Comparing and Contrasting the Intercollegiate Careers of Charlie Scott and the Fab Five or The Intersection of Space, Place, and Race within the White Imaginary

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Introduction

This paper attempts to examine the impact of the white imaginary on male Black athletes in two different historical and geo-political spaces. Focusing on the intercollegiate careers of Charlie Scott, the first Black student to attend UNC on an athletic scholarship in 1966, and the University of Michigan's 1991 basketball recruiting class, popularly known as the Fab Five provides substantial fodder for this type of examination. Utilizing the theoretical frameworks of Charles S. Mill's *Racial Contract*¹, Thabiti Lewis's *Baller of the New School*², and Amiri Baraka's *Blues People*³ it becomes clear that although Scott and the Fab Five occupy two different geographical and temporal spaces their careers as Black intercollegiate athletes forced them to walk a racial tightrope that left them vulnerable to being discredited and experiencing failure.

While there are many prominent Black athletes that could serve as a catalyst for this type of exploration, including Jack Johnson, Jackie Robinson, O.J. Simpson, Muhammad Ali, and Michael Jordan, expanding an analysis such as this to less known players speaks to how deeply imbedded and overarching the white imaginary is in constructing and influencing the experiences of intercollegiate Black athletes. Ultimately, the intercollegiate careers of Scott and the Fab Five exemplify the power of the white imaginary in different temporal and geo-political locations. Additionally, their intercollegiate careers fortify the concept of the racial tightrope that Black intercollegiate athletes are forced to walk more so than their professional counterparts.

Defining the White Imaginary

Before explicating the specific experiences of Charlie Scott and the Fab Five within the framework of the white imaginary it is necessary to develop a working definition of what the white imaginary is, and how it produces falsified histories of race in the United States. While the white imaginary is a multidimensional phenomenon, Charles Mills provides a comprehensive analysis of what the white imaginary is, and how it operates as a tool for white supremacy. In his book *The Racial Contract*, Mills states that whiteness is "a cognitive model that precludes self-transparency and genuine understanding of social realities. To a significant extent, then white signatories will live in an invented delusional world, a racial fantasyland, a consensual hallucination." The "racial fantasyland" Mills describes can be interpreted as the white imaginary." For Mills, the white imaginary is not just a complete misrepresentation of historical and contemporary realities, but under the doctrine of white supremacy it is validated and normalized.

The production of Charlie Scott and the Fab Five are manifestations of what I have defined as the white imaginary. Their intercollegiate careers, while in different temporal and geopolitical spaces, possessed many similarities. These threads can be traced back to the white imaginary as a tool for white supremacy, as it rewrites reality in the United States.

Charlie Scott signaled a shift in Black America's optimism regarding racial integration. He was forced to walk a racial tightrope that pined his own belief in racial integration against the radicalized backdrop of the Black Power Movement in the mid to late 1960s. Scott marked a shift in racial politics that forced the white imaginary to construct new ways of defying the realities of white supremacy.

While the Fab Five were born into the residual effects of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements they were no less effected by the racial implications of the white imaginary. Although they differed from Scott in how they embodied their Blackness and addressed racial politics, they were constructed by the white imaginary in ways the evoked the same racist sentiment

and dismal silence that Scott had undergone 25 years prior at UNC. Both Scott and the Fab Five created spaces in which the white imaginary was challenged, yet ultimately unfazed. Their intercollegiate careers, and the ways in which their images were produced point to the fluidity and power the white imaginary possesses. Additionally, they serve as case studies for the larger investigation of how geographic space and temporal place intersect with race ritual.

Defining Original New School Ballers & Ballers of the New School

It is therefore important to understand that Charlie Scott and the Fab Five embody two distinct, yet deeply intertwined, movements in the evolution of the male Black athlete. Charlie Scott can be identified as what Thabiti Lewis defines as an Original New School baller; a generation of Black athletes that "pressure[d] America to abide by that promise of equality in freedom." They were Black athletes who "forced America's contradictions into the public sphere, where they had to be dealt with like never before, and "whose actions required more courageous acts of opposition and sacrifice than BNS themselves." Charlie Scott was part of a generation of Black athletes who were on the front lines of the Jim Crow South and endured explicit de facto segregation in the North. Black athletes of this era were more overtly political overall, and many were engaged with the Civil Rights movement. Scott's role in the UNC Black Student Movement, and the ways in which he innovated the guard position on the court, places Scott within the realm of Original New School ballers.

On the other hand, the Fab Five can be located within a population of Black athletes that Lewis terms "Ballers of the New School" (BNS). BNS, according to Lewis, are "largely apolitical", but spell trouble for white America because they demand rather than ask, and "boldly assert their own modern voice, style, rules, and values." Lewis goes on to assert that BNS are complex because they embody Blackness in ways that both transform and reify imagined white constructions of Black people. BNS are influenced by, and a part of, hip-hop culture, and must be understood as representing "post-civil rights expectations of equality, opportunity, and hope without any compromise or displays of public humility." Although Scott and the Fab Five differ in their influences, actions, and histories, as Original New School ballers and BNS respectively, both of their experiences point to the fierce opposition white America continues to have towards Blackness. Additionally, their experiences uncover the influence the white imaginary contains in constructing Black athletes.

Amiri Baraka's central thesis in *Blues People* provides supplementary threads to the tapestry of Scott's and the Fab Five's intercollegiate experiences. Baraka, writing as LeRoi Jones, states that, "if the music of the Negro in America, in all its permutations, is subjected to a socioanthropological as well as musical scrutiny, something about the essential nature of the Negro's existence in this country ought to be revealed." Essentially, Baraka is delineating a thread that connects the music Black America is producing and listening to, to the experiences of Black America more broadly. He goes even further to proffer that the nature of the United States can also be ascertained through an analysis of Negro music. 12

The theoretical framework that Baraka developed can be successfully applied to the intersection of the historical and contemporary conditions of Black athlete's and the broader experiences of Black America. Mapping the experiences of Scott and the Fab Five allows a deep and complex understanding of how Black America navigates a white supremacist United States. Such an analysis suggests that Scott and the Fab Five are in fact temporal markers in the context of racial history in the U.S. Therefore, they serve as mechanisms for achieving more nuanced

perspectives on how the white imaginary dictates how race is constructed, and how it maintains white supremacy.

Walking a Racial Tightrope: Charlie Scott, the South, and The Threat to Civility

Charlie Scott crossed the Mason-Dixon line from New York City into North Carolina during a tumultuous racial environment. Although he had attended a Black prep high school in North Carolina his decision to attend UNC made him visible to white North Carolinian's for the first time. As a result of V.O. Key's 1949 study on Southern politics, North Carolina had enjoyed a long standing image as an "inspiring exception to southern racism." However, the exception to racism that V.O. Key was inspired by was in reality sustained by what historian William Chafe describes as "a pervasive commitment to civility as the value that should govern all relationships between people." This commitment to civility was the cornerstone of North Carolina's "progressive mystique."

The "progressive mystique" that white North Carolina had imagined, was indeed imagined. The civility that had dictated race relations in North Carolina, and as Chafe points out perhaps all America, ¹⁶ was civility maintained for the purposes of enforcing white supremacy. Chafe indicates that Black individuals were "victims of civility, [they] had long been forced to operate within an etiquette of race relationships that offered almost no room for collective self assertion and independence." The white imaginary succeeded in producing a narrative of racial harmony in North Carolina that prided itself on its liberalism. However, it is clear that civility for white North Carolina meant suppression for Black North Carolina. At the same time Charlie Scott attended UNC the imagined liberalism that existed for over a decade in North Carolina was met with intense opposition from a militant and radicalized Black Power Movement.

While Charlie Scott was a racial trailblazer, he attended UNC at a time when the positive prospects of integration were deeply fading for many Black Americans. The first year he started for the UNC varsity team was the same year that the 1967 Detroit Rebellion occurred.¹⁸ The Detroit Rebellion epitomized the feelings that many Black Americans developed throughout the mid-1960s. The heady optimism for racial equality through non-violent action and legislative reform that was quite prevalent in the 1950s and first few years of the 1960s was quickly eroding, and it seemed that it was impossible to recapture.¹⁹

Scott's position as a Black student athlete starring in a predominant and very visible activity, basketball, caused UNC's Chancellor, Carlyle Sitterson, to write a letter commending Scott on his choice to attend UNC. While this was the only student who received a welcome from Sitterson in such a manner, his noteworthy action as the first Black student athlete to attend UNC on scholarship was otherwise ignored. Sitterson's decision to personally welcome Scott via letter was clearly racially motivated, yet Scott's race went completely unmentioned.

In an attempt to quell any racial implications Scott's arrival at UNC could potentially have, the UNC administration and the mainstream white press clung onto the notion of racial civility by ignoring the subject of race altogether. With imminent threats to the sanctity of the white imaginary becoming more and more real, UNC, as an institution, and the white press, were deeply invested in limiting the narrative of Scott's decision to attend UNC.

Upon Scott's arrival in 1967 Mel Derrick wrote in the *Charlotte Observer* that Scott was going down South "not as a crusading Jackie Robinson burning to crack a color line, but as a young man honestly seeking an education. He wants to be a doctor." Here, Derrick is using the mystique of racial progress to damper white reader's fears that a Black man, from the North, was coming to UNC to challenge the race line that had been drawn by slavery and Jim Crow. In ad-

dition to limiting Scott's Black identity, white newspapers failed to offer any letters to the editor or editorials in the following days of articles written about Scott.²²

The ways in which the discussion of Scott's Blackness, and his stance as a race man, were in large part avoided, were compounded by the racist discourse that surrounded his athletic abilities. An example of these racist underpinnings were clearly espoused by Chuck Noe, a former South Carolina basketball coach. The *Morning Herald* quoted Noe as stating "he'd make a fortune as a pickpocket in New York" in reference to Scott's speed and quickness. This statement seeps with racist sentiment. Relying on multiple stereotypes of Black men, as criminals with inherent athletic ability, would prove to be a connecting thread between Scott and the Fab Five. So much so, that it would seem that journalists writing for the white press came to rely on these stereotypes to assure their white readers that Black male athlete's, while under the control of white institutions, were nevertheless one dimensional spectacles. These narratives, conjured by mainstream press, reified concepts of Black masculinity imagined by white America.

Reflecting the larger distain for integration that was culminating within Black America, the Black press recognized the importance of Scott's decision to become the first Black scholar-ship athlete to attend UNC. Yet, the Black press did not hesitate to voice their concerns that "Black colleges and Black businesses would face stiffer competition to retain talented African Americans." One editorial, entitled "The Diminishing Returns of Integration" suggested that "The Charlie Scott case is but the forerunner of the raids that are certain to be made on Negro society."

The suspicion that many Black North Carolinian's had towards integration was well founded. Although integration was held in the white imaginary as a clear path towards racial progress, the Black experience differed in many ways. The integration of baseball that was initiated when Jackie Robinson signed with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1945 began the gutting of well established Negro Leagues, eventually leading to their complete demise.²⁶

Moreover, Northern cities, like Detroit, were seeing massive migrations by white communities and businesses into the suburbs. The massive white flight that occurred in the 1950s into suburbia, which operated in response to the second great migration of Black Southerners into Detroit, and other Northern|Midwestern cities, led to massive disinvestment in Detroit. Amy Kenyon situates the rise of suburbia, specifically in the case of Detroit, "as a political economy with profound implications for cities and for postwar configurations of American racism."

Therefore, Black individuals and communities in Southern states, like North Carolina, were beginning to notice the dark underbelly of integration. This was occurring in the same historical milieu that saw a massive white exodus from the city limits of Detroit. These historical movements were produced in the white imaginary as something completely different from what they really were. The white imaginary constructed false realities that saw integration in the South as nothing but racial progress. White institutions did not have to worry about, or understand, that integration, for Black institutions, meant severe deterioration. They were not understood as "raids on Negro society" by the white imaginary, and purposefully so. Integration in the South gave ample fodder for the white imaginary to construct the image of frustrated Black Southerners as ungrateful brutes, unwilling to engage in a civil process, and therefore were justifiably silenced with physical force.

In Detroit the white imaginary that viewed movement into the suburbs as a way of achieving the American Dream did not view their exodus from the city of Detroit as playing a key role in constructing the racism that eventually led to the 1967 Detroit Rebellion. Like their Southern counterparts they were able to hide behind the guise of white civility, or , "whiteness as

rightness²²⁸, to demonize and criminalize Black communities who understood that dismantling the institution of white supremacy was nonnegotiable in their fight for racial justice.

Scott's temporal and geo-political location coalesced with his involvement in the Black Student Movement (BSM) during his time at UNC. Unlike Robinson whose on field actions were able to suffice as a political statement²⁹, Scott was constructed by the white imaginary in a time that saw Black athletes becoming increasingly politically engaged.³⁰ Scott was forced onto a racial tightrope that held his desire to help fellow Black students at odds with his need to remain moderate enough to be tolerated by the white imaginary. Involving himself with the BSM may have very well cost him the ACC Player of the Year award in 1969; at the same time he was pressured by Black students to become even more radical in his support for racial equality.³¹ The racial tightrope Scott had to navigate places his experiences within the larger context of Original New School Ballers.

Facing overt racism and having his role as a racial trailblazer ignored caused Scott to feel severe isolation throughout his time at UNC. He lamented in his later years that he had given up his entire social life to play basketball for UNC. ³² Scott's position as a racial trailblazer, specifically in regard to integration, and the fact that this was largely ignored by the white press show how invested the white imaginary is in limiting the breadth of race men like Scott.

The Fab Five, The White Imaginary, and the Extension of Colorblind Racism

The Fab Five entered the University of Michigan following a twenty year struggle for racial justice on campus. Starting in 1970 the University of Michigan's Black Action Movement (BAM) made a list of demands that centered around the increase of recruitment of Black students and the improvement of the campus climate for Black students, and other students of color³³

BAM demanded that the University increase its Black student population to 10 percent by 1973. The administration's failure to commit to BAM's call for action set off a series of protests that led to the administration's eventual acceptance of BAM's demands.³⁴

In the years following the BAM demonstrations of the 1970s, University of Michigan continued to deal with problems of race without properly addressing them. The 1980s brought issues of race on the University's campus into the national public eye. PBS's *Frontline* documentary, entitled "Racism101"³⁵, heavily focussed on the ongoing racial problems at the University of Michigan, depicting "a disturbing portrait of racism and prejudice among young people."³⁶

Only after the white imaginary could no longer hallucinate that race was a nonissue on campus did an institutional initiative to end discriminatory practices take effect. All of the internal studies and student activism organized over a period of two decades were not enough to force the white imaginary into believing that racism existed as a problem worth attending to. Much like North Carolina, and America more broadly, it took an extreme portrayal of racism to admit that race was a central factor in shaping American life.

Moreover, the white imaginary was able to avoid the deep seeded historical racism that was embedded in the campus by labeling the "Michigan Mandate" a vision for a multicultural university.³⁷ Ignoring the ugly history of institutional racism that continues to exist on campuses, and the U.S., more broadly, is a way for the white imaginary to manipulate histories and superimpose the myth of racial progress over the necessity to grapple with racist histories. The "progressive mystique" that characterized 1960s North Carolina was alive and well as the Fab Five arrived at the University of Michigan in 1991.

The University of Michigan's Fab Five was the title, coined by white media, given to the 1991 recruiting class of the Michigan Wolverines basketball team. Team members included Chris Webber, Jalen Rose, Jimmy King, Juwan Howard, and Ray Jackson. Webber and Rose were both born and raised in Detroit while Howard was a Chicago native, and King and Jackson were from Plano and Austin Texas, respectively. It is well known that this was one of the greatest recruiting classes of NCAA basketball history.

The Fab Five embodied almost everything about BNS. They were ballers who "defiantly reject[ed] century-old postures and expectations of being temperate, peaceful, and pious to 'prove' to the world they [were] good and should be accepted."³⁸ Instead the Fab Five were interested in shocking the world. They brought hip-hop into the locker room, wore black socks, for no political reason, sported tattoos, and shaved their heads.³⁹ These were all ways that, consciously or not, challenged the comfortability of white audiences and sports writers. It forced white America to either grapple with race, or perpetuate the implementation of the white imaginary. The same white imaginary that avoids discussing race at all costs, while utilizing racist stereotypes to frame deracialized constructions and criticisms of Black athletes like Scott.

The arrival of the Fab Five called the imagined racial progress that had been made been made since the Detroit Rebellion and the denial to nominate Charlie Scott as the ACC Player of the Year for challenging acceptable Blackness into question. Had racial progress been made over this 25 years span? Or had the white imaginary constructed yet another cloak for racism to hide behind? White reactions, particularly from white media like *USA Today* and *Sports Illustrated*, to the Fab Five would prove that the racialized underpinnings that influenced white constructions of Black masculinity throughout history were alive and well in the white imaginary of the 1990s.

It is important to understand that much like the abundance of white jazz critics that Amiri Baraka critiques as having the inability to really understand what jazz is⁴⁰, the Fab Five's BNS style of play was consistently misunderstood by white newspapers and critics. The positive connotations associated with "smart" and "team" play which were always coded as white, and always held in contrast to the Fab Five, are manifestations of the racial contract Mills dissects. Lewis describes the racial contract as "responsible for the tag of 'bad' man of immoral stance that is often dumped on athletes of color. According to those who construct images of 'good' and 'bad' style the white aesthetic is the only aesthetic of merit". The rise of BNS within college basketball challenged white perceptions of how basketball should be played, and while, like Scott's presence as a Black athlete at UNC, it was tolerated, it was not free of fierce opposition and racially influenced criticism.

White newspapers, like *USA Today*, reified racist assumptions created by the white imaginary that labeled Black athletes as academically inept, and in need of white supervision and guidance. An article written by Bob Wojnowski⁴¹ relied on multiple racial stereotypes. He portrayed the Fab Five, especially Jalen Rose, as a bunch of goofy kids who enjoyed being coached under the gentile patriarchal model of Coach Fisher. In addition, the article quotes one of the white players, James Voskuil, asking, "how many practices we got left...I've got a paper due Tuesday and two exams next Thursday." The juxtaposition of Rose, a goofy Black youth, and Voskuil, a white upperclassman who was more concerned with his academics speaks volumes about how much influence the white imaginary had on how the Fab Five were constructed. White newspapers used every chance they had to pin the Fab Five as young guys who liked to clown around in order to reinsert the "old racial politics that (white) America is so fond of" under the guise of youthfulness.

Unlike Charlie Scott, who was expected to be better as a student and an athlete⁴⁴ the Fab Five were confronted with a different racist perspective concocted by the white imaginary. As stated by Harrison and Valdez, Black student athletes in the 1990s were "consistently bombarded with lowered expectations from peers, faculty members, and society as a whole who have preconceived notions about their academic ability." These lowered expectations, and the excuses given for having them, in conjunction with the inability of white America to adequately understand BNS mentality set up very different, but scarily familiar, forms of racial barriers that are beholden to the racial contract. These similarities mark a clear thread connecting Charlie Scott and the Fab Five.

Wojnowski's article continues with a quote from one the trainers for the Wolverines:

You have to understand, these are guys who haven't had many limits in their lives...Whatever they've wanted, they've gotten. I think now they're looking for some limits, some guidelines. When you give them the limits, they adhere to them. It's when you're ambiguous that they'll take all they can get.⁴⁶

It is curious to think that five Black athletes who had been corralled into a world of white domination (NCAA) have "gotten whatever they've wanted." Amiri Barak's stance that "it is only natural that their [white] criticism, whatever its intention should be a product of that society, or should reflect at least some of the attitudes and thinking of that society." Fings true in the perspective of the Wolverines trainer. His conceptualization of the world, deeply influenced by the white imaginary, did not see the attitude and demeanor of the Fab Five as an embodiment of BNS. He viewed the Fab Five as kids who needed to be taught, by the white establishment, how to become men in accordance with the white aesthetic. His intention, consciously motivated or not, was to reproduce the Fab Five as model minorities to legitimatize white racism. The white imaginary prevented this trainer from understanding the "deep meanings and tensions entrenched in how [Black] athletes express themselves."

Bryan Burwell's article *Why are we so afraid of Michigan*⁵⁰ written for *USA Today* in 1993 goes deeper into the white imaginary's deracialization of the Fab Five. Burwell's article is interesting because while it eventually discusses the influence race has on the style of ball the Fab Five play, it is prefaced with Burwell's declaration that the fear "mainstream" America had of the Fab Five was "purely generational; much like Elvis' pelvic gyrations caused the 1950s older generation to fall into a hide the women and children mentality."⁵¹ Framing the fear of the Fab Five by "mainstream" America as being purely generational is problematic on two levels. Firstly, attributing the fears "mainstream" America had of the Fab Five to generational divides completely sweeps the racial implications of those fears under the rug. Much like the imagined progressivism of North Carolina in the late 1960s Burwell's article attempts to quell underlying racial issues by ignoring them, refocusing the issue on something everyone can swallow. Secondly, by using the euphemism "mainstream" to replace white, Burwell makes whiteness invisible, and therefore barely glosses over the real issue of white supremacy in all aspects of life, including sport. In this case the white imaginary misremembers the immense impact race has in constructing popular culture.

Finally, the fact that white, male, consumption dominated predominantly Black sports like basketball and football in the 1990s signify a shift in the role of the Black athlete post civil rights. Whereas players like Jackie Robinson were seen as emblems of hope for American racial integration, and players like Scott viewed with diminishing optimism as to whether integration in sport could lead to broader racial equity; Black athletes in the Fab Five era served as raw material for white consumption. This has been compounded by the horrific exploitation of the NCAA

to accelerate the feeding frenzy of Black bodies by white America. Although economic vitality was always viewed as an important factor in integrating professional sports by owners, as profit making mechanisms the Fab Five witnessed their bodies go on sale, for the white public, without legally receiving a dime for the revenue they produced.

Conclusion

By comparing and contrasting the intercollegiate careers of Charlie Scott and Fab in relationship to their temporal space and historical place a chance to map their experiences as Black athletes within the larger context of North/South and 1960s/1990s dichotomies becomes possible. Moreover, a larger exploration into how space, place, and race produced the experiences of Black athletes more broadly can be achieved. Historically contextualizing Scott and the Fab Five's experiences within white/black race relations that developed in these different temporal and geo-political spaces make it possible to critically assess how mainstream, white, media (re)constructed racialized conceptualizations of Scott and the Fab Five for white audiences and the white imaginary.

Furthermore, while Scott and the Fab Five were manufactured for white audiences in seemingly different ways, and in accordance with the temporal and historical spaces in which they were located, upon further investigation it becomes clear that although the rhetoric and content used may have differed, both of their experiences were informed by an imagined racial progress which seeks to ignore, or at the very least minimize, race as a central factor in how one experiences the United States. The imagined racial progress that threads together the white constructions of who, and what, Charlie Scott and the Fab Five were, conflates with the broader belief that racial progress has been made, and that race relations, in the U.S, continue to get better. This imagined racial progress simultaneously demonizes Black, masculine, bodies that attempt to obtain racial equity that challenge, or fall outside of, white, patriarchal, cultural norms. Examining Scott and the Fab Five within these contexts calls for the recognition that their intercollegiate experiences are invested in, and dispute, white notions of racial progress, especially as they interact with white constructions of Black masculinity.

Notes

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 - 4. Charles Mills, The Racial Contract. (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1997.), 18.
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- 6. Thabiti Lewis. *Ballers of the New School: Race and Sports in America*.(IL: Third World, 2010.), 54.
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 - 8. Ibid., 25.
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- 11. LeRoi Jones. *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. (N.p.: Grenwood, 1963.),X.

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 - 31. Ibid., 126.
 - 32. Ibid., 112.
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- 41 Thabiti Lewis. *Ballers of the New School: Race and Sports in America*.(IL: Third World, 2010.)., 25
 - 41. USA Today, March 18, 1992.
 - 42. Ibid.
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