

Sport to Subversion

Baseball played an important cultural role in nineteenth and twentieth-century North America and Latin America because it served as both opportunity and constraint for Black Americans and Latinx, both from the United States and Latin America. More specifically, for Black Americans, baseball served as a reminder that their country discriminated against them based on their skin color, but it also offered them a reason for immigration to Latin America and the opportunity to escape the exclusion that permeated North American culture. For Latin Americans, both those who were United States citizens and those who visited for education or to play baseball, baseball meant both disrupting Latin American stereotypes within North America and complicating the bounds of exclusion based on skin color or the “one-drop rule.” During the twentieth century, baseball complicated the North American color line, as a result of Latinx navigating the boundaries of skin color, while also providing some Black Americans, excluded by Jim Crow, the opportunity to escape such discrimination by playing baseball in Latin America.

In the United States, Latinx forced White Americans to negotiate who exactly was excluded under Jim Crow as capitalist motives clashed with racist motives in baseball. Team owners wanted to maintain competition within baseball to make sure that they could accomplish “commercial goals of expanding markets,” (2) as Adrian Burgos says in *Playing America's Game*, but this meant confronting the boundaries of segregation because it constrained those who it could employ. In order to “test the limits of racial tolerance and to locate the exclusionary point along the color line,” (Burgos 12) while maintaining within the bounds of what was believed to be white acceptability, team owners used Latinx to expand the labor pool. In other words, Black

Americans could still be excluded, so that team owners could cater to what they assumed White Americans would accept because baseball could hire those who existed “between the poles of white (inclusion) and black (exclusion),” (Burgos 4) or those who didn’t quite fit into either group to the point where they could be included in baseball yet still experience discrimination. For example, “Fernando Nation,” a documentary about Fernando Valenzuela, documents how Mexican Americans were forced out, violently in many cases, of Chavez Ravine to make room for Dodger’s Stadium. People were forced out of their homes, which were then destroyed, on land designated for Mexican Americans to accommodate for a stadium (“Fernando Nation”). However, Fernando Valenzuela, a star pitcher for the LA dodgers during the late twentieth century, was a foreign Latino player and exemplified the Black struggle in the United States. Although baseball provided foreign Latinx players the opportunity to immigrate to the United States and experience different opportunities than in the country in which they were born, Black Americans experienced the negative consequences of being born in a country where their exclusion was at least partially maintained by the introduction of foreign Latinx baseball players. More specifically, “African American sportswriters protested the hypocrisy of major-league owners in signing so many of foreign-born Latinos while still excluding blacks” (Burgos 174). The introduction of foreign Latinx baseball players complicated the color line and segregation because Black Americans were further excluded at the expense of the possible benefit of Latinx players. That’s to say that, despite the opportunity with which immigrating to the United States, usually on a temporary basis, presented Latinx people as a result of getting hired as baseball players, this phenomenon also meant the further exclusion of Black Americans.

Black Americans experienced continued discrimination in the United States, as foreign Latinx players joined baseball and team owners justified it by fitting them in between “white” and “black,” so black baseball players went to Latin America where they were offered more opportunity regardless of the color of their skin. One black baseball player who traveled to Latin America for a job even remarked that he went south because “the money was good, and there was no Jim Crow” (Burgos 166). The same opportunity that allowed Latinx players to play baseball in the United States, despite racial discrimination and the negative consequences they experienced as foreigners and nonwhite individuals, is the same opportunity that forced black baseball players to travel to Latin America for employment. However, in Latin America, black baseball players experienced less discrimination than in North America with Jim Crow still going on, as was mentioned earlier. More than that, Black Americans experienced inter-minority discrimination: some Latinx immigrants, dealing with discrimination in their own right, preferred to associate themselves with the privilege that White Americans had inherently. For this reason, Latinx immigrants, such as Puerto Ricans, “who had migrated to the mainland also came to practise its racial principles of segregation,” (683) which Samuel Regalado relayed in “Roberto Clemente: Images, Identity and Legacy.” Furthermore, Latinx people in North America had to disassociate themselves from exclusion or anything related to being Black in order to achieve any semblance of the same opportunities as Black Americans in Latin America. For example, “so determined were some Puerto Ricans to display themselves as white that they often avoided any participation in the growing civil rights movement” (Regalado 683). This isn’t to argue that either Latinx immigrants or Black Americans had better opportunities than the other; instead, when focusing on baseball, both races did what they could during the era of Jim Crow to

maximize their liberties and opportunities. Therefore, Black Americans, when given the opportunity to leave the United States whether or not on a temporary basis, benefitted from baseball because they had the option not to reside in a country where they could drink from the same water fountain as “whites.”

Although it's possible to see the negative consequences of Jim Crow, from which Latinx people benefitted, as providing Latinx immigrants and foreign Latin Americans with agency at the expense of Black Americans, the historical significance behind baseball complicates that understanding and agent-victim thinking. For example, Roberto Clemente was a Latino baseball player who gained popularity in the late twentieth century (Regalado 684). More specifically, he explained that, instead of retiring, he “decided to play the following year in part to continue his quest to defuse the negative images of Latinos in professional baseball” (Regalado 684). Latinx people living in the U.S. weren't immune from discrimination: they weren't black and, thus, easily definable as “other, but they were also not white. Therefore, any opportunities or liberties they received as a result of not necessarily being black, which was a false generalization to begin with, were limited and complicated by their inferiority from being anything other than white. However, it's also important to address the agency that baseball did afford Latinx people, especially those living in Cuba who visited the United States. Though they didn't benefit from being white, Cubans did exercise a degree of subversion through baseball because it, in the words of Louis A. Perez in “Between Baseball and Bullfighting: The Quest for Nationality in Cuba, 1868-1898,” “offered access to modernity, a status to which all Cubans could aspire, and none more than those disaffected from Spanish rule” (Perez 509). Baseball served as a representation that they deserved their independence because they needed it to prosper

economically and baseball proved that they had “discipline and patience,” (Perez 510) in other words, the “virtues necessary to successful nationhood.” Traveling to the United States was what provided Cubans with the chance to learn baseball and associate it with modernity and progress, the ideals that the U.S. seemed to embody and exemplify for Cubans. For this reason, the Cubans are one example of a Latin American people who benefitted in real, significant ways from the opportunity that their own colonized country couldn’t offer them—this is said acknowledging that the U.S. also played a hauntingly large role in indirect imperialism. Cubans, coming home college or visiting the U.S. for other reasons, “returned with a knowledge of baseball—not simply as a popular sport learned abroad but as a paradigm of progress” (Perez 500). Cuba is one example of this phenomenon: Latin Americans benefiting from traveling to the United States, even if it comes at the cost of challenging the color line without fully dismantling it.

Baseball demonstrated the complicated racial dynamic that played out in the Americas, as Black Americans were forced south to have access to any opportunity and Latinx immigrated to North America either permanently or on a temporary basis, where some adopted baseball as a source of liberation. Regardless of the color line in the United States, baseball played a role in liberating both Black Americans and Latinx, both from the U.S. and abroad, because it gave Black Americans the opportunity to abandon Jim Crow even if temporarily and Latinx to immigrate to the U.S. even if temporarily and to develop a communal identity that subverted colonial power. However, when considering the different (yet similar) role that baseball played in the lives of these different groups of people, it becomes clear that these groups clashed: some experienced opportunity to the detriment of others. That doesn’t negate the liberation that baseball offered, but it does demonstrate how Latinx navigated the color line and forced White

Americans, especially those who experienced a conflict between racist and capitalist goals, to redraw the line according to what would offer them the most profit without allowing Black Americans to fit into their new definition of un-excluded. This conversation is important to consider because it echoes a common phenomenon: one minority suffering to provide another opportunity, while the white oppressor is still controlling the dynamic that forces minorities to grapple at any opportunity they can access. Baseball, although to different ends, represented the same opportunity for both Black Americans and Latinx, both foreign and from the U.S.: liberation and subversion in spite of the white oppressor.