 1980s, reassured white basketball fans that the black takeover of the sport was not complete, and that those old-school values associated with white working-class men could still produce success in the realm of sports. With class becoming a cultural signifier rather than an economic one, Boston’s white working-class men could identify with Havlicek, could conceptualize him as “one of them” despite the fact that he was considerably more wealthy than they could ever dream of being, because he was thought to exemplify their values.

Havlicek’s ability to play while injured or in pain was an essential component of this framing. Don Sabo and Sue Curry Jansen, for example, describe the centrality of pain to media depictions of athletic masculinity. The “Pain Principle,” which they define as “the patriarchal cultural belief that pain is inevitable and that the endurance of pain enhances one’s character and moral worth,” is clearly one of the primary concepts shaping the media’s framing of Havlicek’s injuries. Additionally, Sabo and Jansen argue that portrayals of athletes centered around the Pain

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<sup>318</sup> Francis Rosa, “Havlicek: Star without honors,” *Boston Globe*, November 10, 1970, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>319</sup> Jerry Nason, “All Celts need is motivation,” *Boston Globe*, January 16, 1971, ProQuest Archiver.

Principle “may also be modeling stoicism and resilience for factory and service workers who must do more for less because they are ‘lucky enough’ to have jobs in an economy that thrives on impermanence and liquidity.” Ultimately, they conclude that this types of media framings are “ritualized expressions of more subtle relations of power that tap the Pain Principle and hegemonic masculinity for cultural and political legitimacy.”<sup>320</sup>

It is also worth noting that while Havlicek was occasionally described as possessing noteworthy intelligence, the media was much more likely to emphasize his physical toughness, hard work, and determination, even though intelligence is considered to be one of the central components of the construction of white athleticism. However, given the blue-collar distaste for intellectualism that became increasingly popular in the 1970s, and the framing of academics as elite, effete snobs, it is entirely unsurprising that the media framing of Havlicek downplayed the cerebral aspects of his game and emphasized instead the more physical, manly, blue-collar aspects of his playing style. Masculinity is not conceptualized in identical ways in all circumstances—it will vary drastically according to context—and thus the popular idea of what a white athlete was subtly modified by the specific context of 1970s Boston and the aggressively articulated grievances of its white working class.

The “Undersized Center with the Giant Heart”: Dave Cowens and the Myth of the Underdog

The *Boston Globe*'s John Powers once described Dave Cowens's playing style as “42 minutes of gravel and spit a night,” and found that he played “with the enthusiasm of a high school sophomore dressing for his first varsity game.”<sup>321</sup> Earlier that year, Powers had declared

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<sup>320</sup> Don Sabo and Sue Curry Jansen, “Prometheus Unbound: Constructions of Masculinity in the Sports Media,” in *MediaSport*, ed. Lawrence Wenner (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1998), 209.

<sup>321</sup> John Powers, “Celtics' Big Guy: Cowens keeps faith,” *Boston Globe*, December 16, 1977, ProQuest Archiver.

him to the “meanest, blue-collar laborer in the dressing room.”<sup>322</sup> Cowens, who helped the Celtics win two NBA championships and was named league MVP in 1973, was drafted by the Celtic as a rookie after Auerbach saw him play for Florida State and became impressed by his rough-and-tumble approach to the game.<sup>323</sup> Second only to Havlicek in the embodiment of “Celtic pride,” Cowens—like Havlicek—was described as humble and hard-working, with blue-collar interests and lifestyle values that made him a sympathetic figure. His “willingness to get dirty,” the *Boston Globe* argued, was the reason why he “won fans from the first minute [he] set foot on the Garden floor.”<sup>324</sup> However, of equal importance was the fact that he was a 6-9 center at a time when teams were constructed around the talents of centers who were generally *at least* two inches taller. He was framed as the ultimate underdog, a scrappy white player who overcame, through grit, determination, and enthusiastic hard work, the “special advantages” given to black players by the genetic lottery.

Cowens, an eccentric redhead who Criblez describes as “Part Renaissance man, part Neanderthalic warrior,”<sup>325</sup> embodied the Celtic tradition in a more rough-and-tumble manner than Havlicek. Nonetheless, the sports media found him to be a charming oddball, who seemed to have pulled “the diverse parts of his personality equally out of Standard & Poor’s and The Last Whole Earth Catalogue.”<sup>326</sup> The ultimate team player, Cowens frequently rejected media questions that posited him as the only player who performed well, arguing instead that teams win and lose together. “The idea is that I’m doing my job, and implying that the other guys aren’t,” he said. “And that’s not the truth. I’m inclined to say that when a team’s losing, nobody’s doing enough.”<sup>327</sup> The *Globe* was impressed with his lack of a “fat head,” and the fact that he had “a

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<sup>322</sup> John Powers, “Cowens ruins 76ers, 124-119,” *Boston Globe*, April 25, 1977, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>323</sup> Criblez, *Tall Tales and Short Shorts*, 47.

<sup>324</sup> Ryan, “Without Havlicek, it’s different game.”

<sup>325</sup> Criblez, *Tall Tales and Short Shorts*, 48.

<sup>326</sup> Peter Carry, “Boston’s Perpetual Motion Machine,” *Sports Illustrated*, April 2, 1973, 36-41.

<sup>327</sup> Powers, “Celtics’ Big Guy.”

determined attitude, not a cocky one.” He was described as being “embarrassed and irked at the amount of attention he [received],”<sup>328</sup> and was said to be “that modern sports rarity, an unspoiled person.”<sup>329</sup> Cowens, Bob Ryan declared in his rookie season, was “a throwback to the old virtues of hard work and self-discipline.”<sup>330</sup>

Another recurring theme in the media’s framing of Cowens was his rejection of the material benefits of his fame and success as a professional athlete. The *Boston Globe* argued that “he has always played basketball because he likes it.” “He doesn’t play for the money,” Bob Ryan continued, “although he now commands big money and generally cashes his paycheck.”<sup>331</sup> When Cowens took an unprecedented leave of absence from the team in 1976 for personal reasons, his refusal to accept his salary for those missed games was framed as “an illustration of Celtics Pride in its purest form.” “During a period of professional sports when salaries have become a tool for measuring one’s superior talents,” a Celtics fan wrote to the *Globe*, “Cowens has honestly measured his recent production in terms of his capabilities and decided that a foul would be called on him if he continued to play. For this action, I can only express my greatest admiration for the man.”<sup>332</sup> *Boston Globe* writer John Powers agreed, arguing that Cowens “has too much integrity to go woodenly through the motions and still collect a paycheck...the material rewards of an NBA career mean little Dave Cowens...he would pay for lunch and carfare and still derive the same personal satisfaction.”<sup>333</sup> This framing of Cowens as pure of heart, playing solely for his and the fans’ enjoyment, was particularly potent in the context of a time when the NBA

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<sup>328</sup> Bob Ryan, “It’s the same old Dave Cowens—plucky, not cocky,” *Boston Globe*, September 28, 1973, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>329</sup> Bob Ryan, “Cowens: ‘Can’t say I’ll be back...got to think it over,’” *Boston Globe*, November 12, 1976, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>330</sup> Bob Ryan, “The Rookie: He is Dave Cowens of the Celtics, and he is tall, strong, fast, agile, aggressive,” *Boston Globe*, February 7, 1971, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>331</sup> Ryan, “Cowens: ‘Can’t say I’ll be back.’”

<sup>332</sup> “The Fan’s View: Cowens deserves better,” *Boston Globe*, November 28, 1976, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>333</sup> John Powers, “Cowens a unique person—there’s no secret in that,” *Boston Globe*, November 14, 1976, ProQuest Archiver.

was thought to be dominated by “selfish black professionals cynically using the sport to garner undeserved riches.”<sup>334</sup> Cowens was a throwback to that same romanticized past, when white players, selfless and loyal and hardworking, played with integrity and morally pure motivations.

Cowens’s oft-commented-on eccentricity was closely tied to his rejection of material wealth, and allowed the media to frame him as a relatable blue-collar type, despite his obvious economic success. “Cowens is..the first of the super-rich young players who owns a four-wheel drive wagon instead of a car,” *Sports Illustrated* wrote in 1973. He was “the first of the bigtime basketball bachelors who has purchased neither silk sheets, a fur coverlet nor a Magic Fingers.” Cowens was so utterly uninterested in material comfort that he even “neglected to buy a bed.”<sup>335</sup> The media emphasized his distinctly blue-collar, common-man interests, describing his leave of absence as motivated by his desire to “go frog-gigging with his high school buddy in Cold Spring, Ky.,” to “hunker down in the family room and play cribbage with his dad,” and to “put the bush hog attachment on his tractor and clear the back hill on his family’s 30-acre Christmas tree farm.” He was, the *Washington Post* declared, “like the best of the Boy Scouts.”<sup>336</sup> These blue-collar values and interests were clearly meant to be the morally pure foil to the more suspect, less relatable, possibly criminal values and interests of the greedy black players. As with Havlicek, they allowed the media to frame Cowens as highly relatable to Boston’s blue-collar white men, even though, in class terms, he existed on an entirely different plane. When working-class identity became articulated as a culture, with a set of distinct styles, interests, and values, rather than as a way of conceptualizing structural power imbalances between economic classes,

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<sup>334</sup> Colás, *Ball Don’t Lie*, 88.

<sup>335</sup> Carry, “Boston’s Perpetual Motion Machine,” 35.

<sup>336</sup> Joan Ryan, “Cowens Proves He Has the Courage of His Convictions,” *Washington Post*, December 1, 1976, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

wealthy athletes like Cowens could be framed as representative of the aggrieved mass of working-class white Bostonian men.

Cowens' style of play was described as being so distinctive that "fans would know it was Cowens even if he wore a mask and a purple tutu Taglioni." Cowens, Peter Carry wrote in *Sports Illustrated*, was "an unguided missile, a runaway freight. During any given game he is apt to run more baseline-to-baseline sprints, take part in more fast breaks, guard more outside shooters, dive for more loose balls and trample over more opponents, teammates, referees, ball boys, front-row spectators, scorekeepers, sportswriters and sundry pieces of courtside furniture than some centers do in their entire careers."<sup>337</sup> Legendary Celtic Bob Cousy praised him as playing "awfully hard, too hard for most of the men in this league." "Everyone...in the league is afraid of him," Cousy said.<sup>338</sup> The *Globe* described Cowens as "banging and crashing and daring a man to run with him for two hours" and as playing with "wild hair flopping, the sweat dripping, elbows flaring, eyes flashing."<sup>339</sup> "Enthusiasm," Bob Ryan wrote in the *Globe*, "was always his trump card." He was "deemed to be the epitome of hustle..."<sup>340</sup>

Deeply related to this articulation of Cowens' aggressive, relentless, fearless style of play was the media's framing of him as the ultimate underdog. "He is an anomaly," the *Boston Globe* wrote, "a 6-foot-8 ½ white center playing in a seven-foot forest known as the NBA pivot." Because of his lack of the special advantage of natural athleticism and size granted to his black rival players, "he must play as hard" against mediocre players "as he does against Kareem Abdul-Jabbar in order to accomplish what he does on the basketball floor. He cannot, like a Wilt Chamberlain or Abdul-Jabbar, just show up and be seven-feet tall, and thus have an immediate

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<sup>337</sup> Carry, "Boston's Perpetual Motion Machine," 35-36.

<sup>338</sup> Clif Keane, "An insider takes a look at Celtics, says he likes what he sees," *Boston Globe*, December 24, 1971, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>339</sup> Powers, "Celtics' Big Guy."

<sup>340</sup> Bob Ryan, "The coach has a problem: His center," *Boston Globe*, January 14, 1979, ProQuest Archiver.

effect on the game...Cowens' game is absolutely nothing but hard work. He has no shortcuts to success."<sup>341</sup> After a game against the Milwaukee Bucks, the *Los Angeles Times* glowingly reported that Abdul-Jabbar, "the 7-2 center," "seemed lethargic on the boards" while "Cowens, at least five inches shorter, shot over him from outside and occasionally hooked over him from inside. More than once Cowens beat Abdul-Jabbar down court and scored on the end of Boston's fast break."<sup>342</sup> Another *Los Angeles Times* article reported that he "is only 6-8 but compensates for lack of height with speed and aggressiveness,"<sup>343</sup> and even approvingly reported that the "6-8 center...out-rebounded" Los Angeles's own Wilt Chamberlain, a gigantic 7-1 center.<sup>344</sup> The *Los Angeles Times* could not get enough of the "hyperkinetic, rough and rugged redhead,"<sup>345</sup> as they reported that he "thoroughly [dominated]" the Lakers' own Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and that he "made it look as if he was 7-2, like Abdul-Jabbar, instead of 6-9."<sup>346</sup> A 1979 *Boston Globe* article summed up the trope of Cowens-as-scrappy-white-underdog best when they described him as "[battling] Goliath every night."<sup>347</sup>

As a result of these particular media framings of Dave Cowens, white, working-class Bostonians were presented with a scrappy, gritty white underdog, pitted against lazy blacks who were given special advantages by nature, who overcame the odds and achieved success through sheer force of will, hard work, determination, and relentless aggression. The country's white working-class was starting to articulate their grievances and anxieties in remarkably similar

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<sup>341</sup> Ryan, "Cowens: 'Can't say I'll be back.'"

<sup>342</sup> "Celtics Run Away From Bucks, 95-83, Take Series Lead," *Los Angeles Times*, May 4, 1974, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>343</sup> Mal Florence, "Dynasty That Was: Celtics Are Thinking NBA Title Again," *Los Angeles Times*, December 15, 1972, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>344</sup> Mal Florence, "Boston Pressure Wears Down Lakers," *Los Angeles Times*, December 16, 1972, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>345</sup> Ted Green, "It's Finally Sundown as Celtics Win NBA Title," *Los Angeles Times*, June 7, 1976, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>346</sup> Ted Green, "Cowens Outplays Jabbar; Celtics Defeat Lakers," *Los Angeles Times*, February 21, 1976, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>347</sup> Bob Ryan, "Years of growth, under the boards," *Boston Globe*, December 28, 1979, ProQuest Archiver.

terms, as they saw themselves being displaced and victimized by blacks who lacked the desire to succeed but were nonetheless bolstered by the special advantages given to them by the government in the form of welfare and affirmative action. Cowens, framed by the media as embodying white, working-class masculine values in both his personality, style of play, and lifestyle, was—like Havlicek—a beacon of hope, proof that those values and characteristics still could result in success. In a league perceived to be dominated by giant black super-athletes like Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Wilt Chamberlain, the media’s framing of Cowens addressed those white, working-class anxieties that the country was passing them by. He was proof that the black takeover of the league was not a foregone conclusion, and that old-fashioned values could ultimately help good triumph over evil.

“A pathetic collection of self-centered All-Americans”: Sidney Wicks, Curtis Rowe, and  
the Fall of the Celtics Dynasty

The *Boston Globe*’s Bob Ryan called him a “practically useless and stupendously overpaid player”<sup>348</sup> and “essentially uncoachable”<sup>349</sup> and found that fans “saw in him everything that was the opposite of Celtic Pride.”<sup>350</sup> Ray Fitzgerald gloatingly called him “the No. 1 punching bag in Boston sports history,” gleefully reporting that fans regarded him with “good old-fashioned malice...and not a little disgust.”<sup>351</sup> He was regularly booed by players, demeaned by teammates, criticized by coaches, and castigated in the media. The arrival of Sidney Wicks, it seemed, heralded the decline of the Boston Celtics, and the perversion of everything good about basketball.

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<sup>348</sup> Ryan, “Celtics: No offense, no defense, no nuthin’.”

<sup>349</sup> Bob Ryan, “Happiness is Wicks far away,” *Boston Globe*, December 24, 1978, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>350</sup> Ray Fitzgerald, “Same name, new game,” *Boston Globe*, February 10, 1978, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>351</sup> Ray Fitzgerald, “Sidney, you’ve arrived,” *Boston Globe*, December 27, 1977, ProQuest Archiver.

The Celtics' 1977-78 season saw the legendary team take a steep nosedive, falling to 32-50 overall. The following season was even worse, with a record of 29-53. Players fought and were cycled in and out of Boston Garden with distressing regularity, two coaches were fired, attendance numbers declined, and fans and sportswriters were concerned. "This isn't the way it used to be," Ray Fitzgerald lamented in the *Boston Globe*. "The Celtics were once the yardstick by which other professional teams measured their performance, but they've become more of a soap opera than a basketball team."<sup>352</sup> It was clear, wrote Larry Whiteside, that "they are not the Celtics of old."<sup>353</sup>

The Celtics paid \$500,000 for Sidney Wicks in 1976, just in time for the team's decline. Described in the Boston media as "hyper-sensitive," "arrogant," "terribly sullen," and "moody," Wicks made the perfect scapegoat for the team's troubles. Wicks vehemently protested the media's depiction of him, insisting that "the real me is sensitive, intelligent, with sensibilities like everyone else. I'm a person, and, I think, a good one." The fact that Wicks felt the need to assert his own humanity is particularly telling of his treatment in Boston, but not entirely surprising given that "more than one sportswriter...leveled the ultimate cut against the 6-9 forward, calling him 'a dog.'"<sup>354</sup> While a win-at-all-costs attitude was frequently considered to be an integral part of the Celtic tradition, Wicks' competitive spirit was instead framed as a bad attitude. Initially, Wicks was looking forward to joining such a legendary franchise. He recalled watching the Celtics play the Lakers as a child and being drawn to the Celtics "because they won and they had

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<sup>352</sup> Bob Ryan, "Get with it, you Celtics," *Boston Globe*, February 20, 1976, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>353</sup> Whiteside, "This myth dies hard."

<sup>354</sup> David DuPree, "Boston 'Pro Fans' Welcome Back Celtics Who Hustle," *Washington Post*, October 21, 1979, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

a tradition and the kind of players I really admired.”<sup>355</sup> “I’m looking forward to coming here and helping them win another championship,” Wicks declared.<sup>356</sup>

Boston fans had other ideas. With the constant media framing of Wicks as the overrated, lazy, egotistical black villain—the perfect antagonist for the story of the tragic fall of the legendary Celtics, the penultimate “good guys,” the protectors of old-fashioned values—Wicks never stood a chance. He was “despised from the moment he put on a Boston uniform,”<sup>357</sup> and fans seemed to take his meager playing time as “a personal affront.”<sup>358</sup> They held signs demanding that the Celtics “Get Rid of Sid,” chanted “Wicks, Wicks, hands like sticks,”<sup>359</sup> and booed him whenever it appeared as though he was going to be substituted into the game.<sup>360</sup> Wicks protested his treatment by the Boston media until the bitter end of his time with the Celtics, insisting that they had engaged in “character assassination.” “The picture that was painted in Boston wasn’t me,” Wicks said. “Sportswriters had it in for me. A lot of it had to do with Paul Silas leaving and the Celtics winning no more championships, not even being championship caliber. Sportswriters and fans had to turn against someone, so they turned against me.” He was traded to the San Diego Clippers after only two seasons, and the fact that Clippers players found the real Wicks to be entirely at odds to the image of him presented by the media lends credence to his complaints. A Clippers rookie said: “I heard all that stuff about Wicks before I got here. He had to be one of the most genuinely decent people I met, the kind of pro a younger pro can lean on. How he got his reputation, I’ll never know.” With sportswriters and fans complaining about

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<sup>355</sup> John Powers, “All stop signs turn to green for Wicks: Newest Celtic confident attitude problem over,” *Boston Globe*, October 14, 1976, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>356</sup> John Powers, “‘I’m a winning player,’ says Wicks,” *Boston Globe*, October 13, 1976, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>357</sup> DuPree, “Boston ‘Pro Fans’ Welcome Back Celtics Who Hustle.”

<sup>358</sup> John Powers, “Celtics finally flow with Jo Jo, 109-103,” *Boston Globe*, November 12, 1977, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>359</sup> Ray Fitzgerald, “Vacationer returns to real world, colors it ghastly green,” *Boston Globe*, July 18, 1978, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>360</sup> Powers, “Celtics finally flow with Jo Jo, 109-103.”

things like Wicks' "silly green headband," it's not a stretch to believe that Wicks' framing in the media may not have been entirely accurate.<sup>361</sup>

He wasn't the only black player pilloried in the media during the Celtics' dark days. Wicks' close friend and college roommate Curtis Rowe received plenty of negative attention. He spoke too openly about his financial motivations, explaining his move from the Detroit Pistons to the Celtics as "strictly a matter of money" since he "didn't think [he] was being compensated fairly for [his] talent."<sup>362</sup> Wicks' laziness and Rowe's greed, Boston sportswriters argued, "were neither familiar nor approved Celtics scripts."<sup>363</sup> "Sidney Wicks and Curtis Rowe," wrote Ray Fitzgerald in the *Boston Globe*, "couldn't play like Celtics if they were here for a thousand years, and doesn't it seem like they already have been?"<sup>364</sup> Similarly, the arrival of black players Bob McAdoo, Marvin Barnes, and Earl Williams was greeted with resentment by the Boston sports media. They wondered "How many games will it take to integrate McAdoo," given that "everyone knew his arrival would pose a problem."<sup>365</sup> Barnes was suspended for a game for shirking practice, and Williams "was released because 'he acted like he didn't want to play,'" according to player-coach Dave Cowens. "If he doesn't want to play, I don't want him," Cowens concluded. Further, black player Nate Archibald was seen as lacking the grit and dedication that characterized a true Celtic, as demonstrated when Cowens sarcastically told the media that Archibald was missing from the roster because he was sick.<sup>366</sup>

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<sup>361</sup> Mike Granberry, "The Press and Sidney Wicks," *Los Angeles Times*, December 8, 1978, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>362</sup> Larry Whiteside, "'It's going to take a little time' for Rowe to fall into Celtics' line," *Boston Globe*, October 28, 1976, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>363</sup> John Powers, "Script was non-Celtic from beginning...to end," *Boston Globe*, May 4, 1977, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>364</sup> Ray Fitzgerald, "Some Christmas jeer," *Boston Globe*, December 26, 1977, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>365</sup> Bob Ryan, "McAdoo confuses picture," *Boston Globe*, February 20, 1979, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>366</sup> Ryan, "Get with it, you Celtics."

Jo Jo White, previously upheld in the media as a noble, dedicated player in the traditional Celtic mold, saw his public image quickly go downhill after prolonged difficulty with bone spurs. “Some observers feel he has been coasting this season,” the *Washington Post* reported, and the press decided that he had “transformed from a classy, hard-working team player to a sulky, inconsistent team player” because “he just didn’t fit in any longer.”<sup>367</sup> White took it personally when he found out that the Celtics “wouldn’t guarantee his contract over the long term,” and his relations with the Celtics soured.<sup>368</sup> The *Globe*’s Bob Ryan sympathized with White’s stance, writing that “Jo Jo White had been revealed to be a trooper of the highest Celtic order,” even though “there was always an inference that maybe Jo Jo wasn’t being tough enough” when it came to playing through his bone spurs. “White wants his loyalty rewarded,” Ryan wrote, “and he does have a case. For nine years, nobody has been more of a Celtic family man.” Ultimately, however, “business is business,” and the Celtics ultimately traded him to the Golden State Warriors in the middle of the 1978-1979 season. A mere six months after publicly siding with White, Ryan changed his mind and cheered the trade, arguing that “Auerbach must think of the team’s general welfare and not the vanity problems of a veteran on the downslide.”<sup>369</sup> During the dark days of the 1977-79 seasons, it seemed, the much-extolled Celtic loyalty only went one direction.

The media thoroughly turned on the Celtics during their trying times, grasping desperately for an explanation of where their beloved Celtic pride had gone. With a growing perception of the NBA as a league troubled by spoiled, lazy black players who were ruining the game with their “playground style,” newcomers like Wicks, Rowe, and McAdoo and even previously respected veterans like White were easy targets. They were framed by the media as

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<sup>367</sup> Peter May, “We’re Sorry Jo But You Just Had To Go,” *Nashua Telegraph*, February 2, 1979.

<sup>368</sup> John Powers, “Where they fit into (or out of) Celtics’ future,” *Boston Globe*, April 16, 1978, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>369</sup> Bob Ryan, “Cowens shrugs off White,” *Boston Globe*, December 17, 1978, ProQuest Archiver.

exemplifying everything wrong with the game, and as the antithesis of all that the Celtics had stood for. They had committed the ultimate transgression by revealing “Celtic Pride” to be a myth and reducing the legendary champions to an ordinary NBA team, plagued with internal dissension, greed, and disloyalty. The team had substituted “price for pride,”<sup>370</sup> and they left Boston fans and sportswriters “longing for the good old days.”<sup>371</sup> Notably, much of the rhetoric used to depict the Celtics’ bad luck black players as the cause of the team’s tragic decline mirrored with remarkable accuracy the same rhetoric used to articulate opposition to busing and desegregation. Supposedly morally and intellectually deficient blacks, in both instances, were used as scapegoats, denounced in the media as the true source of society’s problems. It wasn’t that the educational system was hostile and apathetic to the needs of black students, and it wasn’t that the Celtics’ style was, perhaps, outdated given the trajectory of the league. It was that black students and black basketball players were lazy and morally suspect, despite the special advantages each received—students in the form of extra government attention, players in the form of their supposedly God-given athletic abilities. Luckily, although unbeknownst to the fans and media at the time, the NBA’s penultimate Great White Hope—Larry Joe Bird, the “Hick from French Lick”—was about to be drafted just in time to deliver the Celtics to a new, promising decade of restored pride and reinvigoration of old-fashioned values.

A “Motley Crew of Infantile Thrillionaires”: The Philadelphia 76ers as Anti-Celtics

The Philadelphia 76ers, nearly everyone agreed, were “talent rich.”<sup>372</sup> Comprised of superstars Julius “Dr. J” Erving, a standout in a rival league known for popularizing the “playground” (read: black) style of basketball, George McGinnis, a man many thought incapable

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<sup>370</sup> John Powers, “A tough year all around: Question-filled Celtics building up to next season,” *Boston Globe*, June 25, 1978, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>371</sup> Ryan, “Get with it, you Celtics.”

<sup>372</sup> David DuPree, “Frustrated, Confused’ 76ers Face NBA Extinction Today,” *Washington Post*, June 5, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

of sharing the spotlight with the legendary Dr. J, the ostentatious “man-child” Darryl Dawkins, known for *literally* breaking backboards with his ferocious and outrageously named dunks, and persistent complainers Lloyd Free, Joe Bryant, and Eric Money, who all regularly argued that they deserved more playing time, the 76ers were everything that the revered old Celtics were not.

David Halberstam explained in *The Breaks of the Game* that the 76ers, “because of its modified schoolyard play, its one-on-one style, had been cast by the media, by fans, by other coaches, as the bad guys.”<sup>373</sup> Their style of play, which tended to emphasize flashy moves intended to thrill the audience, “earned them a reputation for being all sizzle and no steak; a group of ball-hogging, me-first, stat-watching egotists.”<sup>374</sup> In stark contrast to the Celtics’ emphasis on selfless team play, consistent and efficient (but sometimes uninteresting) role players, and blue-collar hard work, grit, and loyalty, the 76ers played an “open, free-wheeling, one-on-one style.”<sup>375</sup> They were dismissed by the *Washington Post* as “leading the league in several categories, namely per capita payroll, attendance, unquenchable egos, unhappy second stringers, dunking in warmup drills, playground offense and unplayed defense.”<sup>376</sup> While some of the 76ers players explained that they recognized that fans paid their hard earned money to be entertained, and that they were trying to give them their money’s worth,<sup>377</sup> the media chose instead to moralize their black, playground style of basketball and to frame them as the embodiment of the forces that were threatening to drag down the league. The slam dunk, for example, an innovation produced by the “playground” style associated with black players and popularized by 76ers stars Julius Erving and

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<sup>373</sup> Quoted in Criblez, *Tall Tales and Short Shorts*, 195.

<sup>374</sup> Criblez, *Tall Tales and Short Shorts*, 195.

<sup>375</sup> David DuPree, “Players Dictate the Offense,” *Washington Post*, February 9, 1978, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>376</sup> Red Green, “76ers Mostly Talk So Far,” *Washington Post*, November 11, 1976, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>377</sup> “Pete Alfano, “I’ve Got Another Dunk I Haven’t Even Used Yet,” *Washington Post*, May 10, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

Daryl Dawkins, was denounced as “pop-art craziness” and a “violent, destructive act” that was surely a sign of the moral rot at the heart of the modern NBA.<sup>378</sup>

Julius Erving was inarguably the team’s biggest star. Having come from the lesser-known but likely more exciting ABA league, Erving earned a name for himself with his astonishing array of dunks and similarly acrobatic moves. The 76ers purchased him from the New York Nets for \$6.5 million, prompting *Philadelphia Inquirer* sportswriter to lament the acquisition of Dr. J as “a sad commentary on the state of pro basketball and, indeed, the state of pro sports in this country.”<sup>379</sup> In another column, that same Philadelphia writer interviewed a Boston attorney familiar with the league; he called Erving’s move “deplorable” and said that “Julius comes across like an innocent kid when you meet him. But he’s really quite devious.” The president of the Milwaukee Bucks was quoted as calling it “the rottenest caper I’ve ever seen” and said that it “brings together...all the evil forces at work and the ramification of those forces.”<sup>380</sup> While some pointed out that Erving “came from the ghetto” and was wisely ensuring his financial future,<sup>381</sup> his decision was called “patently distasteful” and “greedy” in the *Washington Post*.<sup>382</sup>

As a man who “possessed the consummate playground style,” Erving and his wide array of slam dunks were framed as the result of innate athletic instincts and natural athleticism. One coach praised his “real long body” and “amazing physical equipment,”<sup>383</sup> while Nets guard Rick Barry complimented Dr. J’s “tremendous natural ability.” One of Barry’s teammates, interviewed

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<sup>378</sup> Leigh Montville, “Slamming the dunk,” *Boston Globe*, December 7, 1979, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>379</sup> Bill Livingston, “Shot at Dr. J interests Sixers, but not to excess,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 14, 1976, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>380</sup> Frank Dolson, “Pro Basketball: Greed and Avarice,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 3, 1973, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>381</sup> Gary Binford, “‘It Wasn’t a Slick Move...,’” *Washington Post*, October 21, 1976, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>382</sup> John Schulian, “Erving Stew May Result In Bad Taste For Some,” *Washington Post*, October 24, 1976, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>383</sup> “Where there’s dynamic Doctor J, there’s also a title, ABA Nets learn,” *Boston Globe*, May 12, 1974, ProQuest Archiver.

in an article comparing Barry and Erving's styles, exemplified the backhanded nature of these comment by arguing that "Rick [Barry] doesn't have the physical tools that Doc has. Rick had to study more, but as a result, he's fundamentally a lot sounder than Julius."<sup>384</sup> It's worth noting that the trope of the naturally talented black athlete was applied to the team as a whole, as well. While the *Washington Post* heralded the more mature 76ers as "the working class of the NBA" in 1980, the coach of the Hawks was quoted as saying: "Actually, I'm in hysterics over this stuff I'm reading where the 76ers are winning because they are hard working. Hey, this team has eight great players. I mean eight players of great talent. All they're doing is playing to each other naturally. *This is hardly a team of overachievers*" (emphasis mine).<sup>385</sup> Ultimately, as with the other descriptions of black players as gifted with natural, unearned, innate ability, these descriptions served to demean the hard work, creativity, and intelligence Erving and his teammates exhibited in their style of play.

Media framing was essential to the popular perception of the 76ers as the anti-Celtics, the villains of the NBA, the harbingers of the league's demise. Instead of young, inexperienced, but earnest young athletes, they were spoiled and lazy, having millions that they didn't earn, by virtue of their God-given talents. Instead of engaging in a style of play that reflected their socioeconomic background and cultural values, they were malicious malcontents, complainers who spat in the face of their hard-working fans with their outrageous salary demands. Instead of savvy entertainers who understood and strove to meet the fans' demand for high-quality, entertaining basketball, they were fame-hungry egotists, interested only in achieving personal glory. Dr. J was framed as naturally gifted with innate athletic ability and a racially coded instinct for improvisation instead of a thoughtful and intelligent athlete who worked hard at his craft.

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<sup>384</sup> Doug Smith, "Barry vs. Erving—A Matter of Style," *Washington Post*, January 26, 1976, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>385</sup> Derrick Jackson, "76ers Are the Working Class of the NBA," *Washington Post*, May 4, 1980, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

Instead of a sensible man who understood the nature of the NBA-as-business model and had a keen sense of his own worth, he was framed as a greedy trouble-maker.

Much as notions of “whiteness” are dependent upon a diametrically opposed notion of “blackness,” and “masculinity” relies upon “femininity” in order to be constructed as a meaningful category, the 76ers—through the specific media framing analyzed here—served as the perfect contrast to white basketball in general the Celtics in particular. They further dramatized the discrepancy between “black” and “white” basketball, presenting a foreboding picture of what the NBA might look like without the Celtics as the defenders of traditional values and old-school, “white” basketball.

The fact that the league really was in dire trouble as the 1970s came to a close cemented the idea that “black” styles, black players, and black teams like the 76ers were presenting a very real danger to the security of the NBA. The *Boston Globe* noted that the NBA was losing viewers, likely as a result of the “lowering [of] the general standard of play” that resulted from the NBA’s merger with the playground-style-oriented ABA.<sup>386</sup> The crowds and the targeted consumer groups remained predominantly white even while black players increasingly dominated the league stylistically and demographically. There were rumors of widespread drug use that prompted the league to take official steps to curb the problem. That the primary drug cited in the rumors was cocaine further racialized the issue.<sup>387</sup> It was argued that white fans found black players hard to relate to, and that “the average working man can’t relate to someone who makes \$12,180 an hour.”<sup>388</sup> This was clearly not the problem, however, as Havlicek, Cowens, and later Bird were widely commended for their ability to appeal to the common man. The real problem, as ex-Celtic

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<sup>386</sup> Bob Ryan, “Whither Goest the NBA?,” *Boston Globe*, October 13, 1978, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>387</sup> “NBA Tries to Curtail drugs,” *Washington Post*, August 22, 1980, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>388</sup> Dan Lauck, “What’s Really Hurting the NBA?,” *Newsday*, May 6, 1979, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

Paul Silas put it, was that “people are not going to come see black folks making thousands of dollars if the image is not presented right.” Additionally, Silas stated that he had “a fight with sportswriters more than anything else about this constant thing, of viewing us in a manner that I don’t think is a good one.”<sup>389</sup> Celtics legend Bob Cousy, the standard-bearer of Celtic pride, argued that the modern NBA system had resulted in players with “prima donna attitudes” and “a grotesque overemphasis on winning.” He lamented the fact that the league had “degenerated” into a big business, which resulted in “a value system gone astray” and players who had “an exaggerated opinion of their role in society.” “What we’re talking about,” Cousy concluded, “is a problem with roots deep in American society.”<sup>390</sup> The mood in the NBA at the end of the decade perfectly mirrored the nation’s general pessimism and gloominess about the state of the nation.

The dawning of the 1980s, however, saw the rise of two figures who could restore the league and the nation to their former glory. While Ronald Reagan ushered in the conservative revolution with his cheerful promises to restore the country to its former glory, Larry Bird, a hard working young rookie from Indiana, was drafted by the Celtics to reinvigorate their old-school values and to demonstrate that traditional, white working-class masculine values like discipline, grit, loyalty, and teamwork could still succeed.

#### Boston’s Great White “Hick”: Larry Bird and the Redemption of the NBA

In August of 1979, a good few months before Celtics rookie Larry Bird would play his first-ever NBA game, *Boston Globe* sportswriter Bob Ryan heralded Bird’s arrival as “the beginning of a new, and quite probably, glorious era in Boston Celtics history.” “Whatever you’ve heard about Larry Bird before is inoperative,” Ryan declared. “He’s better than that.”

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<sup>389</sup> “3 Seattle Athletes Say Sports Racism Exists,” *Newsday*, December 30, 1979, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>390</sup> Ted Green, “Disenchanted Cousy sees system spawning abuses,” *Boston Globe*, December 26, 1973, ProQuest Archiver.

Ryan, whose writing had demonstrated an increasing resentment and bitterness toward the fallen Celtics, crowned Bird Bob Cousy's "direct spiritual heir, the two of them helping comprise that truly elite corps of basketball players who perceive the essence of the game" and declared him to be one of the game's "legitimate on-court savants" along with legendary Celtics Cousy and Havlicek.<sup>391</sup> The fact that Ryan wrote these words *before Bird played a single NBA game* means that his article perfectly captured Celtics fans' desperation for a player who could restore Celtics pride to the city. Ostensibly, that player could be either white *or* black, since players like Bill Russell, Jo Jo White, and Paul Silas were considered to play "white" basketball, but in order for that player to fully embody the old Celtic ways and to serve as the fulfillment of white nostalgia, he would likely have to be white.

General manager Red Auerbach had nothing but glowing, adoring compliments for his new rookie, describing him as "a real good guy, the kind of guy we want on the Celtics. A Sharman, Cousy, Ramsey type of guy." Auerbach believed Bird to be unselfish and tough, and *Boston Globe* sportswriter Will McDonough noted that "over the years, Auerbach has been lavish in his praise of just two men—Cowens and John Havlicek." "You can make that three now," said Auerbach, chomping on a long cigar surrounded by a pleasant look of satisfaction. "This kid is in that class at this point in time," he said. "He's in the Celtic mold as we used to know it."<sup>392</sup>

Remarkably, the fact that Bird's signing with the Celtics came only after an extended struggle with Auerbach over his contract—a struggle that resulted in Bird signing the biggest contract ever given to a rookie in professional sports up to that point—was largely either accepted or ignored. While many articles reported on the protracted back-and-forth between Auerbach and Bird's lawyer, Bob Woolf, almost none of them seemed to find the ostentatious salary demands—

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<sup>391</sup> Bob Ryan, "Bird lives up to billing, and more," *Boston Globe*, August 26, 1979, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>392</sup> Will McDonough, "He's a rare Bird, just as Red figured," *Boston Globe*, August 23, 1979, ProQuest Archiver.

for an unproven rookie, no less—to be the sign of moral decay that salary demands by proven black players regularly were depicted as. The *Boston Globe*'s Bob Ryan, in one of the few examples of critical reporting on Bird's contract negotiations, said that he and his lawyer were “in the process of degrading not only the Celtics, but also the entire NBA and, of course themselves in their ridiculous pursuit of a seven figure annual contract for Mr. Bird's services on the basketball floor.”<sup>393</sup> However, a few months later Ryan had changed his tune, gushing over Bird in the glowing article referenced above. Perhaps most surprising is the fact that the lawyer who represented Bird in these contract negotiations was the very same lawyer who castigated Julius Erving, a proven star, for jumping to the New York Nets after accusing his previous team of not living up to their side of his contract. Bird's lawyer, Bob Woolf, called Erving's actions “deplorable,” and dropped him as a client over his move.<sup>394</sup> That was in 1973, and while it's likely that Woolf had begrudgingly accepted that the league was, in fact, operating as a business with a bottom line to protect, the fact that Erving and Bird's contract demands were framed by Woolf in such dramatically different moral terms shed light on the deep, destructive, racial connotations that shaped perceptions of players. Ultimately, Woolf's ideological 180 was cemented when *Sports Illustrated* reported that he responded to Auerbach's criticisms of his and Bird's salary demands by stating that “an athlete is entitled to everything he can get, as long as we don't put anybody out of business.”<sup>395</sup>

Bird later argued that he “just wanted a fair contract,” but insisted that he “would have played for nothing. The money didn't have that much to do with it.” As for Auerbach, who had publicly expressed his disdain and disgust for the salary demands of (usually black) players, and who lost multiple of his own black players—players widely regarded as upstanding men who

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<sup>393</sup> Bob Ryan, “Woolf's tactics hurting Bird and the game,” *Boston Globe*, April 22, 1979, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>394</sup> Dolson, “Pro Basketball: Greed and Avarice.”

<sup>395</sup> Douglas S. Looney, “Two for the Show,” *Sports Illustrated*, October 15, 1979, 42.

fully embodied Celtic pride and were invaluable contributors to the team—after refusing to acquiesce to their requests for increased compensation, acknowledged that “Larry’s contract is large,” but believed that it was “in line with his talent and the prevailing market.”<sup>396</sup> Like Dave Cowens before him, Bird was framed as a common man who just *happened* to be exceptionally wealthy, but who was nonetheless the embodiment of working-class values. The *Washington Post* reported Bird complaining that “being a millionaire ‘feels terrible,’” and declaring that, since his lifestyle required only \$10,000-\$12,000 to maintain, he would “probably end up giving it all away to charities...” “I didn’t ask for any money,” Bird insisted. “They gave it to me...I didn’t care how much I got.”<sup>397</sup>

This vehement rejection of money as a motivator for Bird was an essential component of both Bird’s status as the embodiment of white working-class masculinity and the maintenance of what Colás refers to as “the myth of the amateurs.” This myth, he argues, refers to “the athlete who plays for the love of the sport” and implied that “the amateur derives pleasure from the contest, participation is freely chosen, the process of competition is as important as its outcome, the amateur is motivated by rewards intrinsic to the sport rather than extrinsic rewards such as fame or money, and, finally, sportsmanship—a valuation of the sport itself above all else...”<sup>398</sup> More importantly, the myth “contrasts a league saved in the loving image of ‘the amateurs’ with the narrowly escaped dangers posed by selfish black professionals cynically using the sport to garner undeserved riches.”<sup>399</sup>

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<sup>396</sup> Pete Alfano, “Bird Receives Big Contract, Big Welcome,” *Newsday*, June 9, 1979, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>397</sup> “Bird: Being a Millionaire ‘Feels Terrible,’” *Washington Post*, June 18, 1979, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>398</sup> Colás, *Ball Don’t Lie*, 94.

<sup>399</sup> Colás, *Ball Don’t Lie*, 89.

Bird's down-to-earth personality was consistently commented upon in the media, as it was a crucial element of the media's framing of him as a highly relatable representative of the nation's much-aggrieved white working-class men. One anecdote that captures the mystique of the self-described "hick from French Lick" tells of Bird finding his way to a "notoriously rough bar in a dubious part of town" as a naive young rookie with small-town sensibilities. The Celtics' vice president found him, "dressed in overalls and a John Deere baseball cap, bellied up to the bar and chumming it up with the regulars. The locals instantly adored him."<sup>400</sup> "That night in 1979," Jeffrey Lane wrote in *Under the Boards: the Cultural Revolution in Basketball*, "the last white superstar surfaced in Boston. In Larry Bird, Boston fans, like white sports buffs nationwide, revelled in the union of two vanishing icons in one sports hero: the blue-collar factory man and the white athlete."<sup>401</sup> He was frequently "showed up to press conferences in a T-shirt and jeans; he softened his speech with 'Jeez' or 'I suppose'; he drank cheap beer," Lane explained; these quirks indicated that Bird "vehemently rejected the clothes, mores, and status markers of those in the same income bracket."<sup>402</sup> Other popular stories that solidified the "mystique" of Bird in popular consciousness described Bird dropping out of Indiana University because it was too big<sup>403</sup> and getting lost while out on a jog shortly after arriving in Boston and then self-deprecatingly admitting, "I guess I'm still just the Hick from French Lick."<sup>404</sup> Additionally, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that Bird worked as a garbage man after dropping out of Indiana State, and he claimed in his autobiography that he would have been a construction worker—a *literal* hard hat—if he hadn't been a basketball player.<sup>405</sup> As was the case with the media framing of

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<sup>400</sup> Lane, *Under the Boards*, 113.

<sup>401</sup> Lane, *Under the Boards*, 114.

<sup>402</sup> Lane, *Under the Boards*, 119.

<sup>403</sup> Looney, "Two for the Show," 43.

<sup>404</sup> Bob Verdi, "Celtics flying high on wings of a Bird," *Chicago Tribune*, December 11, 1979, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>405</sup> Lane, *Under the Boards*, 118.

Cowens' blue-collar eccentricity, Bird was depicted as the ultimate working-class man, despite his status as professional sports' richest rookie. The erosion of class as a category grounded in material reality and its increasing association with cultural signifiers and values ultimately allowed for this framing—which posited a 22 year-old millionaire as a highly relatable working-class icon—to be successful.

“Why is it,” Lane asked, “that the ‘blue collar’ tag—the endearing notion of the selfless athlete who labors tirelessly for his team and who has presumably so labored throughout his life—sticks best with white athletes in Boston (and in all parts of the country)?” “Perhaps,” Lane continues, “this racial coding reflects the enduring belief that white athletes have to work harder than their more ‘naturally’ gifted black peers do.”<sup>406</sup> The *Boston Globe*'s Bob Ryan noted Bird's “lack of foot speed” but believed that his “general instinct and common sense” would overcome this deficiency.<sup>407</sup> Bird himself was well aware of his weak spots, as the *Washington Post* reported Bird saying “I ain't quick and I don't jump that well. But I can play.”<sup>408</sup> Another article in the *Globe* argued that “what is clear to the naked eye is that Bird has learned quickly that there are intimidators in the NBA who can embarrass you in an instant with their quickness and leaping ability.” “‘I can't really jump all that well,’ said Bird, who also acknowledges that he is no gazelle moving up and down the floor. ‘So I'm likely to do some faking before I shoot...’”<sup>409</sup> The *New York Times*, in 1982, argued that Bird “became a star despite obvious drawbacks,” since “his excellent positioning gets him rebounds, and his uncanny court awareness, and unselfishness, his surprising and def passes, his clutch shots and hustle on defense” helped restore the Celtics to

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<sup>406</sup> Lane, *Under the Boards*, 119.

<sup>407</sup> Bob Ryan, “Bird plays team game,” *Boston Globe*, June 9, 1979, ProQuest Archiver.

<sup>408</sup> Thomas Bowell, “Auerbach Halo Shines Anew,” *Washington Post*, December 6, 1979, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>409</sup> Larry Whiteside, “Bird wows them—even as he learns,” *Boston Globe*, November 30, 1979, ProQuest Archiver.

their former glory.<sup>410</sup> Bob Ryan, in another article written well before Bird's NBA debut, declared that Bird possessed an "innate understanding of the game of basketball" akin to "a John Havlicek or a Bill Bradley, to name two superior players who always recognized the need to blend with four other players." Additionally, Ryan believed, "Bird intuits situations, which right away pits him intellectual miles ahead of strict talent-oriented players such as Elvin Hayes or, yes, Bob McAdoo." He concluded that "it's as if he doesn't even understand what the wrong way on a basketball court really is."<sup>411</sup> This glowing article is a particularly powerful example of the previously discussed racial stereotypes at work. Ryan frames Bird as the inheritor of white basketball genius, and juxtaposes him with two black players whose considerable athletic achievements are dismissed as strictly borne of their innate, unearned ability. This was a clear invocation of the long-standing and "routine association of white athletes with attributes such as mental dexterity, integrity, tenacity, and willpower" which "[established] an effective sense of difference..." Further, this notion of a morally superior white athleticism grounded in intellect and dedication, Hoberman argues, "responds to anxieties that are now part of the white male identity."<sup>412</sup> Isiah Thomas, black player on the Detroit Pistons, received significant backlash after publicly expressing his frustration of the media's perpetuation of the trope in 1987. While his assertion that Bird was "overrated because he was white," received the most attention, Thomas insisted that his real problem was "not so much Larry Bird but the perception of stereotypes about blacks. When Bird makes a great play, it's due to his thinking, and his work habits," Thomas argued. "It's not the case for blacks. All we do is run and jump. We never practice or give a thought to how we play. It's like I came dribbling out of my mother's womb."<sup>413</sup>

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<sup>410</sup> Ira Berkow, "Bird Does the Best He Can," *New York Times*, April 25, 1982, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>411</sup> Ryan, "Bird plays team game."

<sup>412</sup> Hoberman, *Darwin's Athletes*, 50.

<sup>413</sup> Hoberman, *Darwin's Athletes*, 48.

In Bird's ability to overcome his lack of innate physical ability—as compared to his black peers' special genetic advantages—the white working class could see a realm in which their values, their traditions, and their ideas of what constitutes masculinity won repeated success and widespread recognition. The *Boston Globe's* Dan Shaughnessy was surprisingly frank about this, noting that, because of the perception that the NBA “had been taken over by black athletes,” Bird was valorized as a white athlete who could “not only compete” but also prove that “he's one of the best players in the league...The white population probably gets some sort of extra thrill out of that,” he concluded.<sup>414</sup> His ability to fully embody the stereotype of the white athlete, is an “indicator of anxiety about social and economic status in relation to black progress.”<sup>415</sup> Ultimately, Jeffrey Lane concludes, “by ‘outplaying’ the league’s black guys, Bird’s Celtics helped to enact the drama of white dominance and fulfill the (implicit or explicit) desire of putting black people in their place.”<sup>416</sup>

What makes the media's framing of Bird particularly interesting was that it overlooked and minimized—perhaps deliberately, but more likely subconsciously—the very obvious aspects of his style that were much more aligned with the “black” “playground” style of basketball. Lane notes that Bird was “both a showman and a ruthless competitor, committed to dominating and humbling his opponents,” characteristics generally associated with “black” basketball.<sup>417</sup> Similarly, Colás points out that he was very much a “son” of the ABA—the NBA's rival league that was thought to be dominated by “black” basketball—and that he “routinely flouted the conventions of fundamental basketball associated with whiteness and employed instead a variety of maneuvers and skills derived from African American innovations in the game—or, at the very least, from styles primarily emphasized by and therefore associated with African American

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<sup>414</sup> Lane, *Under the Boards*, 134-35.

<sup>415</sup> Hoberman, *Darwin's Athletes*, 118.

<sup>416</sup> Lane, *Under the Boards*, 137.

<sup>417</sup> Lane, *Under the Boards*, 139.

basketball players.”<sup>418</sup> Additionally, Bird was, despite his “aw, shucks” persona and his depiction as a humble country boy, one of the most notorious trash talkers in the NBA. Colás explains that trash talking “first emerged as the distinctive cultural expression of black men on urban playgrounds in the second half of the twentieth century,” and it was a cultural expression that Bird was very, very good at.<sup>419</sup> A sports news website even declared him “the greatest trash talker in NBA history” as recently as 2016.<sup>420</sup> The result of the downplaying of these features of Bird’s game, Colás argues, is that the league was saved through an injection of the “black athletic aesthetic” into the NBA while simultaneously “making it seem safe for white fans to consume.”<sup>421</sup> In the capable hands of Larry Bird, basketball’s Great White Hope, the “black” style was stripped of its associations with blackness and was thus rendered safe and acceptable for the NBA’s largely white fanbase.

Fan response to Bird likely exceeded Auerbach and the Celtics’ wildest expectations. After consecutive years of declining ticket sales, Celtic fans “flocked to the Garden in unprecedented numbers,”<sup>422</sup> while *Newsday* pointed out that “it [was] Bird’s presence that...triggered a season-ticket drive” that was thought to possibly exceed a club record.<sup>423</sup> Bird, according to a longtime Celtics fan, “was ‘holier than God’ to Boston fans.”<sup>424</sup> With Bird leading the way to three NBA championship titles through the 1980s through his reinvigoration of “throwback values, moral character, and true American spirit necessary to repair both a team and

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<sup>418</sup> Colás, *Ball Don’t Lie*, 98.

<sup>419</sup> Colás, *Ball Don’t Lie*, 100.

<sup>420</sup> Nick Birdsong, “Larry Bird is the greatest trash-talker in NBA history,” *Sporting News*, December 7, 2016, <http://www.sportingnews.com/nba/news/larry-bird-60-birthday-celtics-trash-talk-complex/xkodw2lwz5nnlgndhywfd01ms>.

<sup>421</sup> Colás, *Ball Don’t Lie*, 101.

<sup>422</sup> Lane, *Under the Boards*, 133.

<sup>423</sup> Derrick Jackson, “Larry Bird: A Natural With Fans And Players,” *Newsday*, September 26, 1979, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>424</sup> Lane, *Under the Boards*, 133.

an entire league racked by undisciplined black underachievers,”<sup>425</sup> Bird finally restored the proud Celtics, with their vaunted traditions and distinct values, to their former glory.

Conclusion: The Celtics as Defenders of the NBA’s Virtue

The prominent black movie director, Spike Lee, once declared that, to him, “the Celtics represent white supremacy.”<sup>426</sup> Jeffrey Lane points out that “many black basketball fans in Boston identified more closely with the Lakers, the preeminent team of the 1980s that featured an almost entirely black group.” The 76ers, with their crew of larger-than-life players who were always willing to put on a good show for their fans, were also a team adopted by black Bostonian basketball fans looking for a team that seemed less stubbornly and proudly white. The widespread belief that the Celtics deliberately pursued white players didn’t help this defection to rival teams, nor did the very real fact that the Celtics continued to be disproportionately white throughout the 1980s.<sup>427</sup> During the 1985-86 season, for example, eight out of every ten players in the league were black. On the Celtics that season, seven out of ten players were white.<sup>428</sup>

For all of the reasons that the Celtics drove away black fans, the Celtics attracted white players in droves, especially during the Larry Bird era. “For many white fans, in Boston and in all parts of the country,” Lane argues, “the Celtics were fulfilling a privately and not so privately held fantasy that white basketball players could still outplay the black guys.”<sup>429</sup> Not only could they outplay them, but they could outplay them with a specific style of basketball considered to rely upon traditional, old-school, “white” values of hard-work, loyalty, dedication, toughness, grit, selflessness, teamwork, and intelligence. The Celtics, through their supposed exceptional

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<sup>425</sup> Lane, *Under the Boards*, 115-16.

<sup>426</sup> Criblez, *Tall Tales and Short Shorts*, 214.

<sup>427</sup> Lane, *Under the Boards*, 136.

<sup>428</sup> Lane, *Under the Boards*, 135.

<sup>429</sup> Lane, *Under the Boards*, 136.

embodiment of white working-class masculinity—a way of life that was thought to be under attack from all directions—were framed as a noble holdout, valiantly resisting the forces of change that were threatening to degrade the sanctity of the NBA through the infusion of a morally inferior, “black” style of basketball. In an era when white working-class men were perceived as losing their jobs, their status, their unquestioned role as patriarch, their racial privilege, and their very identity, the Celtics were one last example of the ability of white working-class men to achieve success against lazy, greedy, self-centered blacks, blessed with “special advantages” they had done nothing to deserve.

## Conclusion

In December of 2017, the *Boston Globe* published a seven-part series of articles that investigated Boston's reputation as a racist city. One article described a report by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, which found that "the median net worth of non-immigrant African American households in the Greater Boston region is \$8." The *Globe* then published a follow-up article, in which they clarified that the number reported in the article was not a typo. While the household median net worth was \$247,500 for whites, it was, in fact, \$8 for blacks.<sup>430</sup> Not \$80, or \$800, or \$8,000. Eight dollars. In 2015, black median net worth was .003% of white median net worth in Boston. A wealth disparity so ludicrously massive that the paper had to insist that they had not, in fact, reported a typo, does not happen on accident. This unfathomably massive injustice is just one of the legacies of the history of race relations in Boston. One of the primary aims of this paper has been to demonstrate how the study of sport can help clarify and examine the kinds of structural power imbalances and ideologies that allow such dramatic injustices to persist.

"The line that many try to draw between sport and 'the rest of society,' is misplaced and futile," Ben Carrington and David L. Andrews assert. "There is no space 'outside' of society where we can find sports, safely removed from the messy problems that confront both communities and individuals." Instead, they argue that scholars should "turn such assumptions 'upside down' and...take sport seriously as an object for analytical enquiry so as to help us better understand the complexities of modern societies."<sup>431</sup> By studying the media's framing of the

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<sup>430</sup> Akilah Johnson, "That was no typo: The median net worth of black Bostonians really is \$8," *Boston Globe*, December 11, 2017, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2017/12/11/that-was-typo-the-median-net-worth-black-bostonians-really/ze5kxC1jJelx24M3pugFFN/story.html>.

<sup>431</sup> Ben Carrington and David L. Andrews, "Introduction: Sport as escape, Struggle, and Art," in *A Companion to Sport*, eds. David L. Andrews and Ben Carrington (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2013), 10, ProQuest Ebook Central.

1970s Boston Celtics in the context of broader economic, social, cultural, and political trends throughout the country and Boston in particular during that decade, I have followed Carrington and Andrews in attempting to make the case for taking sport seriously as a site of historical analysis. This means that there are important relationships between the treatment of Boston's black athletes, the rhetoric and tropes used by the media in framing the Celtics and their players, and the overwhelming racial wealth gap in Boston. They are not, in any way, distinct, unrelated issues.

Sports hold a place of unique importance in American culture, and the very nature of athletic competition—the physicality, the emotional highs and lows, the tribalism, the invocation of racial and gender tropes—means that it operates almost as a microcosm of broader American society. In studying sport, we can find the United States' militaristic approach to both foreign and domestic affairs, the increasing ostracization of lower- and middle-class families in the pursuit of ever-higher profits, the objectification and degradation of women, and the marked tendency of nationalist rhetoric toward invoking xenophobia, bigotry, and fear of the other. We can see our culture's valorization of aggressive, sometimes threateningly physical expressions of masculinity, the neoliberal impulse to commodify all aspects of human interaction and culture, systems of control and exploitation that subordinate blacks to control and surveillance by powerful white men who can profit off of their labor, and we can see the dehumanization of black bodies and the subsequent reification of long-standing racial tropes. Studying how these issues play out in the realm of sport allows for a narrow focus that dramatizes and clarifies the way power operates in American society. The nature of sport—the sensationalist press, the deeply-felt emotional responses of players, coaches, and fans, the intensity of physical competition—magnifies structural power relationships that operate throughout all of American culture but that sometimes remain invisible in people's day to day lives. In sports, they become impossible to ignore.

Thus, by analyzing the sports media's framing of the Boston Celtics within the specific economic, social, cultural, and political developments of the 1970s—and 1970s Boston in particular—I have been able to analyze the perpetuation of powerful, pervasive, long-standing racial tropes that continue to shape the way Americans think about race, class, and gender. A thorough study of media rhetoric in the 1970s, for example, has revealed that, in the wake of the sweeping cultural and social changes brought about by the 1960s identity-based movements, class began to recede from American political discourse. Conservative politicians, drawing upon the rhetoric used by movements like Black Power, the Chicano Movement, the American Indian Movement, and the civil rights movement, successfully employed what Robinson calls an “identity politics of the dominant” in order to dissolve the tenuous New Deal coalition and force a realignment of the US electorate. Poor, working-class whites—and men in particular—were encouraged to see their limited economic mobility and their loss of status as the result of their racial (and gender) identity, rather than as a product of systemic class exploitation. White working-class men became over-invested in the “white” and “men” parts of their identities, while the “working-class” component slowly came to reflect shallow cultural signifiers rather than actual class position. In other words, working-class came to mean that you drank cheap beer, hated hippies, proudly flew the American flag, and found Archie Bunker's antics to be both comedic and relatable. Class, as an analytical concept, was detached from its material foundations, replaced with empty cultural signifiers, and mobilized by politicians for their own ends.

That's not to say that the white working-class *wasn't* experiencing a crisis of sorts; it just wasn't a crisis centered on their identity as white men, but on their identity as members of the working class. The Vietnam War disproportionately affected this group, since wealthier young men were generally able to get draft deferments. The steadily worsening economy hit them harder, as well, since it resulted in a loss of jobs and economic status. Inflation was harder on the

less well-off, since they had less income to begin with, and upper-middle-class white flight to the suburbs left working-class whites stranded in urban centers with increasing crime rates and poor quality of housing and other services. These were all very real reasons for members of the working-class—white, non-white, men, women, ethnic, and non-ethnic—to feel anxious and insecure, but with class receding from the picture, all that was left was a rhetoric of identity-based grievances. The white working-class, and their advocates in the media, seized upon this language and framed their victimhood as the result of their membership in a *truly* oppressed class—white men.

The story of white male victimhood required a villain to point at as the cause of their dire life situation, and the trope of the lazy black—given special advantages by the government that he didn't earn and that were not available to whites—fit the bill perfectly. Instead of looking at corporations, banks, and politicians from both parties who governed on behalf of the institutions that were putting the working class out of work as the cause of their problems, they pointed to minorities as the source of everything wrong with society. Increasingly, to the white working class, minorities—and blacks in particular—lacked the moral strength to pull themselves up by their bootstraps as European immigrants had done, and instead chose to live off of the hard work of the white man. The perception that minorities were given special advantages by the government in the form of welfare, social programs, and affirmative action heightened the resentment felt by white working-class men toward minorities.

The Boston busing crisis combined all of these issues and thrust them into the national spotlight. Boston's working-class, white ethnic neighborhoods—South Boston, East Boston, and Charleston in particular—became symbols of angry white backlash to perceived attacks by minorities and their white, liberal elite backers. Black students were framed as culturally and morally deficient, and thus the *real* problem with Boston's school system, and attempts to

desegregate the schools were conceptualized as attempts by liberal elites to destroy the self-determination of ethnic whites. Although anti-busing rhetoric often took aim at these liberal elites, the attacks generally lacked a critique of structural power imbalances in society and focused instead on the irrational bigotry that liberal elites obviously felt toward the victimized white ethnics. Resistance to busing was articulated around white victimhood and cast poor blacks as the enemy, rather than acknowledging the fact that both poor blacks *and* poor whites were receiving inadequate educational opportunities. White, working-class residents of Boston's ethnic enclaves saw themselves as besieged underdogs, stubbornly resisting the forces of change that threatened to destroy their values and way of life—forces that were symbolized by lazy, greedy, morally deficient black people.

In this context, the media's framing of the Boston Celtics as a bastion of the endangered "white" style of basketball takes on remarkable political relevance. The Celtics, like Boston's white, working-class residents, were valiantly resisting the sweeping changes threatening to destroy the values that they held dear. In the NBA, black players were steadily becoming more dominant, both in terms of numbers and style, and rather than depicting "black" basketball and "white" basketball as two different, value-neutral approaches to the game, they were placed in a moral hierarchy in which "black" basketball was a force to be resisted at all costs. It was entirely possible for "black" basketball to be depicted as lighthearted, entertaining, and requiring quick thinking and improvisational abilities, but it was instead framed as self-centered and technically inadequate, and the black players who practiced this style were perceived as greedy, selfish, and blessed with a "natural" athletic ability that meant that they had no use for hard work and dedication. "White" basketball players, on the other hand, had no choice but to rely upon their own hard-work, intelligence, and toughness, as their opponents were granted genetic "special advantage" that made white players the perpetual underdogs.

In Boston, white stars like John Havlicek and Dave Cowens were seen as noble defenders of “white” basketball and its virtues, and were framed in the media using the long-standing trope of the hard-working, intelligent white athlete. Both were regularly framed as underdogs who had to work exceptionally hard for every single point, rebound, and assist, since they were up against naturally gifted black giants like Wilt Chamberlain and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Black Celtics players, meanwhile, were regularly mistreated and dismissed, both by the media and the Celtics organization. Players like Paul Silas and Jo Jo White, thought at one point in time to be upstanding embodiments of “Celtics pride,” eventually came to be seen as problematic black athletes, overconfident of their own worth to the team and unwilling to sacrifice for the good of the team. During the Celtics’ dark years in the late 1970s, black players like Sidney Wicks, Curtis Rowe, and Bob McAdoo were castigated in the media and blamed for the team’s fall from grace. They were convenient scapegoats—the media could frame them as the embodiment of everything “wrong” with the NBA, and pin the team’s marked decline on the invasion of the “black” style of basketball into the old-school, “white” Celtics organization. This meant, of course, that the remedy was a reinstatement of traditional Celtic ways—and who better to restore the Celtics to their former glory than the NBA’s penultimate Great White Hope, the “hick from French Lick,” Larry bird.

Bird came at a time when both the Celtics and the NBA in general was facing declining ticket sales and television viewership numbers. The league was perceived as “too black,” a serious problem given the fact that the majority of the NBA’s fanbase was white. Violence and drug use were seen as widespread problems throughout the league, and many found themselves longing for the days when whites dominated the league. Bird was framed as embodying “whiteness” both on the basketball court, with his selfless play, hard work, and remarkable passing ability, and in real life, with his overall-wearing, beer-drinking persona. Bird was the blue-collar savior of the NBA, living proof that the values associated with white working-class

masculinity could be successful in holding back the forces of change and in restoring the league—and America more broadly—to a state of former glory.

The fact that the language used by the sports media to frame black players and teams and to juxtapose them with white players and teams was strikingly similar to the language used to articulate white male grievances and opposition to black advancement proves the earlier point that sports—and culture more generally—in no way operate *outside* of society. Instead, the media framing of the Boston Celtics absorbed popular ways of talking about race, class, and gender, and reproduced it within the specific context of professional basketball. Ultimately, the way the Celtics were conceptualized as noble defenders of white working-class masculine ideals and were juxtaposed against a morally suspect “black” style of basketball allowed the media’s framing to operate as a racial project that reified long-standing racial tropes and addressed the anxieties, fears, and resentments of the supposedly victimized white working-class man. This particular racial project allowed working-class whites to indulge in a nostalgic fantasy in which the white man was still dominant, blacks were put in their place, and good ultimately won out over evil.

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