

# Writing Baseball into History: The *Pittsburgh Courier*, Integration, and Baseball in a War of Position

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College basketball player Toni Smith earned public ire and admiration in February 2003 by refusing to face the American flag during the national anthem. Her repeated performance, which expressed both opposition to a war in Iraq and her lack of respect for a flag that had been used to justify racist acts against African and Native Americans, brought a discussion of these issues into the mainstream sports media.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, it triggered an intense backlash from fans and sports writers who insisted that sports rhetoric should be free of politics.<sup>2</sup> The desire to separate sports and politics fails to acknowledge, of course, the political statements implied in traditions that sports fans hold sacred, including nationalist and implicitly pro-war statements produced by the ritual of the national anthem or, in the weeks after 9/11, crowd chants of “U-S-A, U-S-A.” Only resistance, according to this rhetoric, classifies as an intrusion of “politics” into the sports arena. Despite, or perhaps because of, the anger generated by dissent like that of Toni Smith, such eruption of resistance into mainstream American leisure time offers protesters crucial access to both a visible national space and a public dialogue. While Smith and other athletes have intuited the importance of this public position to a resistance movement, theorists have rarely identified sports as a crucial site of resistance, perhaps seeing it in traditional Marxist terms as simply a superstructural, cultural expression of dissent. The necessity of combining cultural and economic struggles is by no

means a revelation to cultural studies and American studies scholars, nor to most contemporary Marxists, who, for decades now, have fused the cultural and political in academic work. I maintain, however, that the mainstream sports media offers a possible venue for such a mixed cultural-economic analysis of capitalist society. In particular, I will examine segregated baseball of the twentieth century (and popular discourse about it) as one site in a larger anti-hegemonic, Marxist project. As a site of both play and capital accumulation, the segregated diamond assumed a limited role in a Gramscian “war of position.”<sup>3</sup>

In the 1930s and 1940s, major league baseball (MLB) was a scene of American identification, segregated masculine performance, and lucrative accumulation. Although white women emerged briefly during World War II as skirt-wearing ballplayers in Phillip K. Wrigley’s All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL), black men and women were forced to the margins of America’s public leisure time. But as recent historical accounts of baseball have increasingly made clear, African American and Latin American ballplayers generated an alternative public sphere in the “Negro Leagues,” a set of professional black baseball teams that emerged in the early twentieth century and lived on until the 1950s.<sup>4</sup> In the 1930s and 1940s, when the Negro leagues were at their prime and teams were owned and managed largely by black entrepreneurs, segregated play was simultaneously a source of anger among players, fans, and owners and a means of building wealth in the black community. As Negro league players displayed their talents in barnstorming exhibitions, entered major league stadiums on off-days, and took on major league players during black-white exhibitions, they performed a challenge to white supremacist beliefs. But, like Toni Smith’s silent performance in front of the flag, resistant play was not sufficient to change the social structure. Just as Smith supplemented her physical stance with a verbal one, the anti-racist impulses of the Negro leagues needed a narrator, and the black American press took on that role. Especially as the United States entered World War II and average white Americans began to adopt anti-fascist discourse, the black press analyzed and deplored the disjunctures between rhetorical American justice and real American racial oppression. The *Pittsburgh Courier* was particularly famous for its “Double V” campaign, which insisted that a victory abroad must be accompanied by a victory against racism at home.

We might best understand the link between the black press (for my purposes, specifically the *Pittsburgh Courier*) and the Negro leagues, which are both primarily cultural sites of resistance, through the lens of Gramsci’s hegemony. Gramsci argues that a revolution must not only seize state power and overhaul the relations of production, it must also establish hegemony in the social sphere. Hegemony, for him, is the power a group wields over society by earning either tacit or explicit consent for its leadership, and it is notoriously precarious, constantly challenged and reinforced. In the battle over hegemony and the state, Gramsci identifies the “war of movement” and the “war of posi-

tion” as tactics that may be adapted from military science to serve the needs of political science. The war of movement, or a direct attack upon the state, succeeded most famously in Russia’s October Revolution. The Bolsheviks seized power in Russia solely through a war of movement, Gramsci holds, because the underdeveloped cultural and social sphere in Russia meant correspondingly weak ideological support for bourgeois democracy and tsarism. A revolution in Western Europe, however, where the hegemonic power had fortified its position through cultural ideology, would be more difficult, requiring not simply a war of movement but a war of position. Like the trench warfare of World War I, a war of position challenges the ideology steeped in bourgeois culture before attempting to take on state and economic powers. This political and cultural war would raise the consciousness of the workers, leading them to abandon hegemonic culture and to join in the decisive war of movement that would finally capture the state.<sup>5</sup> By adopting Gramsci’s “war of position,” I do not mean to suggest that the contemporary or World War II-era American situation precisely mimics Gramsci’s vision of Western Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. Instead, I posit that the intense ideological success of American hegemony, referred to perhaps most bleakly by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer as the “culture industry,” makes the United States a prime target of a Gramscian “war of position.” Anti-racist work, whether or not it explicitly aligns itself with a revolutionary program, is a key component of that struggle.

Organized sports and the discourses that surround them offer venues for such anti-racist work. The *Pittsburgh Courier*’s attempt to force the integration of major league baseball, for instance, produced a public dialogue that was neither Marxist nor anti-capitalist but that did contribute to the development of African American anti-hegemonic consciousness. *Courier* staff earned their place in the war of position by refusing to isolate their commentary in the cultural sphere. They publicized alternate decodings of baseball and of white popular opinion in a movement articulated with the larger anti-racist project.<sup>6</sup> In the 1930s and 1940s, the *Courier* lined its columns not only with attempts to integrate baseball but with anti-lynching campaigns, debates over communism, and accounts of national liberation struggles in the colonial world. During these years, while the white American press depicted baseball as an escape valve of play and innocence from the stressors of economic depression and war, the black press politicized and redefined the “national pastime” through the critical discourse of racial oppression.

While I identify the *Courier* as an example of nascent resistance, I have chosen to begin with Toni Smith, a contemporary black female athlete, and not Jackie Robinson or Satchel Paige of the *Courier*’s anti-segregation era, to signal the limitations of the *Courier*’s work. The newspaper challenged white supremacist discourse without disturbing gender or class structures, opening a space for black men to compete with and challenge white men while leaving women at the margins. Today, it is often women, black and white, who have

claimed political spaces in the arena of organized sports. Toni Smith's anti-war statement, Martina Navratilova's adamant foregrounding of her sexuality, Billie Jean King's formation of the Women's Tennis Association to address the gender gap in remuneration, and Sheryl Swoopes's recent decision to come out as a lesbian are only a few examples of women's forays into sports as a site of dissent. Ongoing struggles over the implementation of Title IX suggest that, today, women may need to take the lead in exploiting the Gramscian potential of organized sports.

### Encoding and Decoding Black Baseball

Baseball has traditionally been linked to the "American dream" of individual virtue, nationalism, and upward mobility. Even today, baseball lore frequently recalls the segregated era as a golden age in which Lou Gehrig, Babe Ruth, and Cy Young modeled white manhood on the field. But the sport's contribution to American white male identity has always depended on the black ballplayer as well as the white. Eric Lott argues that American blackface minstrel shows established the black man as the constitutive other that both challenged and confirmed white male subjectivity and sexuality.<sup>7</sup> Black baseball was originally encoded and decoded by the white community to perform a similar function. In fact, many of the earliest professional black baseball teams were established by white businessmen to entertain white customers. Canadian Rod Whitman, for instance, formed a traveling show in 1929 made up of two black baseball teams, a minstrel show, and a band. The teams, dubbed "Texas" and "New York," represented north and south in a duel that pitted darker-skinned players (supposedly "southerners") against lighter-skinned "northerners." Another white owner, whose teams played for white patrons at an expensive hotel, dubbed his African American players the "Cuban Giants" and encouraged them to speak mock Spanish.<sup>8</sup>

In these cases, white owners asked black ballplayers to don a figurative form of "blackface" and perform black identity, as did minstrels (both black and white).<sup>9</sup> Black ballplayers, unlike their white counterparts, did not embody the ideals of free market athletic competition in the eyes of the white public. White spectators viewed them instead as racial others (interpellated in the above instances as either "northern" or "southern" black or Latino) and defined the black baseball player as a caricature of the minstrel and the hyper-masculine, "natural" athlete.

The more stable and organized Negro leagues, established and supported primarily by black businessmen, downplayed caricatured "blackface" entertainment and stressed athletic talent comparable to the white major leagues.<sup>10</sup> Although Negro league owners marketed teams primarily to a black audience, the white public continued to monitor black baseball, albeit more subtly than it consumed baseball "minstrelsy." A dearth of records makes white attendance at Negro league games difficult to trace, but the leagues did attract some white

spectators, particularly for all-star games or exhibitions against white teams. Because few black teams owned their own stadiums, Negro league owners often rented major league stadiums, and white fans may have attended Negro league games while white teams were on the road.<sup>11</sup> According to William Brashler, the Depression of the 1930s further increased white attendance at Negro league games as impoverished white fans found it difficult to afford MLB prices. At the same time, the Negro leagues saw a decline in African American fans, who demanded that ticket prices drop further to accommodate widespread economic hardship. During the Depression, “it wasn’t uncommon, owners lamented, for black teams to play in front of crowds made up mostly of whites.”<sup>12</sup>

Such accounts of white attendance remain disputed. Al Monroe of the *Chicago Defender*, for instance, deplored the lack of white fans at the 1939 East-West all-star game. Of 32,000 fans attending the Comiskey Park event, he held, only 1,500 were white.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, *Pittsburgh Courier* reporters remarked upon the unusual sight of white Major Leaguers at a 1939 game between the Homestead Grays and New York Black Yankees at Forbes Field. On this occasion, the *Courier* estimated the white population at approximately ten percent.<sup>14</sup>

Regardless of the statistical presence of white fans at black ball games, the Negro leagues retained a position—albeit peripheral—in the white fans’ consciousness. The *New York Times*, for example, regularly listed times, locations, and brief summaries of local Negro league games that assumed knowledge of “big names” like pitcher Satchel Paige and slugger Josh Gibson. White fans also clung to a racist gaze despite the official move away from minstrel-style entertainment. The minstrelsy tradition had codified stereotypes of black Americans as singing, dancing entertainers, and black baseball dramatized this trope for white spectators.<sup>15</sup> Babe Ruth supported such an interpretation when, in an interview with the *Pittsburgh Courier*, he argued in favor of integration because “the colorfulness of Negroes in baseball” would increase white attendance.<sup>16</sup> Ruth’s comments reflected the reputation of black teams for a brand of play different from the controlled competition of major league baseball. Despite the real existence of legend and record-keeping in both leagues, for instance, popular opinion associated Major League Baseball with meticulous statistics and black baseball with legend. Josh Gibson, it was said, once hit a ball so high that it fell from the sky across the country the next day—and into an outfielder’s glove. The umpire had little choice but to call Gibson out, “yesterday in Pittsburgh.”<sup>17</sup> The perception of a black “style” of baseball transcended racial boundaries, and as Negro leaguer Cool Papa Bell noted, “in our league they threw the spitter, the emery ball, shine ball . . . mud ball,” pitches outlawed in the white major leagues.<sup>18</sup>

In part, the organizational differences between white and black leagues reflected economic inequalities. Negro league teams had difficulty compiling records, for example, because teams emerged and disappeared rather rapidly as owners struggled to stay financially stable. Likewise, players regularly broke contracts for more lucrative offers in Mexico or the Caribbean. To white spec-

tators, these factors marked black baseball as a disorganized, playful game in opposition to mature, organized white play. According to sports rhetoric, white players competed against black teams either as a precursor to a career in “organized” baseball or as a temporary act of regression. We should also read the distinction in “styles” here as a marker of different relations between capital and labor, which may have been generated by the simple inability of Negro leagues owners to exploit their players as dramatically as MLB owners. In major league baseball of the 1930s and 1940s, players had little control over their contracts. Team owners restrained baseball’s free market by colluding to ensure themselves stable profits and predictable competition.<sup>19</sup> According to the “reserve clause,” a team had permanent control over its players and was permitted to trade or retain them without consent. The Negro leagues’ tradition of contract-hopping prefigured a more modern system of free agency, which, it is important to note, was implemented in response to the legal challenges of African American ballplayer Curt Flood in 1969, who saw the reserve clause as a legacy of slavery.<sup>20</sup> By arguing that the St. Louis Cardinals treated him as a piece of property when they traded him to Philadelphia, Flood embedded the concept of free agency in both racial and economic analyses. The economic analysis that Flood shared with the Negro leagues was a distinctly free market capitalist one, but it did reflect a recognition of the laborer’s rights over those of the owner.

Although the economic differences between the two leagues were real, Ruth’s coding of black baseball as “colorful” did not necessarily reflect an *actual* disparity in styles between the leagues. In fact, MLB owners had few qualms about filling seats through stunts and comic routines. St Louis’s Gas House Gang and the appearance of a little person as a pinch hitter for the St. Louis Browns under Bill Veeck in 1952 privileged entertainment over pure competition.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, in the white leagues such stunts were interpreted by sports writers and fans as individual quirks and anomalies. White players could perform these stunts within organized baseball without disrupting the rhetoric of the baseball diamond. Similarly, the supposed stylistic differences that marked the Negro league style of play as speed-based, emphasizing stolen bases and pitching that included spitballs and shiners (contrary to this reputation, the “power-hitting” style of play also existed in the Negro leagues, embodied in figures like slugger Josh Gibson) were certainly not racial in character. In the 1930s, the speed style of play reflected an era that major leaguers believed they had left behind in response to changing rules and the popularity of power hitters like Babe Ruth.<sup>22</sup> In today’s baseball, as in the 1930s, these styles co-exist, but at the time Babe Ruth made his comments, the distinction expressed disdain for the Negro leagues’ supposed inability to “progress” with white trends.

It is easy to dismiss the racialization of stylistic differences as a problematic essentialism, but, from the perspective of African-American players, the “black style” of play could also challenge the classed and racialized ideology of white baseball. Hopping contracts and barnstorming made explicit the economic root of organized sports that would later be so crucial for Curt Flood, while

“trick” pitches and irregular record-keeping rejected basic American ideologies of “fair” competition. More explicitly, interracial matches that pitted Negro league against major league stars staged the political battle over racism on the ball diamond. During these encounters, white players sacrificed the apolitical purity that supposedly characterized major league baseball and participated in a game that explicitly displayed racial antagonism. Interracial exhibition games, then, forced the politics of race and class onto the ostensibly fair ground of athletic competition.

### Forcing the White Gaze to Speak

White competition and spectatorship played a crucial role in the narrative of black baseball. They did not, however, wholly determine it, nor did they strip black players and fans of cultural and political agency. To the black press, the Negro leagues offered *access* to a white gaze that could be challenged, manipulated, and rewritten. In the summer and fall of 1939, the *Pittsburgh Courier*'s Wendell Smith published a series of weekly interviews with white players and managers that elicited opinions on black competitors and the color barrier. Black reporters approached forty players and eight managers, cornering the major leaguers in the “shower room” and “exclusive hotel retreats.” The *Courier* proclaimed the piece “revolutionary,” and considering white baseball’s silence about its *de facto* ban on black players, prying definite opinions from so many major leaguers was a feat in itself.<sup>23</sup> Smith refused to grant players neutrality and instead extracted, molded, and publicized white opinion. He aimed to subject these voices to a gaze that crossed racial lines.

This project belonged to the *Courier*'s larger strategy of analyzing and demystifying America’s liberal democratic rhetoric. Such a strategy has recently been outlined by political theorist and activist Eqbal Ahmad, who argues that oppressed groups must “out-legitimiz[e] the enemy” by locating its “primary contradiction.”<sup>24</sup> In the context of the American anti-racist struggle, Ahmad stresses “the importance of having some congruence between American liberal traditions . . . and our rhetoric and tactics.”<sup>25</sup> The *Courier* strove to identify white America’s primary contradictions and to publicize them by garnering a white readership. To this effect, the paper regularly printed the exhortation that “there are plenty of white people who would appreciate our side of the story . . . if they knew it. Pass your *Courier* along to such a friend.”<sup>26</sup> The interviews with white players, then, did not simply reverse the white gaze in favor of a black gaze but forced white gazers to speak (to black Americans and to one another) and to answer for baseball’s supposed meritocracy of free-market competition. Faced with this challenge, white players faltered, and few dared to express overtly racist opinions.

The only hostile responder the staff encountered was Paul “Daffy” Dean, whose published interaction with the black reporters illustrates the *Courier*'s astute strategy. *Courier* staff recorded the encounter in the newspaper:

He did not submit to our questions willingly or graciously . . . He stared at us for a moment, ignoring our offer to shake hands and said rather curtly, "Naw, I don't wanna talk to ya'!" . . . "Hell," he asked suddenly, "kain't ya see I'm busy!"<sup>27</sup>

This "off-the-record" encounter embodies the reporters as well as the interview subject (the reporters are presented as friendly and professionally correct in their willingness to shake hands while Dean appears uncouth and disrespectful). Most strikingly, however, Smith reproduces Dean's racist response in a form that imitates his accent or dialect. These phrases, in fact, are the only ones printed in dialect in the entire series of interviews. When Dean himself finally does grant an interview later in the same story (after being persuaded by teammate Pepper Martin), his dialect drops out of the text. Through this subtle narrative shift, the *Courier* distinguishes between the cooperative behavior of whites, printed in grammatical and presumably corrected English, and their non-cooperative or racist behavior, printed in dialect.

The black press further calls attention to the narrative effect of dialect as a means of condescension. By illustrating the author's willful role in characterization through dialect, the *Courier* highlights and discredits the practice, which appeared frequently in white publications. In 1940, several months after Smith's series of interviews, *Time* published an ostensibly anti-racist piece lauding the talents of "Satchelfoots" Paige<sup>28</sup> while propagating a host of racist stereotypes. An employer of Paige is quoted in "black" dialect: "That boy et mo' than the hosses."<sup>29</sup> Smith's interview with Dean translates racist constructions such as "he et mo' than the hosses" into Dean's equally racist exclamation, "kain't ya see I'm busy," retaliating against white supremacy by framing the black author as the condescending recorder of white dialect.

Wendell Smith's manipulation of Dean's speech also re-inscribes the ballplayer's implicit stance against integration as a minority opinion. While some players evaded the social issue of integration, all conceded that many black athletes could easily succeed in major league baseball—and they named names. As a host of white players hailed Josh Gibson, Satchel Paige, Martin Dihigo, Mule Suttles, and others, black and white readers learned that Negro league baseball was neither invisible to, nor unappreciated by, white professionals. Interviewees cited the talent, not the entertainment value, of their black counterparts, and many white players announced that they had played with and been beaten by black teams. These factors were perhaps not dramatic revelations to those immersed in baseball culture, but such publicity was unusual. The *Courier's* series overtly disputed the avowals of owners who, "in trying to pass the buck, have blamed the ban on the players themselves. They claim that the injection of colored stars into the clubs would bring about friction and dissension among the other players."<sup>30</sup> Smith not only presented player testimony to the contrary but

elicited statements from managers eager to sign black players. “If given permission,” said Phillies manager Thompson Prothro, “I would jump at the opportunity to sign up a good Negro ball player.”<sup>31</sup>

Whether the white players and managers interviewed by the *Courier* looked forward to integration as eagerly as Smith suggested was largely irrelevant to the newspaper’s project. The *Courier* succeeded in opening a space for anti-racist dissent among white players by insisting that their teammates welcomed such sentiment. With Dean standing for the racist minority opinion, Smith presented players supporting integration as models of American respectability. More potently, he decoded white players’ statements as threats to the racist status quo. He constructed allies for the black community (like Jewish player Morrie Arnovich) and internal enemies to white racism (like Prothro, who “seemed he wanted to convince us that he was against [segregation] as much as we were”).<sup>32</sup> By delivering copies of the interviews to each major league owner, Smith further isolated the economic powers as members of a minority while stripping them of their own claims to neutrality and subservience to public and player opinion. White opinion, in the pages of the *Courier*, threatened only its own hegemony.

In addition to providing alternative decodings of white opinion, the *Courier* used its feature series as a forum for engaging in public debates on the economic and social effects of integration. Although every white player interviewed easily named qualified and talented black players, some expressed concern about the social feasibility of integration. As the owners blamed player sentiment, Giants manager Bill Terry cited audience opinion and the prevalence of Jim Crow laws. Traveling with an integrated team, he argued, would cause resentment among teammates due to segregated restaurants and hotels. *Courier* staff reminded him—and readers—that integrated college football had succeeded in conquering such obstacles.<sup>33</sup> Terry’s ill-founded reluctance, the *Courier* concluded, could only be attributed to “personal reasons.”<sup>34</sup> Likewise, reporters refuted Casey Stengel’s claims that integration could be disastrous by pressing its potentially massive economic benefits, especially to depressed major league teams.<sup>35</sup> By publishing such black-white debates, the *Courier* voiced its integrationist position while unmasking the empty racism of white counter-claims. They forced reluctant whites into a direct and published dialogue on race.

In these interviews, the *Courier* employed what Cornel West would refer to as the “structural constraint” of the white gaze as a “conjunctural opportunity.”<sup>36</sup> West’s terminology, as part of his neo-Gramscian framework, highlights the possibilities for individual and collective agency within the limitations of a given historical moment. In this case, the Negro leagues of the 1930s and 1940s served as a conjunctural opportunity for the *Courier*’s anti-racist and anti-segregationist discourse.

## Integration as Incorporation

The movement to integrate baseball also offered a conjunctural opportunity to question the individualist rhetoric implicitly linked to major league baseball. For although the black press widely celebrated Jackie Robinson following his assignment to the Dodgers' farm system in 1945, individualized integration was not what many in the black community had envisioned.<sup>37</sup> In 1933, the *Courier* published a letter from Cuban Stars' president Syd Pollack to Chicago Cubs' president Bill Veeck requesting the integration of an all-black team into the white leagues.<sup>38</sup> Pollack's plan, while not conducive to the eradication of inter-racial barriers, reveals the legitimate fears of the black community regarding integration.<sup>39</sup> The first was the fate of Negro league owners and managers. The demise of Negro league baseball's "big money" bases has rarely been mourned, but such losses annihilated all administrative positions for African Americans in organized baseball for years to come. Major league moguls destroyed direct competitors and incorporated black stars into their own economic system. And while major league salaries for black players rose quickly, African-American ballplayers suddenly found themselves at the mercy of white rather than black magnates. Robinson, Don Newcombe, and Roy Campanella, the first three black players in the white minor leagues, took significant pay cuts in exchange for status in the white leagues.<sup>40</sup> Pollack's suggestion to import an entire black organization into the major leagues countered such problems by stressing black administration as an essential component of integration. Although the strategy remained firmly rooted in capitalist values, it insisted upon defining segregation as an economic rather than simply a social system of oppression. The second fear Pollack acknowledged was that of individualized integration, a practice destined to accord the hegemonic group even greater control. Instead, Pollack proposed an act of *mass* integration, both horizontally and vertically, that would have promoted solidarity among black players while posing a sincere if limited threat to white hegemony in major league baseball.

Moreover, individualized integration cultivated the problematic concept of racial representation. Here, Gayatri Spivak's identification of two forms of representation may be useful: representation as mimesis (*Darstellung*) and as proxy (*Vertretung*).<sup>41</sup> In the context of baseball, Branch Rickey positioned Robinson as a proxy for the black ballplayer and, by extension, for the black man in a white social space. In addition to its obvious racial reductivism, Robinson's role as representative damaged the anti-racist cause on three levels, which I will outline in greater detail below. First, Rickey carefully elected Robinson to minimize racial threat and confrontation, a practice that led to black incorporation in lieu of direct confrontation and resistance. Second, as a representative in a sports arena, Robinson—and later a host of black ballplayers—embodied only the African-American *male* in the white public eye. The trope of baseball as American society erased both black and white women from the site of political and social contestation. Third, representation, as Spivak argues, entails both "re-

presentation” and “speaking for.”<sup>42</sup> As an athlete, Robinson acted only as a visible (and consequently consumable) but silent representative within hegemonic culture. In turn he was represented (*darstellen*) primarily through the media—both black and white. Despite Rickey’s construction of a silent representative, I will maintain, the black press demonstrated an awareness that resistance in baseball necessitated both a performing body and a counter-hegemonic, collective voice.

### A Non-Threatening Representative

When Branch Rickey engineered baseball’s integration in the mid-1940s, he took every opportunity to secure white hegemony while maximizing his opportunities for economic and cultural profit. Robinson’s willingness to remain passive in the face of racist slurs has frequently been cited as a critical component of Rickey’s decision, and this anecdote highlights Rickey’s desire for a non-threatening transition. In 1945, Robinson was a young player for the Kansas City Monarchs who received limited press.<sup>43</sup> Unlike veteran stars who would have faced a smaller risk of professional failure in the major leagues, Robinson had a less-developed public ego to maintain, and as a graduate of UCLA, his education mitigated the cultural threat to the white public (ironically, considering the low educational level of many white major leaguers).<sup>44</sup> As the sole black man in the league, Robinson had little choice but to conform to MLB standards. Integration, contrary to proposals expounded in the black press, involved not the convergence of black and white professional circuits but the absorption of black talent into a white enterprise. Robinson’s entry into the major leagues significantly led to a boom in ticket sales among black fans across the nation while sales in Negro league stadiums began a fatal slide. Rickey, in effect, defused the black threat to white baseball through the standard hegemonic technique of incorporation.

### Representation for Males Only

But it was not only Rickey who placed limitations on the *Courier*’s anti-racist work. By focusing on baseball as a site of integration and opportunity, the *Courier* excluded black women. This was particularly significant because, between the years of 1943 and 1954, several of which overlapped with the *Courier*’s integration campaign, black women athletes were also barred from the short-lived women’s professional baseball league, the AAGPBL. Integration for female athletes did not draw the *Courier*’s attention even though, in the years following integration, black women excluded from the AAGPBL found a space with the men on declining Negro league teams.<sup>45</sup> During the 1950s, three women played for Negro league teams. Instead of receiving the intense focus the *Courier* had given to male integration, however, these women athletes gained attention primarily as novelties. The conjunctural opportunity seized by the black

press and the black community to end baseball's color barrier only opened a space for interracial, competitive masculinity. As black male athletes ascended economically and socially into the interracial public eye, black women remained the invisible targets of segregation. The public performance of masculinity through baseball likewise elided the labor and oppression of the vast majority of black males. While the black male public gained a measure of vicarious masculine pride in black major leaguers, organized apartheid continued to regulate daily activities. Even Rickey's Brooklyn Dodgers (and many teams in the ensuing decades) did not employ their economic and cultural capital to save Robinson from segregated hotels and restaurants. Symbolic integration in the cultural public sphere, then, failed to translate into everyday acts of integration for both men and women.

### **The Silent Representative in Ahistoric National Space**

The symbolic nature of integration was problematic even for black fans and players on the ballfield. According to the ideology of American sports, baseball is a platform for the silent performance of masculinity and not a venue for political activism. Contrary to the social and economic realities that generated segregation and its official demise, baseball rhetoric situates the field in ahistoric national space. By "ahistoric" I mean several things. First, within a specific historical moment the baseball diamond exists, according to its ideology, as a space of refuge. Competitions do not account for the economic and social circumstances of either players or fans. And although baseball cannot escape history in fact (i.e., the rapid expansion of corporate sponsorship, rise in ticket prices, etc), that history usually emerges to confirm nationalist identity or to deplore the contamination of the sports arena. The nationalist response of organized sports, for instance, to the events of September 11, 2001, was viewed by fans and announcers as "natural," not as a political statement, and the current debate over steroid use reflects the deterioration of a pure notion of baseball sportsmanship. Second, baseball exhibits an obsession with abstract, statistical success. Players compete not simply against each other but against the entire history of baseball through the archives of statistics and records. While the achievements of Josh Gibson and Satchel Paige are considered "unofficial" and unreliable due to the inconsistent record-keeping practices in black and Latin American leagues, those of Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig carry no qualifications about lesser competition (although segregation affected the pool of available talent for white as well as black players) or the specificities of time and place. Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa compete unequivocally with Babe Ruth and Hank Aaron, and absolutely valuable concepts like the ".300 hitter" render historical materiality largely insignificant in the baseball narrative.<sup>46</sup> This is not to say that today's sports writers do not invoke history in relation to baseball. In fact, history emerges most prominently in sports writers' dialogues about today's baseball, as they are unable to escape the contexts of scandals about steroid use

or exorbitant salaries. This more complex present is compared with an historically vacant “golden age.” History is invoked selectively so that representatives of the segregated “golden age” earn the ahistoric space of baseball ideology and those who disrupt that ideology exist in separate, historical locations. Negro league history, then, which has been accepted into and celebrated by mainstream baseball history, always inhabits its own space lest it intrude on the ahistoric spaces awarded to the Yankees’ Ruth, Gehrig, and Mantle.

I need hardly justify my argument that baseball is a “national” space, considering its classic appellation as the “national pastime.”<sup>47</sup> Baseball is, to employ Anne McClintock’s terminology, a form of “voyeuristic commodity spectacle” that lauds the democratic ideal and solidifies national identity through common consumption.<sup>48</sup> Black players entering the major leagues were celebrated as representatives of a race. In McClintock’s terms, they more accurately became commodities for national consumption. Chosen for his very willingness to remain silent, Rickey designed Robinson to act as a *partial* representative. He was to be seen and not heard. Performance, Rickey and others stressed, would speak for him. Athletic talent, however, has little capacity to perform a social analysis of oppression, and Robinson’s representative status paradoxically stripped him of the right to articulate either his own actions or to respond to the racism of others.

## Writing Baseball into History

In the ahistoric, nationalist space of baseball, Robinson’s career functioned simultaneously as an ideological rupture and, in David McGimpsey’s description of Ken Burns’s musings on integration, “as the fulfillment of baseball’s moral destiny.”<sup>49</sup> The game of baseball, its ideology instructs fans, is inherently democratic and anti-racist. The taint of historically racist politics erupts in baseball lore only in the moment of integration itself and not in the years of baseball glory attached to Ruth and Gehrig. By returning baseball to its teleology, Robinson plucked the game from its fatal encounter with history and returned it to an ahistoric, democratic space.

The black press of the segregation era, however, refused to dislocate baseball from social history. While black ballplayers remained silent performers ready for mass consumption, the black press inserted anti-racist discourse and social consciousness into baseball’s commodity spectacle. The *Pittsburgh Courier* contextualized and gave voice to the anti-racist struggle by articulating integration with other movements. In the 1940s, the *Courier* embedded the movement to integrate baseball into its “Double V” campaign: victory against the Axis abroad and against racism at home.<sup>50</sup> Although this movement was by no means revolutionary, it offered a critical look at American imperialism that was unusual in the mainstream white press. The *Courier* explicitly took its war on racism beyond U.S. boundaries by expressing solidarity with the colonized peoples of Africa, arguing that the fight against fascism necessitated ending

colonialism as well. Although certainly limited in its analyses of economics and gender, the *Courier*'s anti-racist campaign attacked white American hegemony from numerous fronts, including the cultural front of baseball. In January 1947, Robinson's picture appeared with those of eleven other African Americans who had played prominent roles in the previous year. The first black major leaguer, the first black U.S. minister to Liberia, and the first black president of Fisk University, the *Courier* suggested, all contributed to the war against racist hegemony.<sup>51</sup>

For the black press, baseball was crucial as a *cultural* articulation of a political project. Roy Wilkins of the *Michigan Chronicle* argued that

the people who go to baseball games do not, in the main, go to lectures on race relations. . . . [T]he millions who read box scores very likely have never heard of George Washington Carver. But Jackie Robinson, if he makes the grade, will be doing a missionary work with these people that Carver could never do.<sup>52</sup>

Wilkins's assessment of the white public is correct, and unfortunately remains relevant today, but it awards too much influence to the performance of sport alone. The contextualizing efforts of the black press provided the necessary analytic narrative to accompany the visual spectacle of the game. And while the "war of position" waged by the *Courier* and Negro league fans and players won its immediate goal of integration, it failed to evolve into a larger challenge to the capitalist or racist system. The silent Robinson of the 1940s has morphed into today's symbols of baseball's multicultural democracy—figures like Alex Rodriguez, Barry Bonds, and Ichiro Suzuki.

Today, popular white male culture employs what Robyn Wiegman terms the discourse of "liberal whiteness" to rewrite the history of the color barrier. Liberal whiteness, as the hegemonic racial discourse in late twentieth-century America, does not rely solely on the universalization of whiteness as many critics have assumed. Instead, Wiegman argues, whiteness clings to particularity by minoritizing whites (i.e., as victims of affirmative action) or white origins (the historical racialization of the Irish). Whites, then, both suffer and overcome the effects of minoritization, leaving a "newly innocent whiteness" in place of the old traditions of segregation and white supremacy.<sup>53</sup> Significantly, the minoritizing of whiteness reverses the techniques that the *Courier* found useful sixty-five years ago. Today, the discourse of multiculturalism and anti-racism has triumphed, but social and economic equality have yet to be realized. As Wiegman notes, the multiculturalist rhetoric of post-segregation baseball culture elides the structures of oppression and exploitation still in place both in the business of baseball and in that of society at large:

Indeed, we might say that even as liberal whiteness has overseen the rise of “diversity” in the popular public sphere, the nation-state’s capitulation to capitalism—in the deaths of welfare and affirmative action, on the one hand, and the heightened regulation of immigrant populations and borders, on the other—has extended the material scope of white privilege.<sup>54</sup>

The publicized baseball diamond of the twenty-first century, peopled disproportionately with wealthy African American and Latino men, confirms America’s national post-racist identity to an eager public. Major league baseball has embraced Negro league history in recent years as a celebration of the new era of “post-racism.” Negro league players have been inducted into the Hall of Fame and Jackie Robinson remains an ultimate hero in baseball lore. Major league baseball has even adopted Negro league history as its own history and celebrates the legacy of MLB’s “enlightened” integration in Negro league merchandise such as caps, jerseys, and t-shirts. The proceeds—the profits of segregation—go solely to major league baseball.<sup>55</sup>

We must follow Wiegman in remaining skeptical of the too-easy demise of racism or racial categories. Baseball, immersed as it is in the national imaginary, offers an essential point of access to civil society for the actors in counter-hegemonic struggles. Resistance movements can take a cue from the *Courier* and re-instate hegemonic cultural forms as sites of a Gramscian “war of position.” Even the capitalist cornucopia of today’s organized sports, mediated by twenty-four hour networks like ESPN, has a surprisingly large opening for such resistant analyses, and both players and sports writers have begun to take advantage of it. Sports writer Scoop Jackson’s analysis of the new NBA dress code that targets hip-hop style and Indiana Pacer Jermaine O’Neal’s critique of the NBA age limit as a means of racial discrimination both sparked debates over race in the mainstream media.<sup>56</sup> Although they are, like the *Courier*’s integration campaign, notoriously flawed in their economic and gender analyses, they demonstrate the possibilities for anti-hegemonic analyses even within the dominant structure. Dave Zirin, a regular sports writer for alternative media outlets such as *The Source*, *Counterpunch*, and *Z Magazine*, offers an even more promising development of the *Courier*’s strategy. Although his explicitly anti-capitalist, feminist, and anti-racist analyses have less access to mainstream sports discourse, the alternative media outlets like *Democracy Now!* that publicize his work are becoming increasingly popular. His work inserts both history and a resistant economic analysis into organized sports. Perhaps one of his most important pieces was an interview of Toni Smith published in his recent book *What’s My Name, Fool?: Sports and Resistance in the United States*. In this interview, Zirin pulls Smith out of organized sports’ realm of silent performance—the space in which she refused to face the flag—and allows her to analyze her own performative resistance. Together, Zirin and Smith find the gaps in hege-

monic discourse that permit activists and scholars to decode popular culture in ways that reject nationalism or blind celebrations of an unequal multiculturalism. Like Zirin, Smith, and the *Courier*, we can seize the gaze upon the playing field as an opportunity to write sports into a history of resistance.

## Notes

1. Dave Zirin, *What's My Name, Fool?: Sports and Resistance in the United States*. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), 278.
2. According to an ESPN poll taken at the time, 60 percent of American adults share this view. "Not Even One in Four Support Smith's Protests," *ESPN Network*, March 3, 2003, <http://espn.go.com/ncw/news/2003/0303/1517193.html> (accessed March 3, 2003).
3. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (Orig. 1971; New York: International Publishers, 1999), 229-31.
4. "The Negro Leagues" is a useful simplification. In fact, several incarnations of the Negro leagues emerged during the early decades of the century. Rube Foster's successful Negro National League of the 1920s died out in 1932 but was quickly resurrected as the Negro National and American Leagues, which were the primary actors in black baseball during the 1930s and 1940s. Peterson provides a detailed account of the varied leagues. Peterson, *Only the Ball Was White: A History of Legendary Black Players and All-Black Professional Teams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).
5. *Ibid.*, 229-239.
6. Hall argues that the encoded content of a cultural practice does not wholly determine the way social actors decode that practice. He identifies three modes of decoding: dominant, oppositional, and negotiated. The *Pittsburgh Courier*, I will demonstrate, participated in both oppositional and negotiated decoding. For a full explication of "encoding" and "decoding," see Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in Simon During, ed., *The Cultural Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1999), 507-517.
7. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Eric Lott, "Racial Cross-Dressing and the Construction of American Whiteness," in During, ed., *The Cultural Studies Reader*, 241-255.
8. The original Cuban Giants team, which did not feature Latino or Cuban players, eventually evolved into the New York Cuban Giants of the Negro leagues. This later incarnation actually did attract Latino players primarily from Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. For an excellent analysis of race and black Caribbean baseball players in the Negro leagues, see Adrian Burgos, Jr., "Playing Ball in a Black and White 'Field of Dreams': Afro-Caribbean Ballplayers in the Negro Leagues, 1910-1950," *Journal of Negro History* 82 (Winter 1997): 67-104; Peterson, *Only the Ball Was White*.
9. It is especially striking that black players in the early twentieth century were asked to perform Latino as well as African-American identity. In later years, black players re-wrote this racist performance as a resistance to segregation and a complication of racial identities. As both Burgos and Peterson note, Spanish-speaking blacks typically faced reduced discrimination at U.S. businesses. Consequently, African Americans with Caribbean teammates periodically masqueraded as Caribbeans by enjoining their Spanish-speaking members to order in restaurants and hotels. The racialized identities originally caricatured by whites, then, were co-opted and manipulated to serve the purposes of disenfranchised players. Although economic and cultural factors remained a complex and contested site for Latino/African-American relations, the conflation of Latino and American black identity by white America forged a bond of solidarity between the two groups. Burgos, "Playing Ball," 85.
10. Baseball "minstrelsy" never fully disappeared, and in the years following integration it witnessed a resurgence in a last attempt to attract spectators to black baseball. The Indianapolis Clowns (known in the 1930s and 1940s as the Ethiopian Clowns), who featured "guest" appearances by clowns and little people, continued to perform until 1968. Three women ballplayers also appeared in the Clowns' regular line-up during the 1950s. Peterson, *Only the Ball Was White*, 203-204.
11. Peterson, *Only the Ball Was White*, 86, 122-123.
12. William Brashler, *Josh Gibson: A Life in the Negro Leagues* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 83.
13. Al Monroe, "It's News to Me," *Chicago Defender*, October 1, 1939, 8.
14. Wendell Smith, "Are Negro Ball Players Good Enough to 'Crash' the Majors?" *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 12, 1939, 16.
15. Lott, "Racial Cross-Dressing," 246.

16. Chester Washington, "Sez Ches," *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 26, 1933, 13.
17. Brashler, *Josh Gibson*, 43.
18. John B. Holway, *Josh and Satch: The Life and Times of Josh Gibson and Satchel Paige* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1991), 43.
19. Harold Seymour, *Baseball: The Golden Age*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 6-10.
20. Although Flood lost his case in 1972, free agency was established after a second challenge in 1975 by Dave McNally and Andy Messersmith. Robert Lipsyte "Baseball's Last Martyr," *New York Times*, January 4, 1998, p. SM46; Jerry Useem, "1970; Curt Flood Refuses to Play Ball," *Fortune*, June 27, 2005, 75-77.
21. "Bill Veeck," *BaseballLibrary.com*, [http://www.pubdim.net/baseballlibrary/ballplayers/V/Veeck\\_Bill.stm](http://www.pubdim.net/baseballlibrary/ballplayers/V/Veeck_Bill.stm) (accessed May 4, 2003).
22. Seymour, *Baseball*, 126-129.
23. Smith, "Are Negro Ball Players Good Enough?" August 15, 1939, 16
24. Eqbal Ahmad, *Confronting Empire: Interviews with David Barsamian* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000), 29.
25. *Ibid.*, 31.
26. Smith, "Are Negro Ball Players Good Enough?" June 11, 1938, 16.
27. *Ibid.*, August 19, 1939, 16.
28. The *Time* article contains various incorrect pieces of information, including this bizarre mutation of Paige's nickname.
29. "Satchelfoots," *Time*, 3 June 1940, 44.
30. Smith, "Are Negro Ball Players Good Enough?" August 15, 1939, 16.
31. *Ibid.*, July 29, 1939, 16.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Although the interviewer in this case did not explicitly link the campaign against segregation in private businesses with that against segregation in baseball, the *Courier* did unite these goals in its own larger plan of action.
34. Smith, "Are Negro Ball Players Good Enough?" July 22, 1939, 16.
35. *Ibid.*, August 26, 1939, 16.
36. Cornel West, "Marxist Theory and the Specificity of Afro-American Oppression," in eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 24.
37. Bill Weaver, "The Black Press and the Assault on Professional Baseball's 'Color Line,' October, 1945-April, 1947," *Phylon* 40.1 (1979): 303-5.
38. Washington, "Sez Ches," 13.
39. Rogosin suggests that Pollack's plan was not unusual: "when the Negro League owners contemplated integration, they thought almost exclusively in terms of putting an entire Negro team into the majors." I have been unable to determine, however, whether the public saw this plan as a selfish proposal for the benefit of owners or whether its focus on group integration drew public support. Donn Rogosin, *Invisible Men: Life in Baseball's Negro Leagues* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), 187.
40. Robinson earned \$600 a month for the Kansas City Monarchs and only \$400 a month as a member of the Dodgers' Montreal farm team. Likewise, Newcombe and Campanella made \$175-200 less per month in their new minor league positions. Brashler, *Josh Gibson*, 140.
41. Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 277.
42. *Ibid.*, 275.
43. Robinson had, in fact, received a great deal of attention as a college football player. The black press had yet to award him equal status as a baseball player.
44. Weaver, "The Black Press," 303.
45. Dan Silverman, "No League of their Own: Barred from All-White Leagues, Three Women Found a Way to Play," *MLB.com*, [http://mlb.mlb.com/NASApp/mlb/mlb/history/mlb\\_negro\\_leagues\\_story.jsp?story=women](http://mlb.mlb.com/NASApp/mlb/mlb/history/mlb_negro_leagues_story.jsp?story=women) (accessed December 8, 2005).
46. Statistics do not, of course, wholly erase historical contingencies. Roger Maris' 61 home-run record, for instance, contains an asterisk in the record book to mark that his record-breaking season included more games than Ruth's. Interestingly, sports writers largely mock the asterisk as a mark of baseball traditionalism designed to favor Ruth. Bob Hoover, "Maris' Asterisk is a Black Mark on Baseball," *Post-Gazette.com*, September 13, 1998, <http://www.post-gazette.com/books/19980913hoover.asp> (accessed May 4, 2004).
47. The recent internationalization of baseball's popularity and the influx of Latino and Japanese players into the American Major Leagues has recently brought the "American-ness" of baseball under scrutiny. Baseball's nationalism continues to play a key role in propagating less overt forms of segregation and racism. For a discussion of racism in late 20th-century MLB, see James H. Frey and Stanley Eitzen, "Sport and Society," *Annual Review of Sociology* 17 (1991):

503-22 and Alan Klein, "Culture, Politics, and Baseball in the Dominican Republic," *Latin American Perspectives* 22 (Summer 1995): 111-30.

48. Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 33, 59.

49. David McGimpsey, *Imagining Baseball: America's Pastime and Popular Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 110.

50. The *Courier* shared the "Double V" campaign with the NAACP. Weaver, "The Black Press," 304.

51. "Political Gains," *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 3, 1947, 3.

52. Quoted in Weaver, "The Black Press," 306.

53. Robyn Wiegman, "Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of Particularity," *Boundary 2* 26 (Autumn 1999): 121.

54. *Ibid.*

55. Many thanks to Darryl McGraw of the Surviving Players' Association for providing information on Negro League merchandise. McGraw identified four vendors for Negro League products. MLB, the largest distributor, retains all profit from their multi-million dollar sales. The Negro League Museum, which sells \$3-5 million yearly, retains its profits for the museum and its owner. The Negro League Players' Association sells approximately \$1 million yearly and distributes proceeds among seven former players. The Surviving Players' Association, the smallest of the four, awards 60-75% of proceeds to nine former players while devoting the additional 35-40% to administrative costs. Darryl McGraw, telephone interview by author, May 1, 2003.

56. Scoop Jackson, "Sacred Ignorance," *ESPN.com*, November 1, 2005, <http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/page2/story?page=jackson/051101> (accessed December 9, 2005). "Stern Wants Age Limit Raised to 20," *ESPN.com*, April 13, 2005, <http://sports.espn.go.com/nba/news/story?id=2035132> (accessed December 9, 2005).

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