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**Diamond-Shaped American Dreams:
Race and National Identity in Contemporary Baseball Films**

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Race and National Identity in Contemporary Baseball Films**

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Dedication

To my Nana and my Mom.

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My love affair with baseball reaches back to my childhood experiences in the Bronx, New York. Through my love of the New York Yankees I discovered an intense and wonderful relationship with the elders in my family. By attending live games and watching local broadcasts with my uncles Edward Bullard, Zeno Gardner, and William Wynn, I developed an appreciation of the game as part of our heritage as New Yorkers and black Americans. Even as a child enjoying the game with my family members, I knew the game would change my life forever. I would also like to thank the friends who have supported my obsessive love of the game: Nancy Fallen, Eli Karon, Brett Caraway, and Richard Patnaude II. In addition to attending countless games with me, they constantly reminded me why I love baseball so dearly.

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**Diamond-Shaped American Dreams:
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Since its invention in the late-nineteenth century, baseball has maintained an important role in American culture. In its hundred-plus year history, baseball culture has explicitly examined conceptualizations of nationhood, otherness, and the American Dream. Frequently revered as *the* American pastime, baseball culture has actively engaged the mythos of a unified national identity. As the game and the professional leagues have evolved, baseball's role as the American pastime has been highlighted in discourses regarding national identity and cultural assimilation. Within this nationalistic culture, fictional baseball films have been a particularly important method for disseminating the ideals of the American Dream.

Although baseball has been the subject of many popular and scholarly texts, there are several gaps in the existing literature. Several baseball historians examine how the

game influenced social changes in U.S. culture; other historians examine how the representations of baseball in film demonstrate changing cultural values. However, the intersection of social issues and filmic representations has yet to be adequately studied. This project examines how fictional baseball films use conceptualizations of the American Dream to address issues of racial, ethnic, and national diversity in contemporary U.S. society. The author argues that in these films, baseball is more than a narrative device but a platform to comment on shifting trends in U.S. culture. Furthermore, the author explores the ways in which contemporary baseball films define the American Dream and reify accepted hierarchies of class, race, and gender through their narratives. Through textual and ideological analysis of baseball movies from the mid-1980s to present, this project attempts to answer all of the following questions: How do baseball texts address race, gender, and class diversity? How is the American Dream “colored” within baseball discourses? How are heroes and masculinity represented within baseball discourses? How is nostalgia used to construct the relationship between baseball and the American Dream? Through constructions of baseball heroes, diverse teams, and specific types of U.S. landscapes, the author argues that these films explicitly comment upon the fears and desires of a changing nation.

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Chapter One: The Love Affair Continues: The Symbiotic Relationship between Baseball and the American Dream

Introduction: Baseball and the Nation

In its hundred-plus year history, baseball has maintained an important role in “American” culture and has been intrinsically linked to the construction of the “nation.” Frequently touted as *the* American pastime, baseball becomes essential to understanding how ideologies of U.S. nationhood function both domestically and abroad. As the game and the professional leagues have evolved, baseball’s role as the American pastime has been highlighted in national discourses. Because of the important relationship between baseball and American identity, much energy has been invested in maintaining the sport’s “purity” as well as propagating its place in American life and lore. The most powerful form of this propagation has come through the ways in which baseball has been recreated across media forms. In particular, baseball films have become an essential mode of communicating these values and of defining “America” as they repeatedly explore conceptualizations of the American Dream, nationhood, and otherness. Through their constructions of “America,” these films and connected texts generate discourses about the nation and promote specific visions of the not-so-distant past in their nostalgia.

Frequently posited as a game that mirrors the tensions the nation has faced over time, baseball provides an important lens through which to examine how national identity is imagined and represented within U.S. culture. Although baseball’s lengthy and

colorful history provides many ways to engage national identity, one of the most productive ways to examine its scope and impact is through media images of the game. Baseball has been present within mainstream U.S. media culture since the early twentieth century in the form of films depicting games and novels featuring various aspects of baseball culture. Over the past century, the media images of baseball have shifted to reflect the specific era in which they were created. And as such, with each generation of baseball media texts, the significance of the game has shifted. But what does baseball symbolize today?

Although hundreds of books on baseball and baseball history exist, significant gaps need to be explored. Most notably, the intersection of race and national identity has not been examined well enough. With the proliferation of media forms and the ever-expanding global market of sports culture, the way that baseball is used in contemporary culture provides many important insights into how race and nation are understood today. Similar to baseball's role in U.S. popular culture, the American Dream has also expressed dominant values of the nation. By examining the relationship between baseball and the American Dream in contemporary films and commercials, I analyze how baseball films represent the American Dream and the nation and recreate current social issues in their narratives and images. Specifically, these texts recreate baseball as a site for white male characters to find stability and regain control over a changing nation.

While baseball films have had a substantial presence in discourses of a singular, unified "America," the ideologies explored through baseball culture are no longer

contained simply in films. In fact, today more than ever, baseball as a metaphor for America is presented in all media forms. Television commercials further the role of baseball as globally important *yet* permanently and uniquely “American.” Through such constructions, the tenuous relationship between baseball and all things “American” is both reified and re-imagined. In mediated constructions of professional baseball as the National Game, the content of baseball media texts explicitly and directly comments upon the changing meaning of national identities. As the world of professional baseball continues to fight for audiences in the competitive global sports market, exploring the ideologies within this culture increases in importance.

Narratives exploring baseball as a representation of American history and ethos have existed since the game was created. Inherent in these discourses are ideologies deeply connected to political and cultural mythologies. Specifically, the American Dream and the idea that any man can achieve greatness through hard work have played a key role in how baseball has developed as the “National Pastime.” However, examinations of this “history” reveal that the sport not only illuminates positive aspects of American history but the social conflicts and crises that the Nation faces. These constructions of baseball and America encourage an active disavowal of negative or painful events in order to keep the “Dream” alive. Much like dominant accounts of U.S. history frequently omit the influences of other nations and ethnic groups on its progress, baseball histories also follow this pattern.

For example, recent sports historians have challenged the much-accepted myths of baseball's origins in order to reveal the influence of other nations. Traditional baseball lore traces the game's history to New England where the game "organically" developed among settlers in the nineteenth century. Part of this history also revolves around two men—Abner Doubleday and Albert G. Spaulding—as the creators and early organizers of the official game. Charting the history of baseball has been so important to the construction of national identity that in 1905, at Spaulding's urging, the Mills Commission was formed and charged with the task of refuting the connection between baseball and other bat-and-ball games of the era. In 1907, the Commission concluded, based mainly on the testimonies of prominent American men, that "the first scheme for playing baseball, according to the best evidence obtainable to date, was devised by Abner Doubleday at Cooperstown, N.Y. in 1839" (National Baseball Hall of Fame 43). However, contrary to the history in which New Englanders simply devised the game based on their own fancy, contemporary sports historians trace the game to cricket and rounders.¹

¹ Although the master narrative of Doubleday creating baseball in 1839 has been widely embraced, its historical accuracy has been challenged from its inception. In 1999, renewed interest in baseball's origin began with the discovery of the Mills Commission's files that had been reported lost in a fire decades prior. The National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York, and reference texts like *Baseball as America* now have incorporated the original investigation's fallacies into baseball's mythology. For more discussion of how baseball history has been reconsidered in light of these events, see Thomas Altherr's exploration of how the game's mythology has been interpreted or Thomas Zeiler's detailed discussion of how Spaulding used his world baseball tour to establish the sport as an American cultural product. Zeiler also discusses how the Doubleday myth was deliberately developed to enhance the game's status as solely "American."

The fallacies in the widely accepted organic history of the game are a good place to start an analysis of the sport that illustrates American values. Although the origin of the sport is really of little consequence to how widely it has been embraced, the narrative that has been created highlights the colonial legacy within the sport on two levels. First, the myth is a byproduct of the rebellion against the colonization and development of the U.S. by the British. And second, it has great implications for how the sport is repeatedly positioned as wholly “American” by forsaking the impact of other nations that have influenced and enjoyed the sport around the world. When considered in relation to its global history, the omission or minimalization of international and cross-cultural influences certainly points to the colonial history from which the game evolved. It is this mythmaking that makes mediated representations of baseball useful to examine. On every level of play, baseball is linked to a conventional construction of a unified and singular American identity.

Why is this history so important that men who should have had more pressing national concerns were obsessed with creating and maintaining the sport as part of an official national narrative? What is it about the game that has elicited Presidential support, provoked congressional hearings, and enticed world leaders to comment on its place in American culture? And what is so important about baseball in contemporary culture that one hundred years after the Mills Commission, the alleged use of performance-enhancing drugs by professional players led to congressional investigations? The answers to these questions, at least partially, come from the observation that

postbellum U.S. political and cultural leaders sought a way to reunite the nation in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The legacy of the nation's insecurity and instability continued throughout the twentieth century as industrial changes, immigration, and global events created both real and imagined threats to the nation's identity.

As the sport has evolved over the last century, it has maintained an important role in American culture. Since the first organized and professional teams were formed, the importance of preserving the game as white, agrarian, and unaffected by social changes has been clear. Journalists and historians went to great lengths to record accounts of early baseball history. Novelists considered the game both referentially and indirectly in narratives that explored baseball culture through characters' involvement with the game or their reverence towards it. As early as 1846, artists generated images of baseball as part of their work. It is no surprise that as new communication mediums emerged, baseball would become part of their content. Early film, radio, and television in the U.S. all engaged the sport's relationship with the national identity. Within each medium, conventions were established to demonstrate the centrality of baseball to American culture. Although baseball has played an important role in a variety of media forms since its advent, this project will examine how contemporary texts challenge and complicate these depictions of baseball in the U.S. Of particular importance will be how these media texts represent examine how race and ethnicity are understood within baseball culture. How do these texts reinvent, reinscribe, and reinvest in American Dream ideologies? How do baseball films function as fictional texts that might inspire loyalty, dominance,

and superiority to the imagined nation-state? And how do these films use the forms, structures, and symbols of their respective genres to advance nationalism and a specific national identity?

While baseball is about the American Dream, it is also about purity in several ways. Some of the most revered and successful contemporary baseball films such as *Field of Dreams* (Robinson, 1989) and countless commercial advertisements engaging in baseball discourses attempt to demonstrate that a nostalgia for the simple rural days gone by should take priority over the current business aspects of the sport. Indeed, despite ongoing efforts to maintain an idyllic image of baseball, the modern sport has continually struggled with the rise of its professional side. As early as 1891, an editorial in the *New York Times* observed about the young sport, baseball is “no longer a sport, but a business” (“Editorial Article 7”). And as a business, the goal of the sport is to maximize profits and create positive associations with the game as a product for mass consumption. Since its formation in 1869, Major League Baseball (MLB) has tried to accomplish these goals by protecting its image and increasing its visibility both domestically and abroad.

This chapter will introduce and define the terms that are essential to my discussion and will engage the debates and discourses inform the project. In addition, this chapter will outline how nation and the American Dream are theorized in relation to sport culture generally and baseball specifically. And finally, this chapter will also provide an overview of the chapters that will be the body of the larger project. By examining how several key concepts such as cultural imperialism are used to construct a

definition of national identity and, consequently, the American Dream, the relationship between baseball and the national identity becomes clear. As U.S. geo-political interests continue to influence how other nations are depicted in media texts, the “national game” is necessarily impacted as a tool to foster a sense of a singular, unified nation-state. Although there has been resistance to attempts at Americanizing the world, within fictional baseball texts, the naturalizing of “others” through their participation in the game is both natural and expected. In this chapter, I outline how media depictions of baseball as a symbol of the U.S. depend upon the subjugation and marginalization of people of color by engaging discourses of race, national identity, and imperialism.

Key Concepts and Definitions

As a discussion linked with constructions of the “nation,” it is important to define how “America” and “American” will be used in this project. To avoid reifying the U.S. as ideologically, politically, or culturally more important than the other parts of the Americas, I will not use “America” and the “United States” interchangeably. Instead, I will make the following choices. When using “America,” I will place the term in quotations to highlight this contested label and to acknowledge that it is deliberately deployed as a powerful rhetorical device. When referring to the state as a nation, I will use “U.S.” to represent the fifty states. When discussing countries in the Caribbean, I will refer to both specific nations and the collection of islands that constitute the region. Whenever relevant, I will identify them as independent entities even if they are U.S.

territories (such as Puerto Rico) because, regardless of their proximity to and relationship with the U.S., they still maintain independent cultures and national identities. The goal of this choice is to demonstrate and acknowledge their marginalized status within the empire. Although this could be problematic, this decision derives from the frequent exclusion of these nations in the constructions and discourses of the U.S. as a state, a nation, and an empire.

Despite the reluctance of some theorists to view the U.S. as a modern empire, “imperialism” is another concept that is essential to this project because of its intrinsic connection with conceptualizations of U.S. national identity. As William Earl Weeks observes in his work on American nationalism and imperialism, “While no one ever has denied the existence of an American nationalism, until quite recently there was widespread reluctance even to acknowledge the existence of an American imperialism or an American empire” (486). Because imperialism can be divided into several forms and each form has a different meaning based on the historical context in which it is used, this concept has been quite contested in contemporary discourses of national politics.

Frank Ninkovich examines how the ideological focus on global determinism, economic stability, and the abstract notion of “restraint” were used to justify U.S. imperial control—both politically and culturally. What is sometimes considered “pre-emptive imperialism,” U.S. involvement in Latin America and the Caribbean reveals national ideals and opinions regarding its hemispheric neighbors. The idea that the U.S. had the ability to bring “civilization” to the unlearned masses fueled nineteenth-century

ethos, and the legacy of such depictions continues to affect the constructions and representations of these nations today (93). Ninkovich argues that the contemporary state of the U.S. as an imperial force dates back to the late nineteenth century. Although far less powerful than the historical forms of oppression and exploitation like slavery, modern baseball culture actively builds upon the legacy of this American imperialism through the establishment of farming systems which seek to cultivate high quality talent that can be exported to the U.S. at bargain prices. Although this project focuses on fictional representations of the game, this presumed superiority seeps into the media depictions of international players in the U.S. and baseball culture around the globe.

Similar to Ninkovich's work on U.S. imperialism, Edward Said's *Orientalism* examines how imperialism has functioned in the U.S. culturally and politically (293-5). For Said, the emphasis is on how the U.S. perceived the Orient as an important site for economic gain and geopolitical power; however, several parallels can be drawn between U.S. imperial interest in the Orient and other regions of the world. Weeks complicates these constructions of U.S. imperialism by noting "both the American nation and empire have been created by varying degrees of coercion, not consent, and reminds us that nations themselves are a form of internal imperialism insofar as they presume to establish a uniform central authority over all groups and individuals, willing or not, within their domain" (488). The complexity of imperialism that Weeks addresses is important to consider as it demonstrates the hegemony of imperialism both within a nation and externally. It would be impossible to examine how U.S. national identity functions

without considering its imperial reach for, as Weeks correctly concludes, “the development of the nation cannot be understood apart from the development of the empire” (490).

For the purpose of this study, I will be exploring how indirect imperialism and cultural imperialism influence the construction of national identity within sports culture and baseball more specifically. Indirect imperialism is the process of controlling nations or territories by influencing either the political or economic systems. Cultural imperialism is a bit trickier to define as it can take on many forms. Most commonly, it is the process of a powerful nation imposing its cultural forms onto weaker nation-states. This process of acculturation can occur through the products, industries, or values introduced to the host nation. Frequently linked with conceptualizations of globalization or the “Americanization” of other nations, cultural imperialism becomes an important way to examine how definitions of nation and nationhood are always shifting. Although both forms of imperialism reveal how modern conditions have redefined the “nation,” it is important to note that neither form actually removes the original national identity of the subjects who endure it. As the definitions of nationalism and nation continue to be redefined in the contemporary global context, it is essential to examine how both concepts are employed to advance specific ideologies and agendas.

Because the concept “race” is both real and imagined, I will be using it to reference dominant color groupings of people of color. This is not to reify “race” as a concept but to acknowledge that much of contemporary oppression stems from the racial

systems of the past. With these distinctions in mind, I am also choosing to use the term “people of color” to represent the collective challenges several populations face within racist social systems. Although the histories vary for each racial group, shared experiences overlap within the community of people of color. As diversity scholar Beverly Daniel Tatum notes of this overlap, “It is important to note here that these groups are not mutually exclusive.... The politics of racial categorization has served to create artificial boundaries between groups with shared ancestry” (22n11). I will also discuss specific ethnic and national minority groups such as Latino and Asian peoples. I am not grouping peoples from varied national heritages together to marginalize or minimize the importance of their national origins, but rather to demonstrate how collectively they face issues of systemic racism based on problematic constructions of shared biological similarities.

The construction of “race” within Latino communities is particularly challenging because it illuminates the many tensions that further fragment the idea of the triad of racial categories of Caucasoid, Negroid, and Mongoloid.² Traditionally ignored by such typologies, the “Latino” identity becomes a complicated and contested ideological construction. Perhaps one of the most poignant and telling legacies of European colonization and slave traffic in the Caribbean and Latin America is the creation of multiple Latin “races.” The result of this contact is the creation of a “mestizo” population

² Stephen Jay Gould deconstructs these racial categories and the social impetuses that led to their creation in *The Mismeasure of Man*. Recent explorations of the genetic factors that render these racial categories inaccurate highlight the ways in which race is socially constructed. See the work of Natalie Angier and Sharon Begley for further discussion of how scientific research is complicating typologies of race.

of people of mixed-raced ancestry. Because of the complicated ancestry of this region, I will use the term “Latino” to refer to U.S- and foreign-born people of Latin descent regardless of their “racial” identity. When necessary, I will also complicate this identity further by addressing the issues faced by “black Latinos.” The ultimate goal in all of these choices is to complicate the black-white binary and to demonstrate the complexities of discrimination and oppression experienced by “non-white” and “non-western” peoples.

As an opportunity for imperial control and influence, representations of baseball become an important articulation of U.S. national interests and racialized hierarchies. While the U.S. has never used baseball as a way to “civilize” nations within its empire (like cricket was in the British colonies and territories throughout its imperial rule around the world³), within the discourses about baseball as the national pastime, the rhetoric frequently relies upon the supposed deficiencies of “third world” nations. Specifically, U.S. involvement in Latin American and Asian countries to farm baseball talent and install auxiliary minor league franchises speaks to the modern imperial climate which codes these efforts as devoid of cultural implications and based solely on business interests. As such, the ancillary forms of baseball around the world reveal both the hegemonic and acculturative nature of sport culture and demonstrate how national boundaries are permeable when the ultimate goal is to maximize profitability. Such constructions of developing or non-Western nations engage geopolitics and how “race” is

³Sports scholars and historians have explored cricket as important within British colonies and as a potential site for resistance. Most notably, C.L.R. James’s *Beyond a Boundary* examines the ways in which the complex relationship between colonized peoples and imperialism are manifested in athletic contests. In his work on sports and nationalism, Alan Bairner examines how imperialists used cricket to assess the cultural capital and national loyalty of subjugated peoples throughout the British Empire.

imagined in a post-colonial context. Through an examination of how these tensions are imagined and vivified in contemporary baseball films and commercials, I will demonstrate how these entertainment forms become nationalist primers ripe with social and political commentary.

The Birth of the “Nation”: Theories, Constructions, and Uses of Nations

A nation is a spiritual principle, the outcome of the profound complications of history; it is a spiritual family not a group determined by the shape of the earth. (Renan 18-19)

The analysis of what makes a “nation” and why nations are important has been evolving for centuries. Although the language and terminology used to conceptualize the “nation” has changed based on larger social, cultural, and political shifts, the basic premise has remained the same: a desire to organize social groups. And with the creation and maintenance of these groups has been a desire to control who has access to group membership. Inherent in any discussion of the nation is an exploration of political organizations and agendas that define the nation. Frequently used to assert power or dominance over others, both “nation” and “nationhood” rely on a system of “us” versus

“them.” Within this construction, the nation, and consequently nationalism, becomes a course of action as well as an attitude.⁴

Since the goal of this project is to examine how baseball functions in relation to U.S. national identity and the American Dream, an overview of how the nation has been imagined is necessary. Although much has been said about how and why the nation has been explored and utilized, my aim is to focus on the discussions that engage the essential concepts related to baseball and the American Dream. These conceptualizations demonstrate the contested and varied definitions of nation and will enable my analysis of the ideological functions of baseball to be positioned within larger discourses.

Although clearly an important part of contemporary culture, defining the “nation” in practical terms has been both contested and challenged by political theorists and historians. Through their efforts, however, the trends and uses for the nation become even more important as they reveal the power and impact of nationalism on people’s lived realities. Through an examination of how dynasties and empires needed to redefine themselves after the invention of the printing press, Benedict Anderson argues that the tensions around how the concept of “nation” are experienced today predate the issues of modernity with which they are most frequently associated. Ernest Renan also discusses the relationship between antiquity and “nation”; however, Renan focuses on the ways in which the nation becomes a spiritual bond between men and complicates contemporary conceptualizations of a nation by returning to antiquity. Homi Bhabha emphasizes the

⁴ See Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* and William Earl Week’s “American Nationalism, American Imperialism” for further discussion of how nationalism becomes an active political force.

ambivalent nature of “nation” and its definition as embedded in other tensions of language and power (2-3). For Said, the nation becomes yet another way that the West “others” less powerful peoples. But what do all of these conflicting approaches to understanding how the concept of the “nation” is understood actually mean? Anderson, Renan, Bhabha, Said, and others demonstrate that while the nation is of great importance in contemporary society, its strength stems from the variety of meanings it can have. Consequently, what the nation implies is fluid and can mean anything and nothing simultaneously.

Anderson’s definition of the nation as “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6) is particularly important in relation to how American Dream and baseball ideologies engage the concept of national identity. Anderson argues that nations are inherently “imagined” because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (ibid.). He argues that this limit occurs because of the finite and definite boundaries to the scope of the nation (7). It is this very “limit” that is useful to baseball films’ ideological structure. Because the nation is unstable and needs to be reaffirmed, a narrative tension becomes how to protect the team-nation from outsiders and the ideals of baseball are presented as one way to naturalize or neutralize these threats. Through investing in the concept of a unified nation, people ignore these real limits and instead share a hope of a connection with the nation-state. When considering the diasporic communities and the

legacy of modern empires, the ties to either the colonizing nations or the communities from which individuals have been displaced should not be minimized. In fact, these ties reveal that the construction of the nation needs to be viewed from various perspectives if its impact and meaning are to be understood fully.

In contrast to Anderson's definition, Ernest Gellner defines nation in terms of two key concepts. The first is: "Two men are of the same nation if and only if they share the same culture, where culture in turn means a system of ideas and signs associations and ways of behaving and communicating" (7). While this is a worthwhile place to begin a definition of "national" identity, it suggests a homogeneous group of nationals. How would a country like Switzerland fit into such a definition given the multiplicity languages and cultures within the Swiss community? Furthermore, a culture-based definition becomes problematic when considering the United States and its history as a country of voluntary and involuntary immigrants who brought with them varied prior national ties and cultural traditions. While many immigrants were eventually acculturated, just as many also maintained strong ties to their previous ethnic communities while also becoming "American."

The second definition Gellner offers is: "Two men are of the same nation if and only if they *recognize* each other as belonging to the same nation. In other words, *nations maketh man*; nations are the artifacts of men's convictions and loyalties and solidarities" (ibid.). This definition offers many important points to consider in relation to how racial and ethnic difference engages the concept of national citizenship. If nations

are “artifacts of men’s convictions and loyalties,” then the ways in which they are created, defined, and protected potentially can reveal the true political agendas and fears at work within a nation. This definition of the nation is useful to the discussion of baseball and the functions of the American Dream as it coincides with the ways in which national myths are re-enacted and revived within contemporary baseball films to articulate to what men should be loyal.

As much as baseball narratives engage the American Dream, they also engage a modified version of Manifest Destiny. Engaging the concept of predestined dominance, Manifest Destiny was used as a justification for U.S. expansion both domestically and abroad in the nineteenth century. As Weeks argues, “Solidifying that union would be the primary task of antebellum American nationalism” (487). In the name of solidifying the nation’s interest, Weeks argues that Manifest Destiny was linked to “The existence of a widespread faith in God and in the providential destiny of the American people lent a messianic dimension to the establishment of a national identity and national allegiance. The presumed special relationship of the American people to the Deity placed both the nation and empire on a foundation of divine right and divine mission” (494). Driven by territorial and commercial desires, Manifest Destiny demonstrates how national myths have evolved into political action historically. As an early form of U.S. imperialism, Manifest Destiny functions similarly to the American Dream as it ideologically positions the U.S. as a superior to other nations and peoples. It is in this regard that baseball culture engages Manifest Destiny through the active exploitation and development of

foreign territories to advance Major League Baseball's agenda. Although building baseball academies around the world is different from the ways in which the U.S. government acquired territories during its expansions, the same ideology of imperial domination over weaker forces is at work. Within baseball films, it is the byproduct of this Manifest Destiny that appears via the foreign players who end up joining professional teams in the U.S.

Although the forms and methods are different, representations of baseball in relation to both the American Dream and Manifest Destiny engage in the same mythmaking practices. Upon these myths rests the notion of the U.S. as the land of opportunity and elides the painful histories that actually occurred. Perhaps this is what Renan envisions as "A heroic past... [which] is the social capital upon which one bases a national idea" (19). However, it should be noted that many dangers exist in creating this heroic past on the pain and suffering of others. At the very least, at some point, the others may demand their rightful place in the construction of the national history.

When considering race and the systematic denial of rights to subjugated peoples, it is very hard to accept a definition of nation which includes the need for the "two men"—as Gellner positions them here—to agree on the other's role in the shared community. What does it say about the nation if membership needs to be mutually agreed upon? With this logic in mind, how is this construction of the nation reconciled with extremist groups that wish categorically to deny the rights of subaltern peoples who have just as much right to citizenship as the group trying to eradicate them?

And, finally, the idea of culture securing national ties presents many issues, especially when considering how culture lacks a clear definition and the recurring discussion of which cultural forms are valued. Gellner addresses the issues at stake when defining culture when he asserts nationalism is “essentially the general imposition of a high culture on society, where previously low cultures had taken up the lives of the majority” (57). In examining how cultural forms and practices function in larger society, the intersection between the nation and the media texts becomes particularly significant.

Much like with Gellner’s discussion of two men accepting each other as part of the same nation, Renan’s exploration of how nations are conceived also invests in the idea of a collective identity. He asserts:

A nation is a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spirit principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form.... The nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavors, sacrifice, and devotion.(19)

It is the final part of this definition that is most problematic. If nations were in fact contingent upon “the desire to live together” and further the “heritage,” then civil wars would not happen and societies would be relatively stable because of their investment in this shared history. Renan’s construction of the nation implies both the unity of people and a unified perspective. The idea of any nation-state experiencing such calm national

climates seems both naïve and impractical. Inherent in Renan's construction of the nation are several contradictions. He argues, "the nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice, and devotion" (ibid.) but does not explore how the degree to which you are asked to sacrifice will affect your loyalty or devotion to the nation-state. Furthermore, although he recognizes the impact of imperial history, Renan reduces the impact of imperial history on how these modern nation-states are conceived when he argues:

More valuable by far than common customs posts and frontiers conforming to strategic ideas is the fact of sharing, in the past, a glorious heritage and regrets, and of having, in the future, [a shared] programme to put into effect, or the fact of having suffered, enjoyed, and hoped together. These are the kinds of things that can be understood in spite of differences of race and language.... Where national memories are concerned, griefs are of more value than triumphs, for they impose duties, and require a common effort. (19)

Such a construction of the ways in which nations are united through hardship certainly has merit. The ways in which the U.S. has memorialized the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941 or the attacks of September 11, 2001, support the idea that the nation defines itself in the time of crisis. However, what happens to this unity when one's rights as a citizen are revoked because of others' desire to protect the nation? This becomes apparent when considering the ways in which ethnic minorities were treated after these events. How did the placement of over 100,000 Japanese-Americans and Japanese nationals into

internment camps affect how these people understand this “shared” heritage?

Generations later, are their offspring able simply to invest in the idea of national unity without remembering the second-class status of their ancestors? While I am not arguing that tragic events forever sever national ties, it is both idealistic and problematic to suggest that something as abstract and tenuous as “national heritage” could erase the hardships citizens faced.

When considering the evolution of “nation” and “nationhood,” it is important to ground the discussion in a firm understanding of the many empires which have shaped the trajectories of both concepts. While the ways in which we understand and live national identities may be changing in the globalized world, as Anderson observes,

Almost every year, the United Nations admits new members. And many “old nations,” once thought fully consolidated, find themselves challenged by “sub”-nationalisms within their borders—nationalisms which, naturally, dream of shedding this sub-ness one happy day. The reality is quite plain: the “end of the era of nationalism,” so long prophesied, is not remotely in sight. Indeed, nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time. (3)

It is often forgotten that the nation and national identities are neither fixed nor stable.

According to Gellner, nationalism positions the nation and state as inherently linked and one without the other is considered a tragedy. It is this relationship that ensures both nations and the ways in which they function in the global community will continue to evolve. Gellner argues, “In fact, nations, like states, are a contingency, and not a

universal necessity. Neither nations nor states exist at all times and in all circumstances. Moreover, nations and states are not the *same* contingency. Nationalism holds that they were destined for each other; that either without the other is incomplete, and constitutes a tragedy” (6). As we continue to redefine national identities in the changing global economy, invariably, the symbols used to represent the health of these nations will become increasingly important.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon complicates the ways in which “nation” and “national culture” are understood. By emphasizing how both concepts change their meanings within the communities of subjugated peoples, Fanon further fragments the idea of national identity being either stable or the same throughout communities. Of particular interest is Fanon’s discussion of how colonized people view their pre-colonial nation. He argues that “For [cultured individuals of the colonized race], the demand for a national culture and the affirmation of the existence of such a culture represent a special battlefield.... It is in fact a commonplace to state that for several decades large numbers of research workers have, in the main, rehabilitated the African, Mexican, and Peruvian civilizations” (209). The idea of competing national identities in the colonial context challenges simple definitions of nation and demonstrates how it affects the power relationships present within that nation. In the modern, post-colonial setting, this understanding of nation is useful because it highlights the complexity of historical relationship between the ruling powers and previously subjugated people. Fanon furthers this point when he observes:

The passion with which native intellectuals defend the existence of their national culture may be a source of amazement; but those who condemn this exaggerated passion are strangely apt to forget that their own psyche and their own selves are conveniently sheltered behind a French or German culture which has given full proof of its existence and which is uncontested. (ibid.)

Fanon's point that all individuals are invested in cultural identities is important to consider in relation to how national identities are imagined. Specifically, he demonstrates how even when not explored explicitly, the post-colonial context highlights the tense power relations that are at work between the colonizer and colonized peoples.

Although some theorists might argue that all nations are contested because they are constructions that are "imagined," Fanon's argument emphasizes the ways in which *some* nations are accepted as having historical roots and how the omission of marginalized civilizations from the discourses of nationhood occur within Western culture. On the importance of demonstrating the dignity and glory of pre-colonial national culture, Fanon observes, "The claim to a national culture in the past does not only rehabilitate that nation and serve as a justification for the hope of a future national culture. In the sphere of psycho-affective equilibrium it is responsible for an important change in the native" (210). Fanon's exploration of the importance of alternative histories of a nation to the "native" population also complicates how the nation is imagined by asking *why* it is examined. While exploring how nations function ideologically is a worthwhile endeavor, Fanon removes the theoretical side of this

discourse and illustrates that there are real implications for such political explorations. Although Fanon examines nation in terms of colonial legacies, his observations work well in relation to U.S. history and imperialism as the same issues of power, class, and race permeate these tensions as well.

Perhaps the most dangerous aspect of the discourse of nationalism is the ways in which it re-subjugates marginalized peoples in its efforts to create a unified and singular national identity. As Said argues in *Orientalism*, the “Western” nation has derived its identity through its conceptualization of the “Other” (43-4). Anderson builds on this idea:

In an age when it is so common for progressive, cosmopolitan intellectuals (particularly in Europe?) to insist on the near-pathological character of nationalism, its roots in fear and hatred of the Other, and its affinities with racism, it is useful to remind ourselves that nations inspire love, and often profoundly self-sacrificing love. The cultural products of nationalism—poetry, prose fiction, music, plastic arts—show this love very clearly in thousands of different forms and styles. On the other hand, how truly rare it is to find *analogous* nationalist products expressing fear and loathing. (141)

Anderson’s idea that nationalism inspires love and devotion is partially correct. While even colonized peoples will express their devotion to the state, if they were totally content with these identities, we would not be living in a postcolonial world in which many colonial ties have been broken. Furthermore, the proliferation of national arts—

literature, music, and film specifically—suggests that this “love” may not be about an acceptance of painful histories but about self-love, despite the histories. So, try as we might to construct a definition of the nation based on shared histories, the fact remains that nationalisms vary by context. Anderson’s idea that the nation is a family offers another way to understand national identity. He argues “the family has traditionally been conceived as the domain of disinterested love and solidarity. So too, if historians, diplomats, politicians, and social scientists are quite at ease with the idea of ‘national interest,’ for most ordinary people of whatever class the whole point of the nation is that it is interestless. Just for that reason, it can ask for sacrifices” (144).

However, this idea needs to be complicated, for it is clear that national interests are both created and presented quite regularly to justify political decisions domestically and internationally. If the nation represents the family into which individuals were born, it stands to reason that it might also be imagined as a dysfunctional family in which struggles for resources and power will inevitably occur. As Fanon correctly argues, “Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it. This work of devaluing pre-colonial history takes on a dialectical significance today” (210). Although Fanon is discussing colonialism, the same can be said about imperialism as political agendas seek to reduce the power of marginalized peoples in the name of the nation-state.

This project will build upon all of these discussions of nation, national identity, and nationhood. Of particular importance will be Gellner's, Anderson's, and Hobsbawm's conceptualizations of nation as their discussions connect with the discourses and ideologies at work in baseball's relationship with the American Dream.

The Nation and the American Dream

Since the nineteenth century, the "American Dream" has been explored as a concept by historians, authors, and public figures. Within this discourse has been the promise of wealth of opportunities made available for all denizens of the United States. Even in its earliest forms, the idea of American liberties was presented as a stark contrast to what was available in other countries. Although the liberties are seldom experienced as they are imagined, Robert Elias explores how the myth of the American Dream "seduces foreigners" with the imagined class and religious freedoms they could experience in the U.S. (5). Samuel Regalado furthers this idea by arguing that:

in an age when the media became the mass media, when nationalistic promoters saturated the global public with tales of opportunity in America, and when novels such as those written by [Horatio] Alger offered a chemistry for success in the land of *E Pluribus Unum*, consumers of this marketing who lived in less than desirable circumstances were taken in by the specter of fame and achievement. . . . By the 1890s, expansionists trumpeted this myth to the regions that had come under American hegemony. Though the chief goals in these neocolonial ventures

were to secure military bases as a means to promote American economic interests, American values, too, were imported. (72-3)

In his discussion of how these success myths were often received in Latino communities, Regalado positions the U.S. as a sanctuary of hope. He concludes, “If poverty ranked high as a ‘push factor’ for immigrants to leave their homelands for America, the ‘pull’ was, among other things, the myth, which by its very definition held the promise of financial security and national prestige. In this regard, the American Dream becomes both contested because of its potential hegemony and embraced because it offered hope in situations that were rather dire.

Whether in reaction to the tyranny of dictators or the plights of poor people in Europe, from its inception, the American Dream has been coded as something all (white) Americans could achieve. Wedded to the Protestant Work ethic, the American Dream positioned the diligent worker as one who could achieve success if he only applied himself and lived piously.⁵ Even in these early articulations of the American Dream, the notion that anyone could achieve material wealth was central to these discourses. In perhaps the best marketing campaign of all time, the U.S. became the land of milk and honey where the streets were paved with gold and anyone could attain social status and wealth. From national idioms to political rhetoric asking citizens to invest in the ideology of the national promise to the acceptance of success being defined through the

⁵ It is important to note that the discourses of the American Dream have varied a great deal, but repeatedly revolve around traditional gender expectations. In its earliest forms, people of color and women were both systematically excluded from the ideals expressed within the Dream. Although this project will not examine the exclusion of women from the American Dream, the gendering of the national myth should not be forgotten.

acquisition of material wealth, the American Dream has become a naturalized part of U.S. dominant culture.⁶

For some historians, the American Dream is a byproduct of the nationalist agendas that originated in the nineteenth century. Through these rhetorical explorations of the American Dream, the nation is constantly reconfigured in hope of building unity and advancing specific cultural needs.⁷ From the collective explorations of the American Dream, several important themes emerge: the promise of financial opportunity, the construction of the U.S. as providing every citizen with equal access to social mobility, and the belief that the meritocracy of the U.S. will ensure class and social freedom. Although these themes are manifested in different ways, they are all clearly linked with the conceptualization of American Dream.

While the symbols representing achievement of the American Dream have changed with each generation, they are frequently represented as material reward through participation in the national mores and investment in the economic system. With each decade of the twentieth century, how the nation was defined usually returned to the idea of the United States as the land of opportunity.⁸ As the Civil Rights and the Women's

⁶ Many scholars have examined how the American Dream became naturalized in U.S. culture. For discussion of how film content has explored the American Dream, see Jonathan J. Cavallero, Timothy E. Scheurer, and Peter C. Rollins for a sample of this discourse. For discussions of the American Dream and racial identity see Jennifer L. Hochschild, Thomas Zeiler, and Marshall G. Most and Robert Rudd.

⁷ See Esmond Wright's *The American Dream* for a detailed analysis of how the American Dream evolved to reflect the cultural and political needs of each era. Robert J. Samuelson's *The Good Life and Its Discontents* also examines how the American Dream reflected political agendas and cultural values.

⁸ Samuel Regalado's *Viva Baseball* and other works examine the many challenges Latino athletes endured in hopes of achieving the American Dream through baseball. Similarly, Robert Elias examines the shortcomings of the meritocracy promised to immigrants in "A Fit For a Fractured Society."

Movements gained prominence in the mid-twentieth century, the discourses of America as the land of opportunity evolved to address the gaps and omissions of federal and state programs that should be available to all. Rather than restructuring the American Dream to something only available to white men, these movements reinvested in the American Dream as it promised civil liberty as evident in consumer opportunities to all. People of color should have access to owning a home in the suburbs; women should be able to earn equal salaries and have control over their destinies. These tenets were accepted as the way to be a “true” American. By the 1960s, many disenfranchised Americans actively questioned the idyllic image of an American Dream as accessible to all. Yet, although major social shifts in economic priorities in the 1970s and 1980s would continue to redefine what exactly the American Dream promised, the image of suburban houses, job opportunities, and social mobility through economic status remained essential to the way the Dream was represented.

As the American Dream became accessible to different populations, its meanings and symbols shifted to represent the specific cultural and economic needs of each community. And, as such, the representations of the American Dream are best understood through an examination of the ways in which marginalized peoples can gain access to the promises of the nation. As Jennifer L. Hochschild argues, “millions of immigrants and internal migrants have moved to America and around within it, to fulfill their version of the American dream” (15). Although she recognizes that people have been disillusioned by their inability to achieve the American Dream, Hochschild

ultimately concludes that the promise of possible improvements and the Dream's connection to one's virtues, encouraged millions of people to stay loyal to the Dream (31, 34). Hochschild continues to complicate the myth of meritocracy that is embedded in the American Dream by adding that it is "an impressive ideology. It has for centuries lured people to America and moved them around within it, and it has kept them striving in horrible conditions against impossible odds" (25). Hochschild concludes that:

The emotional potency of the American dream has made people who *were* able to identify with it the norm for everyone else. White men, especially European immigrants able to ride the wave of the Industrial Revolution (and to benefit from the absence of competition from the rest of the population) to comfort or even prosperity, are the epitomizing demonstration of America as the bountiful state of nature. Those who do not fit the model disappear from the collective self-portrait. Thus the irony is doubled: *not only has the ideal of universal participation been denied to most Americans, but also the very fact of its denial has itself been denied in our national self-image.* (26 emphasis added)

This denial is important to consider in terms of how the American dream functions ideologically. Despite the many ways in which the American Dream is used as a statement of the nation's promise to all of its citizens, rarely are the institutions that should be responsible for ensuring that it is accessible discussed in relation to how the Dream fails. Specifically, the American Dream becomes an ideology that omits the

systemic denial of access for various groups over time and selects the successes as representing the collective experience of the Dream.

The discrimination that white immigrants faced was intense and undoubtedly affected their success in the U.S.; however, many could choose to change their names, lose their accents, or remove remnants from their previous cultural background if they desired to blend into the ambiguous “white” dominant culture. Furthermore, although cultural traditions would remain present over time, the traits that linked white immigrants to their homelands frequently diminished after a generation or two.⁹

The American Dream is predicated on equal access to opportunities regardless of race and is undeniably linked with articulations of racist ideologies of what makes an “American.” Although in many ways, baseball has been the site for the exploration of social issues within the U.S., it also represents one of the last vestiges of the institutional obstacles for attaining first-class citizenship for people of color. For Latino and Black Americans, assimilation into every aspect of the American Dream has been wrought with institutional barriers—even within contemporary U.S. culture. As Regalado observes, for black Latino baseball players, the struggle to gain access to the American Dream was doubly hard as they had to negotiate the language barrier and the color restrictions within the U.S. (73-4). Although Asian Americans have also faced discrimination and limited access to the American Dream, their status as the “model minority” has separated them

⁹ For further discussion, see Hochschild’s chapter “Blacks and White Immigrants” in which she offers an in depth examination of the many challenges white immigrants faced. In “Baseball: Badge of Americanism,” Harold Seymour also builds on this discussion in his examination of how some immigrant families encouraged their children to play baseball as a way to achieve the desired status of being an “American.”

from other people of color and afforded them more opportunities in many settings.¹⁰

Dominant popular media forms have at once exacerbated and alleviated the struggle for these peoples to find an American identity by marginalizing the obstacles people of color faced trying to achieve social mobility and by reinvesting in the myth of equal access to the Dream.

State of the Nation: Constructing National Identity through Sports Culture

As Said's work on the constructions of exotic others demonstrates, the constructions of national identities have many implications for the ways in which the social world functions. Through cultural forms and texts, the imperial legacy remains one of the most obvious remnants of this construction of national identity through the Other; that is, the practice of defining the members of the community by characterizing those who are not. Regardless of how "nation" is defined, *how* "nationhood" is used within sports culture provides many insights into how nationhood is understood in contemporary culture. Within the sports context, the "imagined" community is the team and its fans. Within this imagined community, the team becomes a symbol of the nation, and athletic contests become sites for visions of the nation. This team-nation becomes especially important in terms of regulations, codes of conduct, and moral panics all of which lend themselves as a good way to critique both the social investment in "sport" and

¹⁰ Doobo Shim, Elaine Kim, and Sumi K. Cho all discuss at length the concept of Asian Americans' status as the "model minority" because of their stereotyped work ethic and lack of confrontation when faced with racial oppression. Of course, this concept furthers other problematic racist ideologies as specific Asian national groups have been persecuted in the U.S. based on the politics of the era.

the fragile nature of the “nation.” Thus, baseball is particularly important to ideas of American nationalism as its roles as the “American game” has been fiercely defended and deliberately constructed when “real” threats to the “nation” have emerged.

Although the percentage of professional baseball players who are foreign-born continues to increase, baseball is hardly the only professional sport in the U.S. to establish a strong international pool of athletes while still representing itself as American. For example, the National Hockey League (NHL) has had a longstanding relationship with Canada and European nations. Part of the explanation for the NHL’s successful partnership with other countries has been that these countries already have formal and informal hockey leagues. As a result, Canadian hockey culture and players are respected within U.S. sports culture as having a legitimate legacy in hockey. Baseball, however, has a different history. Despite evidence that baseball’s roots trace back to other nations’ games like cricket and rounders, traditional baseball history presents the game as born and evolving in the U.S. without “outside” influence. Such a representational treatment of baseball culture leads to the marginalization of international players and sports cultures.

In this regard, the comments of Toby Miller et al. provide an important amplification of how sport culture produces and maintains specific national identities. They argue: “Sporting bodies are taken to represent the condition of the nation through racial ‘integrity’, the ‘health’ of the economy, the rate of technological progress, the nature of appropriate gender identities, and any other symbolic role that can plausibly be

deployed” (31). The physical body of the player becomes further important as a national symbol on several levels. As Miller et al. continue, “The sporting body bears triumphalist national mythologies in a double way, extending the body to encompass the nation and compressing it to obscure the social divisions that threaten the national unity” (ibid.).

The athletic body as a symbol of the nation has been seen in the Olympics for centuries. The steroids controversy in baseball is an example of how the alleged actions of a few athletes can turn into a moral panic about the nation’s health. The scandals associated with possible steroid abuse among professional baseball players resulted in congressional hearings and the revival of national anti-drug campaigns. In this regard, baseball players’ alleged illegal activities serve as a national barometer of the nation’s health, and sports culture becomes a site to negotiate national fears.

Although these relationships between sports and the physical bodies of athletes are part of the discourses of sports culture, when considered in relation to fictional media texts, the relationship is further complicated. A product of the collective and individual’s imagination of the sport and hero being depicted, the fictional text constructs these bodies to embody the virtues, fears, and tensions to be explicated within the narrative. Thus, generic demands also inflect the representation as well as the star’s image in the case of moving pictures. All of these features—the nation, the American Dream, the team, the body, the star—produce complex and potent images.

Sports, Baseball, and the American Dream

The recent influx of foreign players into the NBA [National Basketball Association], set against the increasing youthfulness of Black players at home, forces a reconsideration of what constitutes America and who truly can be represented as Americans. This in turn alters what we see as the American Dream, and how contemporary circumstances might nuance our perceptions about how one might achieve this goal, or whether or not people are even pursuing it in the first place. (Boyd 8)

In order to understand the intricate relationship between the American Dream and sports culture, it is essential to examine the ways in which different communities understand and live the Dream. As Todd Boyd observes about the contemporary American Dream, the ways in which the Dream has been imagined have changed and need to be examined in this new context. Although media texts continue to support the 1950's model and imagery of the American Dream, its meaning and how it is lived has changed a great deal. As such, more attention needs to be paid to the fact that not everyone embraces the "Dream" as being embodied by the suburban home, manicured lawns, and 2.2 children.

In this regard, the American Dream becomes a way of articulating whatever social, economic, or cultural opportunities that have been denied or considered out of reach for that community. And even with such a conceptualization, the fact remains that the Dream will be defined individually despite dominant cultural trends to suggest a

unified and singular goal for Americans. Moreover, Boyd correctly asserts that baseball is not the only sport into which people imagine their dreams of a better life. He argues:

In a world where nationalism seems to have given way to culture as a form of identity, basketball has become a culture of its own. This culture transcends America's shores, and in this world made smaller and potentially more accessible by virtue of technology, people from all over the globe both watch and participate. Baseball and football are ultimately local, whereas basketball is internationally known, nationally recognized, and locally accepted. (Boyd 11-12)

If these differences among sports are occurring as Boyd argues, then why are media texts relying so heavily on baseball as a place for representing the American Dream? One of the many arguments that can be made is that baseball is convenient for articulating the essential myths of the U.S. in terms of meritocracy and growth of the nation. Although certainly an argument can be made for this understanding of baseball's role in illustrating the ideological values of the American Dream, the greater impact of race and urban culture on other sports such as basketball rather than the still predominantly white baseball culture most definitely offers another explanation for media culture's commitment to baseball as the exemplar of the Dream.

Since the advent of baseball, it has been used as a way to imagine both the rural and urban spaces of the changing nation. As the game evolved in the late nineteenth century, it reflected the tensions of the nation. As Elias observes, after the Civil War, the modernization of the game entailed adapting to the changing shape of the nation and the

new urban communities (8). Between the changes occurring to agrarian communities because of new technologies and the influx of people from around the world, the nation-state was particularly unstable during this period. As Weeks simplifies the needs of the late-nineteenth century, “Solidifying [the] union would be the primary task of antebellum American nationalism” (487) after the U.S. Civil War. Ninkovich further discusses this need in his discussion of concurrent labor politics in the U.S. He argues that “Immigration created yet another set of worries about the national character” (18). From Congressional initiatives excluding Asian immigrants in the 1880s to the influx of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe in the 1890s, with each wave of immigration, the concern focused on what would happen to the nation that was still rebuilding after the Civil War (ibid.). Ninkovich summarizes the concern well:

It was not so much the volume of immigration, which actually declined from the numbers posted in the 1880s, as the character of the new entrants that concerned old-line Americans. Often illiterate and ethnically and religiously different from the country’s dominant Anglo-Saxon Protestant stock, these new immigrants generated worries about the country’s core values in the future.(ibid.)

Moreover, these immigrants poured into the urban areas, exacerbating recognition of differences and of classes as the U.S. industrialized. The concerns that Ninkovich addresses regarding how immigrant populations will affect U.S. national character demonstrate how the national identity as both imagined and protected continues to be important in the political discourses of the subsequent generations.

Similarly, Robert Rudd and Marshall G. Most argue that the mass media were integral in creating baseball as a site for cultural affinity in this changing society. They argue:

sportswriters and journalists who were most responsible for the construction of that vision were deeply concerned about the impact the processes of urbanization and industrialization were having on American society. The vision they crafted of the 'national pastime' was intended to provide 'the symbols, myths and legends society needed to bind its members together' within this new urban environment.

(36)

In this regard, baseball represented a way to address the increasing isolation and fragmentation that urbanization created within the U.S. Although political leaders and intellectuals were generally disinterested in the well-being of people of color and working-class U.S. citizens, there was great concern regarding how the shift to an industrialized, urban society would change the perceived virtues of the young nation. As people moved to industrialized occupations, they faced becoming part of a larger, but more heterogeneous community. What is compelling about the construction of the fragmented urban society is how industrialization, which will allow the U.S. to become an even stronger economic force globally, also threatens the imagined stability of the nation and its prosperity. However, despite economic benefits, there was a persistent fear of how these changes would change the national character.

The composition and nature of these new communities would become essential to the development of new forms of recreation. Sut Jhally connects these shifts with the development of the sports media complex and concludes:

the underlying dynamic behind the emergence of spectator sports was *urbanization*. While early team sports were played and watched by the upper classes, urban sports were played by and catered to a working-class audience. Commercialized sports grew rapidly in the expanding urban centers as a release from the social problems that accompanied capitalist urbanization, and also as a result of the lack of leisure and recreational facilities which might have eased the burdens of rapid industrialization. (43)

Similarly, in his analysis of how baseball has been used to foster community in a changing society, Harold Seymour examines how baseball was used in relation to the development of urban areas. He argues:

With urban industrialism bent on the development of large, highly organized and bureaucratized entities in so many other segments of society, boys' baseball... got caught up in attempts to solve a host of social problems, such as juvenile delinquency, child labor, and poor schooling that had been made acute by burgeoning city life. (12)

By positioning baseball as a way to address the new conditions of urban life, the longing for the rural past across media forms and for "simpler" days and wide open spaces would become as essential to the image of baseball as the game itself. Rudd and Most correctly

summarize the symbolic importance of baseball as the nation underwent many changes: “Baseball was presented as a pastoral game, and as a mean to reconcile the contradictions between earlier frontier values and those of the emerging city” (49). As such, the media images most commonly associated with baseball evoke nostalgia for these “simple” days regardless of the real challenges the nation faced during this now romanticized period. Even in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, representations of baseball contain these residual discourses while also grappling with new issues in representing the nation and the American Dream.

The media images and discourses of baseball culture become useful tools to explain how baseball and sport culture currently define the American Dream. In his discussion of how commentators have theorized the American Dream in *Field of Dreams*, Thomas Altherr argues that baseball comes to represent the tensions between the pre- and post-industrialized Americas. As a site for examining the role baseball plays in the construction of the national identity, baseball becomes a way to understand how the American Dream mirrors the shifts within the nation. While Altherr positions baseball’s meanings in U.S. culture as contested and varied, he describes many problematic notions about the American Dream. Most notably, dividing the U.S. into a binary opposition between rural and urban spaces functions as a way to understand the film’s reception and the ways in which the audience could engage the text. He notes, “For some [commentators], the game has been a reminder of America’s rural past, a welcome (or not-so-welcome) relic of pre-mechanized country sides, lazy pastoral picnics, a surfeit of

rustic peace. For others, it has been the opposite, the game that grew up with the cities, assimilated immigrants, and matched the hustle and bustle of industrialism” (52-3). In either version, baseball is presented as a way to express the complexities of living in an industrialized society. These constructions of baseball in a changing society are particularly useful as they highlight how the sport has many meanings that are all grounded in a specific cultural context. The idea of a reflexive American Dream is precisely what Boyd means when he notes how the Dream has changed based on new community issues and trends. Both Boyd and Altherr demonstrate, although in different ways, how using sports to represent the American Dream is both relevant and alive today.

In their exploration of how the American Dream functions in business films, Mary Pileggi et al. argue that the media fuels the “myth of individualism in attaining the American Dream” (210). They continue to frame these films by dividing the American Dream into two categories in business films: rags-to-riches and money-can’t-buy-happiness models (ibid.). Using this typology, they argue that hard work and personal integrity are the two virtues which yield success in business films. More relevant to an analysis of how the American Dream functions within baseball media texts is the “money-can’t-buy happiness” formula. This narrative model serves as a cautionary tale both in business films and in baseball texts through the creation of wealthy characters who are unhappy, greedy, and selfish (211).

Beyond its role in reinforcing the American Dream, baseball has also served as a way for individuals generally to self-identify as American. Historically, through

participation in baseball as either a fan or player, the sport has allowed people to engage in the national culture. In relation to Kenneth Burke's theories of identification and rebirth, Kurt Billmeyer notes:

We all seek symbolically to be common with others. Baseball served as a common focal point for many Americans, particularly in 1919. America was a "melting pot" of many cultures, with many apparent differences. Many of these ethnic Americans sought something "American" that they could hold in common; baseball provided this "identification" for many. This desire can be seen by the fact that along with native-born Americans, those of Irish and German descent made up over 90 percent of professional ball players in the early 1900s. (91)

Although a lot has changed for immigrant populations, baseball has maintained its importance as a way for new Americans to gain access to American culture. Elias argues that "leaders of immigrant groups advised their peoples to learn the national game if they wanted to become Americans, and foreign language newspapers devoted space to educating their readers about the American game" (11).

A third function for baseball exists. In the same ways that Horatio Alger's nineteenth-century novels created a myopic view of the American Dream revolving around white males' journey to find success within U.S. society, contemporary baseball texts reify the ways in which the American Dream still revolves around white masculinity. Specifically, the intersection of the American Dream and baseball today reveals dominant culture's desire to reclaim baseball as a site for not only white

redemption and dominance but for white masculinity. Canonical baseball films like *The Natural* (Levinson, 1984) and *Field of Dreams* serve as the beginning of the contemporary iconography of baseball's American Dream. In the baseball-centered films that follow these two films, the narratives persistently return to the idealization of the game as a site for white masculinity as well as national identity construction and the promise of prosperity that the U.S. has historically represented in the form of the American Dream.

Through his discussion of how baseball has helped to acculturate generations of immigrants, Elias points out that the sport did allow for racial and ethnic mobility (ibid.), but it is as a tool for acculturation that baseball's role in U.S. history is better understood. As the nation faced many social changes, the ways in which people engaged with the game increased in importance. As populations moved to urban centers, the loss of idealized rural spaces became an important aspect of baseball mythology. Elias asserts that although the American promise has not been fulfilled, it reappears in several cultural forms and becomes a way to understanding what was at stake in creating the national discourse of the "American Dream" (6). Both in terms of baseball's origins and its white masculinity, it has served as a centrally useful site for symbolic work about "America."

The History of the Baseball film

Before examining how contemporary baseball films represent race, national identity, and the American Dream, it is helpful to provide a brief history of how baseball

has been represented in film. Several filmographies attempt to chronicle every baseball film ever made.¹¹ For each of these filmographies, the author has developed the criterion that defines a baseball film. Whether the main character is a baseball player or the sport is featured prominently in the narrative are the factors most commonly used. The common denominator in all of these texts (even the most referential) is that baseball films have always conveyed the real and projected values of dominant U.S. culture.

For example, Hal Erickson opens his analysis of baseball films from 1915 to 2001 with the following useful questions: “What is it about America’s Pastime that so often prevents it from successfully combining with America’s Second Pastime? Why is it that, since 1914, there have been a little over a hundred American feature films about baseball?” (5). For the purpose of his study, Erickson focuses on feature-length films made after the invention of sound technology. He argues that the release of *Little Sunset* (Bosworth, 1915), the first feature film about baseball, ushered in a new platform for filmmakers (Erickson 13-14). In the following decades, mainstream U.S. filmmakers would continue to use the sport across genres and with varying approaches to depicting the game. Erickson divides the main approaches into five basic categories: comedies and fantasies, baseball as a metaphor for life, star vehicles, baseball outside the American mainstream, and quirky independent projects (23-24).

¹¹ Howard Good’s *Diamonds in the Dark: America, Baseball and the Movies* and Gary E. Dickerson’s *The Cinema of Baseball: Images of America, 1929-1989* provide an overview of the major shifts in fictional baseball films. For annotated filmographies, see Hal Erickson’s *Baseball Filmography* and Harvey Marc Zucker and Lawrence J. Babich’s *Sports Films: A Complete Reference*.

Similarly, Gary E. Dickerson notes, “scholars from a variety of disciplines have asserted that both baseball and the cinema have assisted in enculturating the American people and are, in fact, instructional tools by which Americans have learned and acquired American values and culture” (3). However, he also argues that

If the premise that baseball is or was “America’s game” is accurate and as such, it can be said to *reflect the popular values of American culture*, and if the premise that film *reflects the popular values of American culture is accurate*, then it seems logical that a study that has the exploration of the values contained in baseball films as its focus would be valuable as a tool for discovering what these values are and what they suggest about *our* culture. (3 emphasis added)

The assertion that baseball reflects popular American values is important to consider in relation to how “our” country is imagined. The imagined inclusion of all “Americans” in such a statement is problematic considering the treatment of cultural differences within these texts.

In order to identify the values at work within the films, Dickerson argues that “the dominant values in these films are identified by examining the character traits attributed to the films’ protagonists” (7). He explains the logic of his analysis: “my assumption is that the Hollywood version of the baseball player is the embodiment of the popular ideals and values held by the audience members at the time the film was released” (7). Although Dickerson positions the protagonists within the appropriate sociocultural context by examining the politics of the era, only passing attention is given

to how racial or ethnic identity is represented.¹² An argument could be made that so few baseball texts depict racial and ethnic characters because there is no need for such analysis. However, this is simply untrue as race, both in the form of the imagined invisible whiteness of characters and in the heavily coded depictions of people of color, is present in all of these films. Ultimately, by not examining race through either the treatment of difference or the presumption that whiteness is not a color in these films, the conceptualization of baseball and, consequently, the U.S. as color-blind is reinforced.

What is compelling about positing films as a reflection of cultural values in this manner is the assumption that because a Hollywood film imagines an audience will respond positively to a film then the text reflects the dominant mores of the era. Although this argument has some merit, there are several problems with this line of reasoning. Such logic becomes particularly useful considering how frequently mainstream films ignore or marginalize audience groups that are either undervalued or considered unmarketable. Prior to the 1970s Blaxploitation film era, the black audience was hardly the focus of mainstream films. In fact, as Ed Guerrero argues in *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*, it was not until the 1980s that Hollywood started using strategies like the interracial buddy film model as a way to draw the black viewer to the theater. While Dickerson's assumptions about the connection between the ideological content of baseball films and American values has some merit, his construction of the motivations and implications for such content needs development

¹² For further discussion, see Dickerson's chapter "The Bad News Bears and the Bad News Seventies" in which he examines baseball films in relation to key events in U.S. history.

especially considering the ways in which race is represented in these texts. Furthermore, such a simplistic discussion of how films reflect American values ignores the many reading practices that audiences use. Is it impossible to enjoy baseball films without seeing their content as a reflection of one's values or beliefs? The many reading strategies utilized by viewers (especially those of marginalized groups) suggest that the equation is not that simple. Even when considering Dickerson's observation that silent baseball films were able to help enculturate immigrant groups despite linguistic differences (3), how the "American" values were received is open to interpretation. Regardless of how the content depicts baseball, what is clear is that these films provide viewers simple codes that reflected the idealized vision of the nation.

Key Baseball Films

Regardless of how baseball films are defined, several films were groundbreaking and innovative in how they address the basic tenets of the game. These variations and innovations indicate specific cultural shifts of the era and demonstrate how the ideological uses of baseball continue to evolve. Further supporting the notion that baseball is a platform that can be used to address issues in U.S. culture, these films become more than forms of recreation; they are also snapshots of how American lifestyles are imagined.

Although most baseball films attempt to use the sport as a way to solve social problems in the U.S., a few have depicted the injustices and failures within the nation's

history. For example, *Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars & Motor Kings* (John Badham, 1976) is a fun and entertaining narrative about a team of Negro Leagues players who resist the exploitative and oppressive demands of their team's owner. Throughout the narrative, the players work together and eventually one of the players becomes the first black player to join Major League Baseball. Similarly, the team in *The Bad News Bears* trilogy is a group of youth misfits who are brought together by how dominant culture has dismissed them. Through the antics the youth get into, the film openly addresses the failures of the American Dream in 1970s culture.

Each generation of baseball films has attempted to address specific cultural shifts in their narratives. Despite the prevalence of women in baseball films in supporting roles, until the release of *Bull Durham* (Shelton, 1988), women characters were not actively engaged in the sport as either fans or participants. Through the story of two minor league baseball players—one at the beginning of a promising career and the other at the end of a successful, yet unfulfilling career—the film uses baseball as a metaphor for life and women as essential to the characters' coming-of-age process. In his essay "Ceremonies of Innocence and Experience," Frank Ardolino examines the importance of the characterization of Annie Savoy (Susan Sarandon) in the film. He argues, Annie is able to provide "lessons in sexuality, manners, poetry, and life in general" for the players (46). Although he is correct in acknowledging the important shift that Annie represents, she is still a secondary character whose identity is defined in relation to the male protagonists. Smart, sophisticated, and cultured, she offers these men the chance to find

themselves by having sexual and intellectual relationships with her. The story is about them, only secondarily about her. Another important variation in baseball films occurred with the release of *A League of Their Own* (Marshall, 1992). The film attempts to add feminism to the traditional baseball narrative by telling the story of women players who took the field because men were away during World War II. Starring Madonna, Rosie O'Donnell, and Geena Davis as some of the players on the team, the film offers an entertaining, whimsical, and utopic look at the history of the gender divide in sports.

All of these films have received both popular and scholarly attention for the changes they offered in how baseball might be represented in film. However, less discussed films have also challenged the traditional representations of the game. For example, *Fear Strikes Out* (Mulligan, 1957) addresses the pressures of professional play and the eventual breakdown of a player. Similarly, *The Scout* (Ritchie, 1994) depicts a troubled baseball phenom who must deal with his mental illness if he is to reach his potential as a pitcher.

Several baseball films have attempted to chronicle historical figures and events. For example, the fictional film *Eight Men Out* (John Sayles, 1988) retells the story of the 1919 Chicago White Sox scandal. Although the film follows the basic historical storyline of the World Series scandal that led to several players being banned from baseball because they were found guilty of accepting bribes to lose games, the narrative also includes interpretations of events and attempts to explain what motivated the players. Such deviations make the film a work of fiction that has been inspired by history.

In sharp contrast to a film like *Eight Men Out*, documentarian Ken Burns examines the history of the game in his epic nine-part series *Baseball* (1994). In each part or “inning,” Burns examines a different aspect of the game and how it engaged U.S. politics, race relations, and the commercialization of the sport. Because of the length of the documentary, Burns is able to address many different aspects of baseball culture and its impact on the nation.

Baseball docudramas about important players have also provided an important role in shaping the historical representation of the game. Although the line between fact and fiction sometimes is blurred, baseball biographies have been rather popular and play an important role in making specific players baseball heroes. Films such as *Pride of the Yankees* (Sam Wood, 1942), *The Babe Ruth Story* (Roy del Ruth, 1948) *The Jackie Robinson Story* (Alfred E. Green, 1950), *The Babe* (Arthur Hiller, 1992), and *61** (Billy Crystal, 2001) all attempt to tell the life stories of legendary baseball players, but also position the game as a vehicle for these men to transcend class and racial boundaries. The line between fiction and reality becomes especially blurry in some of these films when the athlete plays himself (as in *The Jackie Robinson Story*). From social injustices like segregation and sexism to the mental challenges players must endure to biopics, it is clear that a baseball film has, oddly enough, very few narrative or convention requirements.

Method of Investigation

What do contemporary film and advertising images say about baseball in contemporary U.S. culture? How do we understand these texts in relation to global politics and consumer cultures? Despite the diversity of professional baseball since the 1980s, contemporary baseball films appear frozen in a nostalgic past which features all-white teams. Because of the reliance upon static images of baseball, these films present white men as the purveyors of the game's virtues and the people of color who attempt to join this fraternity have to erase their differences before they are accepted into the team. Rather than complicating the depictions of athletes of color, whiteness and the rural American Dream become the defining elements of baseball in fictional films. This project argues that these images reveal the constructed nature of American identity and how aggressively this identity is protected especially in terms of constructions of American identity in relation to race and masculinity. Despite the success of athletes of color in professional baseball, what is remarkable is how rarely that success is represented. Furthermore, when athletes of color are represented, their racial difference is used to comment upon the perceived threats and negative shifts in sports culture and society more broadly.

Although many media texts depict baseball as an American sport, I have selected films and commercials that focus on the game of baseball rather than use baseball to serve as a backdrop for other stories (often heterosexual romances). For each of the films, I will analyze the representation of social and political issues at work within sports culture and Major League Baseball. When examining films that include people of color,

Donald Bogle's work on constructions of blackness in films is of particular importance. Using his pantheon of black characters, I analyze the depictions of baseball players of color into historical context and analyze how the narratives define racial difference. Another conceptualization of race in film that influences this project is Ed Guerrero's work on the bi-racial buddy films of the 1980s. Guerrero theorizes that black characters are contained within narratives and defined in relation to whiteness. Both Bogle and Guerrero provide useful frameworks for interpreting race within baseball films.

Since the focus of my study is on contemporary fictional and commercial representations of baseball, for each chapter, I have identified specific ideological concerns for the relevant themes, and I have selected exemplary films and commercials accordingly. When determining how to define the set of films for the project, I considered several factors. As scholars such as Dickerson and Good have noted, the 1980s marked a significant shift in how Hollywood filmmakers perceived baseball narratives. On this point, Good observes:

Beginning in 1984 with the adaptation of Bernard Malamud's first novel, *The Natural*, to the screen, filmmakers rediscovered baseball as a subject. Four years later the critical and commercial success of *Bull Durham* seemed to disprove once and for all the long-held notion that baseball films were "box office poison" (Sheed 1) In the Hollywood tradition of a hit film inspiring 'prequels,' sequels, and imitations, *Bull Durham* set off a cycle of baseball films that has continued into the 1990s. (Good 6)

The resurgence of baseball films in the late 1980s marks the beginning of the recent use of baseball as a site for expressing the American Dream. It is in the 1980s that baseball films became financially lucrative and successful star vehicles in Hollywood. As the study progressed, several themes emerged that suggested an important shift occurred in the late 1970s with the release and surprising success of *Bad News Bears* (Ritchie, 1976). In this raunchy look at little league baseball culture, the film explicitly uses the disenfranchised youth to comment upon the American Dream. The film is also important to consider because it introduces the multi-ethnic team as a platform to comment upon social changes.

As the filmography demonstrates, many baseball films have been made since 1976. However, very few attempt to alter or update the representations of baseball to include diversity. Although the films which focus only on white baseball players provide many insights into how race functions within U.S. culture, the goal of this project is to highlight the ways in which whiteness is defined through depictions of racial and ethnic others. Because I want to isolate how racial and ethnic difference is positioned in relation to whiteness within the films, I eliminated films that do not include people of color as part of baseball culture. Furthermore, since one of the aims of the project is to examine how the conventions within baseball film change when race is introduced, for each chapter, I selected the films made since 1976 that engage the tensions and themes.

It is important to note that despite the many patterns within baseball films, I do not consider them a genre as they use the game as a narrative platform and rely upon the

conventions of other modes of storytelling (i.e., dramas, comedies, and romances). In this regard, baseball films occupy many genres and can be examined in terms of various conventions. For example, although *The Natural* is a film that relies upon baseball to advance its narrative, with minor changes, the same story could be told regarding a soccer player. Further more, since my aim is to connect fictional representations of baseball with national ideologies, the most important factor in selecting films was to identify texts that directly comment upon these tensions.

Since the chapters will address how filmic depictions of baseball reflect larger social issues, I examine the discourses at work within these constructions to examine how these texts are understood as representations of the American Dream. As relevant, I will explore how the political economy of professional sports culture influences the representations of baseball as a career and as an emblem of the American Dream. As such, I will examine the canonical texts of this period *The Natural*, *Field of Dreams*, *Bull Durham* (Ron Shelton, 1988), and *Major League* (David S. Ward, 1989) as case studies in relation to hero construction, nostalgic images of the national landscape, and multi-ethnic ensemble comedies. I will also examine in depth how these films, despite the narrative inclusion of people of color, are focalized through the perspective of a specific type of white masculinity.¹³ To demonstrate further how race functions within contemporary baseball films, I will examine the only two contemporary fictional films

¹³ Although “whiteness” has been explored by scholars in terms of invisibility and its problematic placement as lacking a racial identity (see Richard Dyer and Peggy McIntosh), within baseball ideologies the notion of an “American” is inherently tied to whiteness. Traditionally, the baseball hero or protagonist is a white man who represents every man because he is not too handsome and not too athletic, but rather is just “average.”

that focus on black baseball players, *The Fan* (Tony Scott, 1996) and *Mr. 3000* (Charles Stone III, 2004).

In addition to my exploration of contemporary baseball films, I will also support my analysis by examining specific commercials that demonstrate the intersection of race, class, baseball, and the American Dream. As fictional texts, commercials are very useful to consider in relation to baseball films since like films they reflect how their respective producers imagine the sport. Furthermore, the visual and narrative content of these commercials highlight the role of the modern athlete as a cultural commodity. When juxtaposed with baseball films, these commercials demonstrate the ways in which the sport and the athlete function as commodities in contemporary American culture.

The products sold in these commercials range from sports products and vehicles to financial companies and baseball as an industry, but all of these texts exhibit the same conceptualizations of race, U.S. landscapes, and national identity as are expressed in baseball films. Since anything is possible in both films and commercials, the directors and crew ultimately *choose* how they want to present everything included in the narratives. As such, these commercials become snapshots of how baseball culture is imagined in relation to other sports within the national landscape. Specifically, these texts comment upon how athletes represent dominant values of class ascension via sports participation, once again eliding race and constructing baseball and U.S. society simultaneously as color-blind and white male-centered.

Chapter Outline

This project seeks to demonstrate the ways in which media images of baseball and the American Dream intersect to reveal social tensions and fears. Specifically, I examine how baseball culture informs the construction of “American” identity in terms of race and gender expectations.

Chapter two (“Welcome to the Majors, Mr. Hobbs”: Canonical Images of the American Dream in Baseball Films) examines the historical relationship between baseball and the American Dream. Through a discussion of the history of both baseball as a sport and baseball as a vehicle for the American Dream, I consider further the ways in which the nation is constructed within sports culture. I argue that the dominant images of the American Dream in contemporary baseball films simultaneously offer solutions to present social issues and create nostalgic images of the past. In *The Natural* and *Field of Dreams*, the canonical baseball films of the 1980s, the rural heartland is presented as the American Dream in modern culture. Within these films, the white male heroes are in crisis and need to learn baseball properly to save themselves. Although both films connect professional baseball with the class ascension commonly associated with the American Dream, they demonstrate that a pure game, untainted by modernization and industrialization, is fundamental to the restoration of the human spirit, which is the actual American Dream.

In this chapter, I argue that these films reproduce the iconography that defines baseball culture in other media forms, specifically sports advertisements. These canonical images of baseball and whiteness are demonstrated in *Ameriquest* and *Chevy*

commercials that link happiness with contemporary and nostalgic constructions of baseball. Through the construction of baseball as white and rural or suburban, these films and commercials utilize baseball to reinforce traditional class and race value systems.

Specifically, in addition to commenting on the roles of wealth and greed in the game, these films also explore the spiritual function that baseball could have in an individual's life. For example, in *The Natural* the hero, Roy Hobbs, finds financial stability *and* emotional clarity through his participation in baseball. Similarly, in *Field of Dreams*, Ray Kinsella achieves happiness by dedicating himself to restoring baseball to its pure state, that is, by removing the blemish of corruption and greed that led to the end of several professional players' careers. Although both films still actively engage class and social mobility through baseball in their narratives, the addition of a spiritual lack redefines the American Dream to be something other than simple economic mobility.

Using the ways in which the American Dream is defined in the canonical films, chapter three (Can I Get a Hero?: Racialized Constructions of Heroes in Baseball Films), builds upon the traditions and depictions in the canonical films to explore what happens when the central protagonist is a person of color. Despite the racial diversity in contemporary baseball, filmic representations of the game still present the game as a white-dominated sport. In the few texts that include athletes of color, the men are usually presented as either caricatures or are positioned on the narrative periphery as accessories to the white heroes. However, several texts attempt to foreground racial difference within their narratives. When baseball texts attempt to color the game by foregrounding

place an athlete of color, the characters are connected to negative themes such as egocentricity and corrupt values. To demonstrate this, I analyze the construction of racialized heroes in the *Major League* trilogy and *Mr. 3000* as well as several recent commercials which employ men of color to sell sports products. Within these commercials, the athlete is both a hero and a product for sale. Ultimately, the films reveal that in order to achieve success in modern sports, these men must suppress their individual desires to the greater good of the team/nation. They learn that happiness is more rewarding than financial success.

Efforts to create the baseball team as a symbol of the U.S. as a nation abound in sports discourses. Although the concept of the team-nation has the potential to oversimplify complicated social and political issues, within scholarship on baseball and baseball films, the relationship reappears through the language used to discuss “our” game.¹⁴ However, even in scholarship that is critical of this relationship, racial and ethnic difference is insufficiently investigated, and the research lacks grounding in critical race studies. For example, in their discussion of how baseball films construct an idealized and unified “America,” Robert Rudd and Marshall G. Most argue:

Consistent with a vision of community that emphasizes tolerance and diversity, baseball films of the 1980s and 1990s are completely devoid of racial conflict.

With the exception of those films whose stories are prior to the integration of the game, the communities portrayed in the baseball films of this era are

¹⁴ For further discussion of how the team-nation discourse functions, see the work of Howard Good, Gary E. Dickerson, Kurt Billmeyer, Robert Rudd and Marshall G. Most, and Thomas L. Altherr.

harmoniously integrated with black, whites, Asians, and Hispanics, all playing, living and bonding together. (43 emphasis added)

Although the films of the 1980s and 1990s include secondary characters from diverse backgrounds united on a seemingly “harmonious” team, the stereotypes used to convey difference demonstrate the fear and contempt frequently associated with integration. Furthermore, since most of the “others” are incorporated into dominant white culture and outnumbered, it seems reductive to conclude that integration has been amicable.

With the oversimplification of race in baseball films in mind, chapter four (Baseball Comedies and the Melting Pot: Cultural Differences in Multi-Ethnic Teams) examines what happens to the team-nation paradigm when racial differences are explicitly introduced to the narrative. Specifically, I will examine how the nature of the game and the presentation of the team change with the introduction of racial, ethnic, or linguistic others. I argue that although no simple formula exists to explain how race affects baseball texts, a few patterns occur based on the specific tension depicted in the text.

From external threat to exotic “others,” the placement of athletes of color within baseball films illuminates both social fears and concerns about changes in the game at that distinct cultural moment. I use the film *The Bad News Bears* (Ritchie, 1976) as a point of departure to demonstrate these themes even though it is not a contemporary text. This film marks a decisive switch from previous baseball films which minimized their discussion of race and ethnicity. In stark contrast to other baseball films, *The Bad News*

Bears actively and explicitly comments on the changing face of baseball and, consequently, reveals how U.S. society fails to be completely integrated. The film is also important because it highlights how, despite idealized constructions of the U.S. affording equal access to all peoples, the Dream is in fact still riddled with class, race, and gender obstacles. Through its narrative, the film examines changing gender roles and latent racism within U.S. culture and ultimately concludes that although the team is not comprised of an ideal mixture of people, they are united as a symbolic unit against all who challenge them. This construction of the team as a multi-ethnic unit becomes increasingly important in the baseball films of the late-1980s and continues in contemporary films.

Using *The Bad News Bears* as a model, I examine how the *Major League* trilogy and *Mr. 3000* also build upon the images of a mosaic team-nation. All of these films comment on how the American Dream is understood as the national promise of success or happiness and offer insight into how baseball reflects and refracts larger social issues in U.S. culture. Created during an era of inflated salaries for professional athletes, these films comment upon the crises that baseball must face. Although the American Dream still exists, these texts demonstrate how the inclusion of people of color in baseball culture has changed its values, goals, and image—for better or for worse. Rather than presenting the modern black athlete as initially united for the team's well being, these films focus on the self-serving needs and laughable antics of athletes of color. As with *The Bad News Bears*, the comedy mode suggests that the protagonist can learn to

subsume personal ego to the benefit of the team—where color is presented as irrelevant. Much like the films featuring a black protagonist, these films use difference as source of humor that must be erased or neutralized in order for the team to find success; however, the multi-ethnic film exploits many forms of difference to advance its comic narrative.

After examining the deviations from the canonical images of baseball, chapter five (The Great American Hoodscape: Baseball, the American Dream, and Urban Landscapes) examines what happens to the depiction of the American landscape when race enters the equation. In this chapter, I argue that baseball culture invests in a value system that privileges constructions of “suburban” locales over “urban” spaces. Furthermore, I argue that while it is accepted that the American Dream is predicated upon the notions of social class ascension, what is implicit in this ideology is that specific social classes are valued over others. The binary between suburban and urban spaces is explored in baseball media texts through the construction of the hoodscape which is clearly marked as other, undesirable, and “brown.”

Contrary to the rural heartland depicted in the canonical texts, when racial or ethnic others are introduced to fictional baseball texts, they are positioned as either coming from rundown urban centers or as being connected to such urban cultures through their dress, conduct, and values. To demonstrate these themes, this chapter explores depictions of the hoodscape in both films and commercials. Since so few baseball films develop people of color as part of larger communities, examples of urban or even suburban cultural groups, selecting films to examine is particularly challenging. The

most poignant depiction of blackness within contemporary baseball films occurs in *Hard Ball* (Robbins, 2001). However, *Hard Ball*'s depiction of the black community in the Southside of Chicago is filtered through the perspective of the film's white male protagonist who enters the community to pay off a gambling debt by serving as a little league coach. Of course, during his sojourn, he discovers his own self-worth and can rejoin white society. Every aspect of this film relies upon crisis—within the black community, within baseball culture, and in white masculinity. However, unlike the issues that the white protagonist must face, the social problems that besiege the black community—violence, crime, poverty—are inescapable because they relate to larger economic contradictions not individual failings.

The depiction of urban blackness in crisis is also a dominant theme in contemporary sports commercials. I will examine recent advertising campaigns by Gatorade and other sports products that generate images of class and race through baseball. Through all of these texts, the common theme is that the hood is a place of danger and is devoid of value to U.S. society. This chapter examines how the denizens of urban areas seek the American Dream through their participation in sports. Through sports culture, these otherwise marginalized peoples can also achieve a sense of belonging within the nation. In all of these cases, race is presented as a marker that connects people to their social caste and is transcoded onto the landscapes presented within the texts.

The final chapter of this project (Shifting Meanings of the National Game) examines how fictional baseball narratives combine to illustrate that despite the changing racial and ethnic demographics in the U.S. and within professional baseball, the ways in which the American Dream is defined and presented in baseball films remains unchanged. In addition, I examine some of the many absences in the constructions of baseball in film and commercials. Because the game is not exclusively American, I argue that the ways in which the American Dream is changing in contemporary culture need to be incorporated into both the media representations and the scholarship on baseball culture.

Since this chapter is also the conclusion of this project, I also address the future scholarship that is needed, changes in depictions that can be anticipated, and what is needed in baseball films if they are to reflect accurately the many forms of diversity within the game. Whether media images illustrate the increased dominance of people of color in the sport or will recoil and cling to the last vestiges of whiteness in the game remains to be seen. However, if past trends of returning to whiteness when in an unstable state or crisis continue, then representations of people of color will remain in the margins of baseball texts.

Chapter Two: “Welcome to the Majors, Mr. Hobbs”: Canonical Images of the American Dream in Baseball Films

Film is both the messenger and harbinger of myth, both the storyteller and the truth-maker, and so shapes our culture at the same time that it reveals it. (Wood 20)

The ever-changing relationship between baseball and constructions of the national identity is well-documented since the game’s origin in the late-nineteenth century. As the national needs have evolved, so have the ways in which baseball and the American Dream have been represented in media texts. After World War II, the development of suburban communities shifted the ways in which the American Dream was used to define the nation’s goals and needs. Although there are several ways to explore the representations of the American Dream in contemporary baseball films and commercials, it is most useful to examine how baseball functions as a platform to comment upon issues is used to comment upon crises in racial, gender, and class identities. In these texts, both the narratives and characterizations of difference reinforce myths of equity and reinscribe the virtues of the American Dream in dominant U.S. culture.

In an effort to examine the ways in which baseball appears in U.S. film over time, Hal Erickson’s *Baseball Filmography* examines the one hundred and eleven films made between 1915 and 2001 in which baseball is central to the narrative. His study of these films contextualizes the major themes and tensions that are explored within baseball as an

important reflection of American culture. Erickson examines the baseball films in terms of profitability, plot variety, historical accuracy, and the representations of the team versus the individual. Of particular interest is his discussion of the archetypes at work. Although each film varies in terms of quality and reception, each contributes to the ideological functions of baseball at the time it was made. Of the one hundred-plus films made in the U.S. about baseball, only a few can be considered definitional texts within the baseball canon.

These films reassert baseball as essential to American culture, realign baseball as a battle of man versus the world, and position the hero as an individual who can overcome obstacles through his participation in baseball. For the purpose of this study, I have defined the baseball canon based on several factors: the critical attention the films have received, the depth of the discourses regarding the films' "timeless" qualities, and how the films redefined baseball films and culture in the U.S. Of particular importance for this canon is that the films defined the depictions of the American Dream by illustrating the personal and social redemption that baseball offers. Although the characters ultimately achieve financial stability by the end of their respective films, personal contentment cannot be achieved until they learn that money alone will not yield happiness.

Films such as *The Bad News Bears* (Michael Ritchie, 1976) and *Major League* are classic baseball films which offer a comedic look at baseball culture, but do not

provide either a nostalgic or a redemptive look at the nature of the game.¹⁵ *Eight Men Out* (Sayles, 1989) is another film that could be considered part of the baseball canon; however, despite its look at the bribery scandal of the 1919 World Series, the film focuses on the failures of real men to maintain the integrity and honor of the game. And as such, the film is firmly grounded in “reality” and “history.” Of the fifty-four baseball films released since 1980, two stand out for their ability to convey all of these sentiments and demonstrate the essence of how the baseball film has been redefined in the contemporary era: *The Natural* (Barry Levinson, 1984) and *Field of Dreams* (Phil Alden Robinson, 1989). Both films focus on the magical and healing elements of baseball by illustrating how the game can help restore stability to white masculinity.

In order to examine the canonical baseball films, it is important to review how others have understood the relationship between the American Dream and baseball. In “A Fit for a Fractured Society: Baseball and the American Promise,” Robert Elias explores the practical ramifications of creating a culture that relies upon the “Dream.” Like any other form of hegemony, for Elias, the “Dream” needs to be maintained and renewed in order for it to influence people. In this regard, the American Dream ideology becomes a social force which needs to cultivate its dominance by evolving to reflect the contemporary socio-cultural environment. Connecting the American Dream with baseball, Elias argues that “baseball reflects some of the nation’s noblest aspirations” (3).

¹⁵ It is important to note that both of these films offer a critical look at how baseball addresses diversity and integration in American culture. However, neither text actually addresses the class ascension associated with the American Dream, but rather how the game brings people from different backgrounds together, for better or for worse. In this regard, these films demonstrate how baseball engages the myth of America as an egalitarian melting pot.

The baseball as a “mirror” of society is quite common within sports discourses. To demonstrate how baseball functions as an American institution Elias uses John Thorn’s argument that “The national pastime became the great repository of national ideals, the symbol of all that was good in American life: fair play (sportsmanship); the rule of law (objective arbitration of disputes); equal opportunity (each side has its innings); the brotherhood of man (bleacher harmony); and more” (ibid). However, Elias astutely notes that, “With few exceptions, even critical assessments focus almost entirely on concerns about America not living up to the dream rather than on whether it should be pursued in the first place” (4). The idea that perhaps the American Dream is *not* a good goal is very useful to consider in relation to how class ascension is imagined in these films. Since baseball films tend to rely upon the money-can’t-buy-happiness model, the American Dream is represented by the individual’s ability to achieve spiritual renewal via participation in the game. However, even with this model of the Dream, once the character has been rejuvenated spiritually, he will receive the financial or material rewards of middle-class status and stability. In this regard, the American Dream is as much about social status as it is about personal growth.

While there are many accounts of how the American Dream has made the class divisions more pronounced and has created systems in which poor people are repeatedly denied access to opportunities to improve their social standing, the narratives of baseball films usually focus on what needs to be done to insure the Dream remains socially relevant. Another important point that Elias makes is that the U.S. is the only country

with such a well-marketed “promise.” Why is it that there isn’t a “Japanese Dream” or even a “Kenyan Way” of doing things? (ibid.).

Elias notes, “Even with these caveats about baseball’s appeal, the game has nevertheless long contained values that comprise the basic ingredients of Americanism and the American dream” (8). In the dreamworld of baseball, many have argued, the nation is able to address its fears and hopes. If, as Elias asserts, “Arguably, Americans should care about baseball because it has been, and remains, a barometer for the health of American society,” then examining the ways in which baseball is presented in mass media will at the very least identify some of what the filmmakers believe to be the problems within society (9). However, how these issues are presented, and from whose perspective, will inevitably shape how accurate this commentary is.

The canonical baseball film will rely upon two basic fundamentals: its ability to encourage the belief that baseball is not just a sport, but a way of life, and to convey the magical properties of the game which will realign the viewer with one version of the American Dream. With these objectives in mind, these two texts rarely criticize national institutions or present rebellious behavior as acceptable. Both films also utilize a hero-villain construction and focus on crises in white masculinity within the changing nation. Despite the many institutional systems at work in both narratives, the major threat that both heroes must overcome is embodied in corrupt individuals.

Consequently, the actions of the individual are condemned as threatening the stability and happy outcome within the story, not the labor system or lack of equal opportunities. This is demonstrated in the construction of the greedy and unscrupulous

owner of the fictitious New York Knights in *The Natural*. His machinations are presented as evil and he becomes what Roy must defeat in order to have his chance to reach his potential as I will discuss further below. The concept of team (and player) “ownership” as an issue in the developing professional leagues during the 1930s is not explored at all within the narrative because our hero, regardless of his abundant talent, could not slay a dragon that large. Furthermore, the hero’s journey needs to be about a man defeating other individuals because one of this myth’s functions is to suggest that the individual makes his own destiny. By using placing the financial rewards of the American Dream as a bonus and focusing on the ways in which spiritual renewal can occur via baseball, the films complicate how “success” is understood. These are not films about attaining excessive wealth, but rather finding their purpose and the happiness that is associated with middle-class status. One of the byproducts of not examining the systems that create the undesirable circumstances is to maintain the status quo in the narrative and for the viewer. Although many sports films use myth and fantasy to advance their narratives, both films also represent an important intersection between baseball and national mythmaking. While both films use history to present the sport as an important site for social issues to be negotiated, they both reinforce the status quo by their resolutions.

***The Natural* and the Myth of the Rural American Dream**

Few sports movies garner the respect and adoration that *The Natural* evokes. Based on the novel of the same name by Bernard Malamud published in 1952, the film

attempts to convey the magic and mythology of baseball in U.S. culture. The story of Roy Hobbs (Robert Redford), a farm boy who desires to be “the best there ever was,” *The Natural* embodies the sense of wonder and longing that baseball has come to represent within American culture and folklore. As Stephen Wood et al. correctly observe,

If the movie *The Natural* is only a story of a man playing baseball, it serves that function well. However, analysis reveals a much more complex and important role assumed by this movie. It reveals an American epic hero, an archetype, who happens to play baseball. *The Natural* is part of the cinematic mythos that reflects and shapes American culture, a living myth which points to hope, love and an understanding that being ‘the best that ever was’ is about more than baseball. (33)

Clearly a film about storytelling and mythmaking, *The Natural* is the quintessential baseball film because how it actively embraces baseball as the national game and as the cure-all for contemporary American society.

What separates *The Natural* from other nostalgic baseball films is arguably the film’s creation of baseball as the mythical scaffold for American culture. Following the structure of Classical mythology, the narrative focuses on the challenges that Roy must face to complete his epic journey. As Wood et al. note, “*The Natural* is more than a film about baseball; it is a film about a mythic hero who finds his way through baseball. The juxtaposition of the hero and baseball is uniquely American, and reflects our most basic cultural values” (ibid.). But what story is this myth telling? And what is at stake in the film’s mythmaking? In its efforts to capture the essential American myth that baseball

represents, the film also defines the values that are perceived as the archetypal elements of U.S. culture.

The narrative revolves around the deceit, corruption, and violence that Roy must traverse in order to find success in the Major Leagues. In the process of finding success, Roy discovers the same personal virtues and features that are embodied in the American Dream: the importance of self-reliance, monogamous heterosexual relationships, and a life centered on the domestic and rural family. Essential to the film's narrative is the idea of man's ability to seek glory and find virtue instead. When Roy leaves his boyhood field and humble beginnings in his desire to be the best baseball player ever, he also leaves behind the values and trust associated with the American Dream. Although most of the film revolves around his efforts to play professionally, flashbacks to his past engage the idea of recording history and building American myths. Of particular importance is that Roy starts out playing baseball as a boy with his father. His father teaches him how to develop his talent and builds his desire to play professionally. Every aspect of his baseball skill and desire is clearly linked to the farm life and this father-son relationship. Through this relationship, his talent is nurtured and supported by his father and their community. The film opens with these scenes and flashes back several times (usually when he is in some form of conflict) to the simple life Roy led while on the farm. After his father's untimely death, Roy is left to his own devices and needs to leave the farm, both literally and metaphorically, behind him if he really wants to find success as a professional baseball player. More symbolically, Roy even builds a bat from a tree on the family farm that is struck by lightning. Roy's bat becomes essential to his success

and accompanies him on his journey to achieve his dream of being the best player ever. As if magically enhanced, the bat enables him to overcome his injuries and eventually become a baseball hero. When it is destroyed during his final at-bat at the end of the film, it represents that the stage of his life in which he can pursue his youth through baseball have also come to an end.

Once on his journey, Roy must face the harsh reality of life away from the farm and learn that his virtue is more important than glory. In the process, he must learn who to trust and how to navigate the treacherous terrain of urban America. Even though Roy is clearly cynical when he deals with men, he openly and readily trusts women and is punished at several points for this blind trust. As such, the film becomes about the lessons Roy (and consequently all men) must learn about the dangers of “bad” women/trusting the wrong women. The only woman who does not betray him and can bring out his true talents is his childhood sweetheart from the farm. Again, this choice emphasizes the notion that all good things, even love and trust, exist in the agrarian community of his childhood/in the heartland he knew as a child. Ultimately, Roy must achieve success in order to make his return to the heartland a choice rather than a last resort. And as such, his decision to return to the cornfields and traditional family life (unbeknownst to him, he has fathered a son out of wedlock, so this construction of “traditional” values is both problematic and telling) with his childhood sweetheart supports the notion that the urban, modern world threatens the future of the nation both literally and symbolically within the film. Roy’s choice to accept his role as a father and return to the farm represents a need to return to family values within modern society. It is the pursuit of a career as a

professional player that lured Roy to the big city. And it was his inexperience (and arguably the fact that he was disloyal to his sweetheart) that kept him from maintaining contact with the people in his life from the farm which led to his son being raised without a father. By choosing the rural homestead over the temptations and potential glory of pursuing his professional baseball career, Roy restores the “traditional” family. However, the film does not resolve baseball in Roy’s life by simply having him return to the farm. Instead, the closing image of the film is of Roy enveloped in sunlight light throwing a baseball with his son in a golden-hued wheat field. The resolution suggests that baseball will live on in the Hobbs household, but so will the virtues and values taught in the rural heartland.

One of the most telling dynamics of this modern myth is its treatment of the women in the hero’s life. Although the film starts and ends with the confirmation of his true love from his life in the rural community, several women threaten his quest and create the greatest tragedies in his life. The film actively updates the sirens or temptresses who are a common trope within Classical mythology. The first siren is the woman who shoots him as he is on the brink of realizing all of his dreams. Little explanation is given for the violence which furthers the mythical quality of the narrative—after all, tragedy must befall the hero if he is to complete his journey and learn what is truly important. However, it also adds to the film’s statements about the role women play in destroying men. The second siren is a woman Roy dates despite his clearly developed cynicism about relationships and the urban world. At several points, he is obviously aware that he should not trust her, but he maintains the relationship. In all

of his relationships with women, Roy is positioned as a victim of fate and is never held responsible for his actions or his choices.

What makes the film an essential text in the canon of baseball films is the way in which the playing field is defined and how it is used as the space where these values and the American Dream can be achieved. The process of translating baseball to a myth necessarily includes using the symbols from the sport to imply universal elements. Wood et al. summarize the basic structure of Classical mythology: “Tragedy is... fundamental to myth. Indeed the cycle of the mythic hero is a journey of pain, alienation, testing and failure, but also a journey that often ends in transcendent success, lessons learned and the spirit of humankind lifted” (22). *The Natural* engages each step of the hero’s journey and provides many statements about what baseball means to U.S. culture and white masculinity in the process.

Despite being set mainly in the 1930s, the lessons Roy learns about himself and the world are important to consider in relation to when the film was made. By the late 1980s, professional baseball in the U.S. was becoming increasingly diverse which allows another way to read the struggles that the hero must endure. Made just years after events like what has been called “Fernando Mania” which celebrated the dominance of Mexican-born Fernando Valenzuela in the Major Leagues, the film can be read as an effort to remember the days when segregation enabled baseball to be about white masculinity and specific cultural values. As the success of players like Valenzuela sparked a major shift in the sport’s popularity both in the U.S. and around the world, baseball was on the brink of racial, ethnic, and cultural transformation regardless of

whether the nation was ready for such changes. In this regard, all of the symbols at work in the modern mythology of the film become about more than succeeding through a sport but also about recalling the origins of the nation.

Not only in the narrative, but also in the visual imagery, *The Natural* creates a hero who reinscribes the virtues and morality of baseball and white America. Visually, the film uses lighting to convey both the purity of the heartland and the darkness of the urban world. Most notably, when faced with self-doubt, Roy remembers his true abilities and sees his true love who is in the stands watching him play. The appearance of Iris, who is literally framed like an angel engulfed in golden rays, enables Roy to remember his true abilities as a player and brings his bat to life, literally and metaphorically. These tropes are essential to the film's mythmaking project. As Wood et al. note, three archetypal metaphors are present in *The Natural*: the use of light and dark; the soul mate and father imagery; and the universal round/process of closure (24).

The use of such easily identifiable modes of storytelling allows the film to become a canonical text while also connecting it to the process of building a national identity through baseball. Ultimately, the film creates a baseball world in which "Individually and collectively, these metaphoric treatments reveal much about how American culture views baseball and how baseball is used to refract reality and embeds itself in the American mythos" (ibid.). The American Dream is very useful in defining this "American mythos." Although it is safe to assume that the average viewer did not watch the film and think of its clear connections to Classical mythology, that the film directly engages discourses of baseball's importance in the U.S. ensures that the text is

understood as a symbolic journey. Anchored in enough historical truths about baseball's origins and the rural past of the nation, the film also easily positions the viewer to read the text as about social and cultural changes. In its creation of a gold-hued image of the past that is in stark contrast with the present, *The Natural* asserts the beauty of the myth.

Although the film is loved by baseball fans and critics alike, the images presented about the day-to-day life of the sport are hardly positive. Since the hero ultimately finds his way and returns to the values embraced as quintessential to American prosperity, the film is able to present the professionalization of the national game in a disparaging light while maintaining that the game itself is still pure in the hearts of true players. In its creation of the baseball world, the film makes many statements about the ways in which the sport demonstrates several challenges for the nation. Explicitly presented as corrupt and influential to kids, professional baseball in *The Natural* is in no uncertain terms a game about boys and their ability to conquer the world as athletes. Part of this timelessness can be attributed to the film trying to capture the magical qualities of baseball; however, the use of myth within the film also creates a universe in which baseball is intended to represent both the past and present simultaneously.

The Place Where Dreams Are Made: *Field of Dreams* and the Myth of Baseball's Healing Power

Much like *The Natural*, *Field of Dreams* has also received a great deal of critical acclaim for its portrayal of baseball. An adaptation of the novel written by W.P. Kinsella, the film engages how baseball plays an important role in adding to baseball's

mythmaking power in U.S. culture. The story of Ray Kinsella (Kevin Costner), a man who in his late thirties begins hearing a voice that tells him to build a baseball field which instead of focusing on making his farm profitable, positions baseball as both a religion and site to right past wrongs. The voice tells him that if he builds the field “they will come.” Once Ray has converted the cornfields into a baseball field, he begins to see players from the 1919 Chicago White Sox team who are able to recapture their innocence, restore their lost honor, and love the game again by playing on Ray’s field. In the process, the rest of the community comes together and prospers emotionally, if not financially, as a result.

Since its release, *Field of Dreams* has maintained a magical hold over baseball fans. Its place in U.S. culture has been interpreted in many ways, each of which draws upon a social or cultural need that the film fulfills for viewers. Phil Alden Robinson, the film’s director, offers his understanding of why the film has a unique role in U.S. culture: “We live in cynical times. We’re all jaded. A lot of your heroes have turned out to have clay feet. I don’t believe in astrology, crystals, reincarnations, heaven hell. I don’t believe dreams come true” (Erickson 193). As Robinson’s comments suggest, the film separates itself from the mood and attitude of the late 1980s and engages young and old viewers in the magical possibilities of baseball. His comments are representative of the ways in which the film’s nostalgic and magical dream-state have been understood in the many texts written about the film. All that is missing is, “But thank God for baseball.” While he does not make the leap that baseball can solve all of America’s problems,

plenty of other theorists, writers, and scholars have appealed to the film's therapeutic capabilities.¹⁶

Despite the inaccuracies and the requirement for viewers to believe in the magic occurring on the screen, the film was well-received. Through the construction of Costner as a handsome lead or the nostalgia for days gone by, it offered for men and women a way to dream about baseball. As Erickson notes regarding the timing of the film's release, "It always helps to punch the right emotional buttons at the right time and the spring of 1989 was precisely that time for *Field of Dreams*. Millions of male baby-boomers were waking up to find themselves on the fringes of middle age with most of their youthful aspirations and hopes of creating a better world either compromised or forgotten" (ibid.). What is intriguing, however, is how the film maintains its status as one of the most revered baseball films of all time. Although an argument could be made that the performances and fantasy nature of the film could be an explanation for the film's lasting impact, there is more at work here. Aden's conceptualization of the playing field in *Field of Dreams* offers a useful way to understand the symbolism of the film. He argues that it is a space to deny the rules of greater society, the life-death continuum, and even reality. In this regard, the field becomes a space in which the characters, and viewers via their identification with the characters, can engage with baseball, escape

¹⁶ The discussion of how baseball functions as a source of therapy and renewal ranges based on which aspect of baseball culture is being examined. For example, Frank Ardolino examines how the field is a "pastoral wonderland" where past mistakes can be repaired (45). Roger C. Aden argues that by watching and playing baseball, people can atone for past sins. Kurt Billmeyer positions *Field of Dreams* as a "populist retreat into a pristine past" as a way to find spiritual and emotional rebirth in the present (92-3). And Gary E. Dickerson uses the idea of baseball as the source of rebirth as an escape from social problems in contemporary culture.

reality, and interact with Americana as they see fit. The key is that the field allows people to re-imagine the world based on their needs and therefore becomes a form of therapy (Aden 221-2). Just as the American Dream withstands major social and cultural shifts, *Field of Dreams* freezes in time the struggle to protect what is quintessentially “American” and in this case that is the reinvestment in the values and ideals of the film. Specifically, the film invests in the idea of the nuclear family, patriarchy, and a world where (despite the changing demographics of the nation and baseball in the late-1980s) white masculinity still maintains power and influence.

One of the ways in which baseball is presented in the film as having the ability to heal is through its use of religious themes. In addition to the simplistic evaluation of baseball as something that people faithfully follow and ritually consume, Thomas Altherr and Aden both examine the ways in which the film engages religious tendencies. For Altherr the religious aspects of the novel and film are a natural extension of baseball culture. He argues:

Baseball, already rich in its mythic associations, has added a religious appeal. Consciously working in previous folkloristic traditions about baseball, Kinsella has laid on another layer of a new myth, a religious gloss, which Robinson has decked out in luscious color, making Iowa glow like heaven. In these fruitful artistic interchanges, baseball has once again proved its mythopoeic qualities, its capacity to engender emotional allegiance in an American audience hungering for sustaining myths for generations to come. (61)

Altherr builds on this idea of divine intervention within the film by pointing out that baseball is naturally connected with religious themes: “But simply using recognizable baseball lore and conjuring up nostalgic thoughts is not only what Kinsella does. What distinguishes his baseball fiction is his tendency to invest sport with distinct religious overtones” (57).

Similarly, Aden examines the ways in which the film explicitly uses blind faith through the religion of baseball. Aden argues that the disembodied voice that guides Ray’s actions is an important aspect of the film’s religious trope. For Aden, the religious connections within the film fall into three basic symbolic representations: Ray as Noah—both men must “build” the vessel that will save their respective communities; the disembodied voice that requires Ray (and Noah as well) to act based on faith, not evidence; and the salvation or spiritual rejuvenation that is experienced for all who “believe” in the potential for miracles (225-7).

These discussions of religion within the film are naturally connected with the idea of redemption so heavily explored within the narrative. Both Ray and Shoeless Joe Jackson are afforded the opportunity to be reborn. Ray is able to redefine his life and work out his unresolved issues with his deceased father. Shoeless Joe is able to rid himself of the negativity with which he became associated through the World Series scandals. By playing again, Shoeless Joe “ends” his career on the field rather than in disgrace. For both characters, baseball is able to redeem them for their past mistakes and to transform how they see themselves.

Perhaps the film's greatest ideological success is in its ability to renew and restore faith in the game and human nature simultaneously. As Aden notes, "By playing and watching baseball, individuals activate the promised land of sport" (238). Central to this "promised land" is the ability to "believe" again. Although he's discussing both the film and the fans/visitors who make the pilgrimage to Iowa, Aden accesses the essential myth of baseball in the U.S. and arguably around the world. Through participation in baseball as either fans or players, the game offers all sorts of mythical freedoms and opportunities to achieve the ever-elusive "Dream." In the narrative of the film, the "dream" represents the ability to relive and correct man's errors in the past.

But few writers have complicated exactly which "Dream" is enacted and engaged within the film. For whom is Iowa "heaven" and what does it mean to locate (literally or metaphorically) the place where dreams can come true in a farm that represents the agricultural past of the U.S.? Despite the fans' active use of the film as a space in which to find renewal, something is inherently tragic about the way this mythic space has been created. By relegating "renewal" and hope to a magical realm anchored in the rural past, the film suggests that the present is unbearable and that only through faith can order be restored. Much like the ways in which the American Dream has been used in past generations, the film uses it to suggest that people can heal by returning to a simpler way of life and the values on which the nation was founded. Of course such a construction of U.S. history is both short-sighted and limited in its accuracy, but the film only asks viewers to believe in the possibility of such a reality. As such, the film presents an

alternative to problems Americans face in the modern world in the depiction of the rural life with family-owned farms as a way to return to an idealized past.

The discourse on *Field of Dreams* demonstrates the ways in which both individuals and community are understood in relation to the American Dream. In Aden's discussion of the film, he argues that the "intrusion" of industrialization ended the pastoral, nature-centered America and that the shift from producers to consumers had a spiritual as well as economic impact on Americans (223). According to Aden, *Field of Dreams* offers an escape from over-consumption by "suggesting an alternative form of socioeconomic culture... in which individuals produce through sacrifice that benefits others" (224). Essential to this conceptualization is the focus on "community" needs over "individual" desires. Although the film's narrative clearly supports the importance of the larger community "believing" again, it also clearly positions white male patriarchal values and actions—as embodied in both Ray and Shoeless Joe—as the key to "restoration" of the community. Such discussions of "community" need to be problematized as they assume that one unified American community exists and it has the same priorities, history, and dreams. The simplification is common in baseball history as it frequently ignores the many people who were not granted access to this dream—chiefly people of color and women. These marginalized populations were certainly given access to baseball as a site of pleasure and national identity; however, this access was limited as they were segregated into different leagues or only spectators rather than participants for quite some time. Moreover, such nostalgia for pre-integrated times implicitly reinforces how the American Dream and baseball are imagined via the perspectives.

Aden's discussion of the "promised land" of the baseball field in the film demonstrates the ways in which baseball represents a symbolic place to negotiate the social issues of specific cultural moments. While it is clear that the text positions Middle America as the Heartland of a lost nation where rebirth can occur, much more needs to be said about who is included and who is left out of this "Dream." Despite the insertion of a black character who assists Ray in his effort to restore order to baseball history, the rest of the film revolves around whiteness and its investment in baseball. Ironically, the supposed virtue of the game could have been restored by providing access to the hundreds of Negro League players who were denied access to professional baseball. However, rather than including the men who were denied access to baseball because of their color, the narrative focuses on restoring the honor of white men who knowingly accepted bribes to lose games and scarred baseball's legacy as a result. In this regard, the novel and a film are both articulations of specific American Dreams.

In its efforts to focus on the injustices of the past, the film faces the challenge of being historically accurate. The idea that the film needs to be historically accurate shifted the critical discourse regarding the film to include its inaccuracies. Specifically, the film's errors in representations of real players such as Shoeless Joe Jackson provided baseball historians with details to criticize the film's interpretation of history. As Erickson notes, though, the film was "forgiven once the baseball historians accepted the film's basic thesis: baseball is more than a game; it's an idea to love and an ideal to strive for" (193). Such forgiveness reveals how much fans and critics invested in the film.

Field of Dreams represents more than just a film that explores the magic and wonder of

baseball; it also presents the way in which both characters and fans engage with undesirable historical events in the game. By allowing both fans and players a chance to restore their love of baseball, Ray receives a chance to erase his painful memories. Ray is rejuvenated by his ability to provide the former baseball players with another chance to play the game and the fans a chance to remember the players as heroes.

Similar to *The Natural*, *Field of Dreams* also uses baseball as a mythical and allegorical site to explain the modern condition; however, *Field of Dreams* examines different issues in terms of hero construction. Rather than exploring the hero's development from optimistic boy to jaded man as in the characterization of Roy, Ray is presented as stalled at a crossroad of his life. The realities of Ray's obligations and responsibilities to his wife and daughter make his dream of building a field where his heroes can come to life the last chance he has to relive his childhood. In this regard, baseball is both the manifestation of his dreams and his last chance to dream. Through his fantasy of making the field a reality, Ray can eschew the reality of mortgages, providing for his family, and adulthood if only for a brief while. Although women are not presented as directly threatening to Ray, that he has to struggle with his responsibilities evokes the pre-middle age crisis of masculinity in modern culture. It is important to note that Ray in this fantasy story has a wife who supports his desires even though they are outlandish and could bankrupt their family's future. Even though the film depicts monogamous heterosexual relationships as an accessory to this dream, the film also positions them as one of the ways in which men are potentially thwarted and contained by their choices. Destroying his crops and their potential profits so that he can

build a baseball field is hardly the traditional enactment of the American Dream; however, the financial freedom to bring such a vision to fruition is precisely the essence of the Dream. Moreover, Ray's "vision" provides income from another modern industry: tourism and souvenirs.

Both *The Natural* and *Field of Dreams* serve as an indexical system that organizes the major themes and images of the American Dream in contemporary culture. Through their exploration of the game's failures and the possibility for redemption through magical belief, the film secures its place in American culture as a canonical baseball text. From the corn-lined fields on which the characters find themselves to the wide-open national spaces where the characters build their lives, both films demonstrate how baseball is used to convey national values and class identity in the late 1980s. As the game and nation have continued to experience substantial changes, these canonical texts help us understand how baseball was being used as site to negotiate national identity in the mid-1980s. Within the context of 1980s culture, these films also counter with the pro-spending and materialistic climate by showing how the American Dream can be found through spiritual and personal growth rather than excessive consumption of goods. Although baseball movies are the most recognizable texts demonstrating the connection between baseball and the American Dream, other media forms also actively engage this ideology. Specific commercial campaigns echo the constructions of the American Dream presented in the canonical baseball films. Of particular interest are the Ameriquest and Chevy campaigns.

The American Dream For Sale: Other Media Representations of the National Myth and Baseball

From its inception, the American Dream has been a national marketing tool. Although the way in which it has been used has evolved over time, it has always been connected with promoting specific values, namely achieving national identity through consumerism. Americans know how successful they are based on what they can buy at the local mall. Baseball has become a useful site to analyze the ways in which the American Dream is sold to the masses. One such example is the conflation of baseball with home ownership and the American Dream in a recent Ameriquest commercial. A major mortgage company, Ameriquest has utilized popular conceptualizations of the American Dream in its iconography from its main image of the Liberty Bell to its direct address of the concept in its self-promotion as the “proud sponsors of the American Dream.” Several Ameriquest print and television advertisements demonstrate their desire to use the American Dream as essential to their product. Their use of the American Dream is quite fitting—is there a better way to comment upon the American Dream than to present it as achievable through financing the purchasing of a single-family home? The articulation of the American Dream through a mortgage company makes sense since both rely on the idea of the ability to make sacrifices for long-term success.

Ameriquest’s idea of investing, literally and figuratively, in the long-term profitability of the American Dream is highlighted by the use of baseball’s home plate transposed into a suburban home as seen in the stills (figures 2.1 and 2.2) from their “Home Plate” commercial from 2005. Implicit is the idea that home ownership is just as

essentially “American” as baseball. Although this commercial is hardly offensive or problematic in and of itself, it demonstrates the currency of the American Dream in contemporary culture. It also returns to the myth of meritocracy by reiterating the idea that through hard work (and presumably good credit), everyone can achieve these markers of American success. Furthermore, the commercial creates an image of what the American Dream looks like: it is a modest house with a lush yard, not an apartment or



Figure 2.1: Ameriquest’s “Home Plate.”



Figure 2.2: Ameriquest’s suburban house in “Home Plate.”

any sort of urban dwelling. In fact, the house is reminiscent of the early stages of suburban expansion in the 1940s and 1950s. Given the current trends in home ownership leading people to buying bigger homes than they can afford, the choice of this image is also important as it seems to suggest that modest homes of days gone by embody the simplicity of the American Dream. The tagline of this commercial “Proud sponsors of the American Dream” demonstrates perfectly how Ameriquest is connecting baseball, home ownership, and the American Dream. In every way, the American Dream is a matter of consumption of material goods and is readily marketed as such. But what is at

stake in keeping alive such constructions? The work ethic that is mythologized around baseball actually parallels the logic of the American Dream of home ownership. Specifically, it is the idea that baseball is a sport in which the “little guy” can find success through hard work. While inherent “talent” is useful, the possibility that through “hard work” and dedication, anyone can find success is what makes the American Dream stand the test of time and is so very marketable.

Similar to Ameriquest’s construction of suburban home ownership as proof of attainment of the American Dream, Chevy has also recently used traditional iconography of the American Dream in commercials. Their first commercial to mobilize this discourse is Chevy’s revival of its 1970s commercial “Baseball, Hot Dogs, Apple Pie and Chevrolet.” The original commercial, which ran from 1974 to 1978, identified America’s favorite sport as baseball, meal as hot dogs, and desserts as apple pie. In July of 2006, Chevy updated the song and commercial to reflect the changes that have occurred in both the U.S. and baseball. The connection between baseball and American traditions is best demonstrated in the black and white photo of a ball, a bat, and a hotdog placed on an American flag (figure 2.3). This is perhaps the most iconic representation of the culture Chevy is selling in both versions of the commercial. To highlight the “Americanness” of the game, figure 2.4 shows a large U.S. flag in the background as a player fields a groundball. Although the commercial does not directly address how the use of flags in baseball stadium has changed, it is important to note the prevalence of such placements after the events of September 11, 2001. One of the many ways in which baseball culture responded to these tragic events has been to increase the presence of the flag in all

stadiums around Major League Baseball. Much more could be said about the role the flag plays in baseball culture, but what is most important for this image is the reminder that, even if the international composition of teams suggests otherwise, baseball is linked to the U.S.



Figure 2.3: Chevy's iconographic America in "Love Affair."



Figure 2.4: Chevy's baseball and nationalism in "Love Affair."

Included in Chevrolet's new commercial lyrics are lines like "We love baseball, hot dogs, apple pie and Chevrolet/Stolen bases, goat-cheese pizza, bottled water, and Chevrolet." To demonstrate how much baseball culture has changed since the original song, the announcer/singer's voice questions the addition of such new items as goat-cheese pizza, bottled water, and rally monkeys as a part of the game. Although this is not fully developed, the treatment of these modernizations suggests that despite the addition of what could be seen as odd new foods, the game remains the same. Inherent in this construction of modern baseball is also commentary on class differences. Of the "new" items included in the commercial, many are luxury items like gourmet pizza, retractable

stadium roofs, and camera phones—all items that connote a modern, urban identity more than the rural past so frequently associated with baseball.¹⁷ Within the Chevy imagination of baseball, however, the game is still all-American even if its foods and fan rituals have changed. One of the changes to this modern world of baseball that Chevy notes is the inclusion of women and people of color as fans enjoying the national pastime (see figure 2.5). The inclusion of a woman in a contemporary advertisement may not seem like a major accomplishment, but in sports marketing it most certainly is. Even within this specific ad campaign, the woman cheering in figure five is a far cry from the image presented in Chevy’s original commercial from the 1970s (see figure 2.6). Through the use of updated images of the national game, Chevy also attempts to update its own image as an “American Revolution”—the company’s tagline for this campaign.



Figure 2.5: Chevy’s modern fans in “Love Affair.”



Figure 2.6: Chevy’s traditional American mom in “Baseball, Hot Dogs, Apple Pie, and Chevrolet.”

¹⁷ It is important to note that Chevy’s baseball campaign differs greatly from its campaigns promoting its new trucks. In a series of recent region- and state-specific commercials, Chevy has focused on the ways in which its vehicles are built for rugged and rural lifestyles.

Despite the “revolutionary” identity Chevy aspires to create, the fact remains that beneath the glossy modern conceptualization of American culture is a traditional set of values. Ultimately, the conclusion of the commercial is that “Apparently baseball has changed a little over the years, but not America’s love of the game or our love for Chevy.” Ultimately, these “changes” as figures 2.7 and 2.8 demonstrate do not detract from baseball being firmly rooted in past traditions. Both images depict little league players and suggest a simpler time period. In figure 2.7, the scene is of a celebration or parade replete with kids in their baseball uniforms and local townspeople reminiscent of life in a small town. Figure 2.8 simply shows young boys in baseball uniforms from two different teams chatting before or after a game. Of course, central to both images is the Chevy vehicle being advertised.



Figure 2.7: Chevy’s small town celebration in “Love Affair.”



Figure 2.8: Chevy’s little league players in “Love Affair.”

The text at the end of the commercial “The world has changed/but the love affair continues” removes any doubt that the commercial is attempting to position Chevy within

the nationalistic discourses of the visual and narrative elements of the commercial. It is important to note that Chevrolet's efforts to use nationalistic agendas to sell its products do not end with this campaign. In fact, in 2006 Chevrolet launched vehicle-specific campaigns highlighting the things that make the U.S. "our country." While these texts do not address baseball directly, they are an effort to sell different versions of the American Dream that include specific identities and exclude others. This advertising campaign has had several incarnations. As part of its partnership with Major League Baseball, Chevrolet has recently created several commercials based on legendary players such as Roberto Clemente and Cal Ripken, Jr. In addition, they have also created non-baseball versions of this campaign focusing on regional or state cultures (i.e., a commercial specifically focuses on Texas and trucks).¹⁸

Final Thoughts

Every sport played professionally in the U.S. necessarily has tried to make a meaningful connection with the population in order to build a financially viable fan base. Due to the competitive nature of the sports market and the over-saturation of products, such efforts are good business. For each of these sports, the path to naturalization within American culture has differed greatly. Unlike the other major professional team sports leagues (hockey, basketball, and football), baseball has enjoyed a ready-made place in

¹⁸ Of particular interest are the commercials which feature John Mellencamp's musical performance and include images of Hurricane Katrina victims and survivors escaping from the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. The inclusion of such images to sell products received enough negative press that Chevrolet has removed the images and instead focused on defining rural communities as "our country."

American life. Although several histories have offered to explain how baseball became *the* American sport, it is generally accepted that American culture is intrinsically linked with the development of baseball. In many ways, the American Dream as been the byproduct of this shared history. As baseball has grown in importance within the U.S., it has been an essential element for each generation of immigrants desiring an American identity to embrace.

As Elias correctly states: “Arguably ... the United States has not actually fulfilled the promise of the American dream. And if some people have realized some of the goals of that dream, then nevertheless sometimes seems like it’s more in spite of the American system than because of it. If we look closely then, and transcend the mythology of the American dream, we can see it not as an inevitable reality but rather as a dialectic of U.S. society: the dream and its contradiction” (6). By seeing the “Dream” as a “promise,” Elias is correctly highlighting that this is more than something that people romanticized about. The American Dream is the reason many people migrated to the U.S. and it is the carrot that is repeatedly dangled in front of people—and quite frequently those who have little access to the resources to achieve this “Dream.” The modern understanding of the American Dream has been greatly influenced by canonical images and narratives presented in baseball texts. Together, *The Natural* and *Field of Dreams* are more than films about the ways in which baseball affects American culture but also about how it defines the culture.

Although both of these films suggest that the professional sport is far from pure, they rely upon the idea that the game itself is “pure” and that any corruption is the result

of individuals who have lost sight of this purity. These films are about rugged individualism and man's ability to repair the errors and mistakes from his past through baseball. Central to the redemption presented in both films is a commitment to monogamous, heterosexual relationships and investment in the idea of middle American rural family values. As such, both films are an articulation of the American Dream in which the literal and metaphoric farmland becomes the site for redemption and both men's future. Through their commitment to these mores, men's emotional health, virtue, success, and self-esteem are restored.

Building upon the canonical images of the American Dream established in these essential baseball movies, contemporary advertising has also attempted to reify the ways in which baseball is the site for national identity building. In many ways, commercials have reified the themes of American identity through the consumption of products. Just as the American Dream is the national myth, baseball is the tool through which the media actively constructs and redefines that myth.

Chapter Three: Can I Get a Hero?: Racialized Constructions of Heroes in Baseball Films

What's in a Hero?

The conceptualization of what makes a hero is always evolving to suit cultural and social needs. As such, how a hero is imagined and how heroic actions are described involve understanding the systems and ideologies at work within a specific culture.

Within baseball culture, the informal discourse of players who are “heroes” for the nation or the team becomes highly theorized and contested. Although this construction of baseball heroes is also explored in formal texts and discourses, the informal articulations provide a unique way of understanding what is at stake within the community beyond the historians and scholars who attempt to translate and record cultural values.

An example of an informal exploration of baseball heroes occurred recently when a fellow baseball fan posed the following scenario to me: If you had the task of building baseball's Mount Rushmore, who would you choose? Taken from a sports radio program that was exploring the spring training hopes of baseball fans by asking them to consider this task, the concept of creating a theoretical “Rushmore” of baseball icons proves to be intriguing for two reasons. First, it asks baseball fans to consider the various changes that have happened within the game in its first hundred years of play. Whether in the form of dismissing the so-called steroid era of the late-1980s to the early-2000s or considering off-field personas as factors in their choices, fans inevitably have to explain what baseball represents to them as fans and “Americans.” In doing so, fans would also have to

position themselves in the discourses surrounding the sport and what constitutes the essence of the game. Second, this discussion asks fans to decide which players should become the iconic images of the game. In choosing the four players who embody the game, fans must define how the game should be remembered and, consequently, which heroes are worthy of this status as definitive icon within baseball lore. Created to commemorate the first 150 years of U.S. history, Rushmore and the historical figures depicted (George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln) become a great point of departure for a discussion of how national mythmaking and heroes are constructed within baseball culture and within U.S. society more broadly. When asked to build the baseball Rushmore, the fan is also being asked how to memorialize the game's heroes, to select the images that should represent the game, and to reveal what he or she values as the most essential elements of baseball history.

Beyond the discursive benefits of this task, the concept of a Rushmore for baseball figures also reveals how the process of recording history necessarily involves the negotiation of facts and social preferences. Furthermore, the Rushmore example demonstrates how the process of memorializing or heroicizing any athlete highlights a contested act that reveals the factions within the larger culture. Regardless of whether considering the actual or metaphorical Rushmore, the positioning of a hero also requires reflection on the ideological aims of the institutions involved. Rushmore has been plagued with controversy regarding the Native Americans who claimed the land and the treaties that were broken in order to build the National Park which also highlights the reality that there is not *one* national history, but many. As the Rushmore example

demonstrates, the ways in which baseball players are imagined historically engages the dominant discourses about the desired traits of heroes, what is important in sports culture, and how immortality (achieved via earning a place in either the record books or the sport's hall of fame) is frequently presented as the ultimate goal for athletes.

Since the advent of modern sports culture, issues of equality and the need for civil rights have permeated how athletic contests are played and understood. In the U.S., baseball is frequently constructed in relation to its role in maintaining and at times challenging the status quo. In this regard, scholars, historians, and politicians have explored the connection between national politics and athletes as a powerful site for potential social change and resistance. Whether as a forum for athletes to express their concerns and discontent in political affairs during the 1968 Olympics or as a platform to quietly demonstrate displeasure with social issues in the U.S., there is a long history of disenfranchised people using sports as a vehicle for social commentary about the state of the nation.¹⁹ Despite the courage these acts required, the athletes who challenge the national identity on such frontiers are frequently punished or lambasted for being traitors. In recent years, sports superstars like Charles Barkley and Allen Iverson of the National Basketball Association (NBA) have challenged the concept of sports star as cultural hero and role model by arguing that they neither asked for nor desire such positioning (Boyd 6-8). Despite the desires of some athletes to avoid the responsibility of being cultural role models, the pressure to represent more than just athletic prowess remains a reality for

¹⁹ For further discussion, see Dave Zirin's *What's My Name, Fool?: Sports and Resistance in the United States*. Zirin explores in great detail the many ways in which professional and collegiate athletes have used their status to comment on social injustices.

professional athletes, especially black men who achieve great status and wealth through sports.

As a result of the culturally assigned role of athletes as pillars of society, sports figures in both the real world and in media texts absorb the lofty weight of being held to higher standards of conduct and morality. Regardless of which sport is being studied, the ways in which athletes are explored and revered reveal both the social importance of the sports star and the cultural impact their image can have. In this regard, the ways in which media forms construct the athlete-hero becomes an essential marketing tool and narrative device that extends well beyond the media text and into the larger culture. Unlike other forms of baseball such as the live broadcasts of games, fictional films explicitly create their heroes to reflect whatever the filmmakers consider the cultural needs to be. Because the films are not understood as being connected to the real game or as needing to capture events as they unfold, they are granted several freedoms. As a result, baseball films can transcend the bounds of “reality” and instead actively engage in the idea of characters as symbols. In baseball films, the modes in which heroes are constructed demonstrate the racial and ethnic politics present within U.S. society at that specific moment.

This chapter examines how several contemporary films imagine baseball heroes and how cultural definitions of race, class, and masculinity influence and shape these depictions. In an effort to examine the conventions of hero development within these texts, I examine how athletes of color are presented in contrast to the canonical baseball heroes. Do the conventions change when the hero or protagonist is a person of color? How does the ideology of the American Dream or baseball as an allegory for U.S. culture

change when the main hero is a person of color? In an effort to highlight how normalized white heroes have become in baseball films, I will also examine how these films use athletes of color to demonstrate the internal and external threats to the game and to the nation. In this regard, baseball is still an important site for building nationalism and national myths; however, its meaning certainly changes when race is foregrounded and treated as more than a site for comic relief. In addition, since fictional baseball films are influenced by tensions within “real” baseball, I will further complicate these constructions by connecting these depictions with discourses of race in sports culture.

Understanding the Social Functions of Sports Heroes and Myths

Hopes are still invested in the ability of sport to produce heroic role models, and the frustration of these hopes feeds into a critique of sport as having become corrupted. In these constructions, what sport produces is not heroes, but stars. (Whannel 174)

What is it about sports culture that allows people separated in every possible way—class, geography, background, race, national origin—to feel connected and engaged through their fanship? How are sports fans able to feel the triumph of the underdog as sincerely as if it was the lifelong dream of their own team? What are the limits to this fanship? For an avid sports fan, there are many answers to these questions. Whether it is watching a miraculous fielding play of an infielder for your lifelong rivals or seeing a team that has never made it to post-season score the game-winning points as

time expires, sports culture invites appreciation for all possibilities that can happen. In fact, most essential to sports spectatorship is the *possibility* that the amazing can happen at any given moment. Although each sport has its specific codes and meanings that delineate the spectacular from the mundane, the belief that the unbelievable *can* happen is what unites millions of sports fans around the world. And as a result, the players who do the “impossible” come to take on heightened significance as sports heroes.

Although simply doing the impossible is not the only criterion for a sports figure to be considered a “hero,” it certainly helps to insure that the athlete earns a place in the annals of sports history. As sports theorist Dave Zirin beautifully summarizes, “Sports are popular because they are often fun, sometimes beautiful, and, at their best, rival anything in the National Gallery This is art, highly distorted, yes, but art all the same. And this is why fans, despite the abusive terms of their relationship with sports, keep coming back” (290). Although this “art” is often denigrated because of its mass appeal, it maintains an important role in shaping the larger culture on many levels. Intrinsically linked to the construction of sports heroes are the fans who embrace their images, consume them as products (both literally and figuratively via endorsements), and invest in their successes and failures as part of the fans’ identities. This relationship is essential to any discussion of sports heroes because without the fan as spectator-consumer, these heroes would not have a role in society.

Discerning the difference between a “sports star” and a “sports hero” can be challenging in the media-saturated contemporary sports industry. Garry Whannel is correct in observing that:

in popular discourse the concepts of hero and star, celebrity and personality are often confused and any notional boundary between them are blurred. The very concept of the hero is troubling and ambiguous. Statements about heroism, the heroic and heroes are frequently statements not just about the society in which we live, but statements that carry a marked positionality, inscribing both the perspective from which they are made and the frame through which we should perceive society. (40)

Even though sports films borrow from the mythology-based conceptualization of a “hero,” in the world of sports hero takes on many levels of interpretation. First, a sports “hero” is an athlete who excels on the playing field and achieves celebrity status because of his athletic performance.²⁰ Second, the hero is the lead character of whatever sports narrative is being written. And lastly, the sport “hero” is able to “save” his team from defeat. Although losing an athletic contest rarely poses a threat to either the players or the fans, the ability to help the team overcome obstacles is how the hero earns (sometimes fleeting) status as the savior. Of the many responsibilities bestowed upon the modern sports hero, the most challenging can often be the expectation that he is a role model for because he embodies the virtues of fair play, humility, and team values.

Sports sociology and sports culture frequently explore the social and psychological factors at work within this fan culture. Through the analyses of

²⁰ Although there are several female sports stars who engage these themes and tensions, my focus is on male athletes because baseball culture is male-dominated. Further discussion of the gender divide in sports celebrity is certainly warranted, but for the purpose of this project, the role of female athletic stardom is less important as it not represented in baseball films at all. I am not trying to reinforce sexist aspects of sports culture but rather to isolate how male sports celebrity functions within baseball hero mythology.

“hooliganism”²¹ and fanship, this research frequently sanitizes or under-estimates the impact “heroic” moments have on creating and maintaining fan cultures. Whether it is New York Yankees’ short stop Derek Jeter’s famous game-saving acrobatics in the third game of the 2001 American League Division Series²² or the seemingly indefatigable drive of the Texas Longhorns’ quarterback Vince Young as he led the team to victory in the NCAA Championship game at the Rose Bowl in 2005, these spectacular feats encapsulate the narrative power of sports and embody how sports culture is frequently defined based on the anticipation and hope for the unbelievable. Shortly after these memorable moments occurred, they were introduced into the canon of the greatest moments in sports; however, more importantly, the athletes involved were elevated as heroes for their teams and the communities they represented. Beyond their appearance on highlight reels and extensive discussion in sports communities, these moments also provided narratives that relied upon the *possibility* that sports can inspire. Inherent in any discussion of stardom and celebrity in sports culture is an exploration of narrative construction and how the “story” of the heroic athlete is constructed. In this regard, the baseball player is considered a “hero” not only because of his athletic talent, but also because he has the ability to save his team from defeat or even elimination. Although

²¹ The concept of “hooliganism” is commonly associated with soccer (or football) contests around the world, but most notably in Europe. The term reflects class assumptions and group mentality that is imagined as natural within extremely competitive sports communities.

²² This play occurred in the American League Division Series against the Oakland Athletics on October 12, 2001. The Yankees were facing elimination from post-season play and as modern lore has constructed this play, Jeter saved the team from losing late in the game. Now referred to in popular culture as “The Flip,” this play has appeared in numerous highlight reels and even in a Gatorade commercial.

elimination from post-season play is not a real form of danger, the ability to “rescue” the team and its fans from losing is considered an act of heroism within sports culture.

Factors other than simply the narrative constructed around his athletic performance influence how a baseball player is imagined. Most notably, the social context, cultural tensions and needs, and public interest in the hero all shape how athletes are understood. Many scholars have explored the ways in which sports teams and athletes serve as more than symbols of athletic skill but also as representatives of nations. Within this discourse, the team indicates the health and hope of the nation. In addition to this construction of the team as nation, the importance of the athlete as hero embodies the aspirations of the nation. In their discussion of the national symbolism of athletes, Toby Miller et al. observe “The sporting body bears triumphalist national mythologies in a double way, extending the body to encompass the nation and compressing it to obscure the social divisions that threaten national unity” (31). Similarly, Aaron Baker examines the ways in which athletes are understood as symbols of their nations through his discussion of Michael Jordan. Although primarily known for his remarkable athleticism and success during his professional basketball career, Jordan is presented to imply that “the American dream still exists” and that an individual can transcend racial labels to become an international icon (Baker 34). Jordan becomes the quintessential sports hero who engages several important discourses in terms of race, nation, and the American Dream. From humble beginnings, Jordan’s story evokes the Horatio Alger myth of success through virtue and hard work. Jordan became the image of a model athlete and black man because, throughout his successful career as an athlete, he was always well-

groomed and was never boastful or threatening to dominant (white) culture. In relation to the treatment athletes of color in the media, Whannel argues, “One element in current public discourse about sport stardom concerns the supposed decline in morality” (161). This is especially true in how salary negotiations are discussed in the media and the efforts of controlling powers within professional sports culture to control behavior of athletes of color. When players deviate from the expected mores, they are presented as “troublemakers” or as ungrateful because they are dissatisfied with the system that pays them.

Given the struggle to be heard and the contested spaces that black athletes are placed in, “images of black masculinity have been the site of struggle in which ideological elements of sporting prowess, black male virility, street-cool, racism, black masculinity and concepts of national identity are articulated” (Whannel 173). Whannel continues, “The repertoire of representation of black athleticism in the mainstream draws upon established stereotypes—the respectful (Uncle Tom), the powerful and threatening black body, the cool and street-wise” (174). Although Whannel does not directly address race in relation to baseball films, his discussion establishes many important patterns that are very useful when examining the ideologies at work within fictional films.

Howard Good describes the relationship between athlete and nation in films as a symbol of changing cultural needs. He argues that baseball films became popular in the 1980s “because their iconography reflected the audience’s search for a model of what a functioning adult should be” (26). Furthermore, in his discussion of how heroes are constructed in this subgenre, Good argues that narrative revolves around the fact that,

ostensibly, the sport is a boy's game and that baseball players try to revive days gone by (22-3). In the process of trying to keep their youth and their career players alive, they engage in

a mythical quest, a quest for identity, continuity, their place and purpose in the scheme of things. Before they are forced out of baseball they must, on the one hand, fulfill the dreams of the fading generation, represented by the grizzled old manager, and on the other, impart their know-how to the rising generation, represented by the undisciplined rookie. The survival of the game—or of the team, the community, that best embodies the game's deepest, greenest values—depends on their courage and savvy and luck (23).

As Good correctly concludes, within baseball films, the hero assumes the responsibility of representing and often redeeming the tensions facing the team and sport. In this regard, the “hero” is the individual within the team who is able to achieve the desired goals. However, when the hero is a person of color, the pattern changes. Instead of characters on a spiritual journey or trying to find salvation in baseball, initially these heroes are seeking fortune and glory and the team is paying the price for their shortcomings. Only when they learn their lesson do they fit the standard image of a baseball hero.

Black Boys of Summer

When Americans identified with baseball, they did so specifically through its heroes held in high esteem. Baseball stars were the first sports heroes

and, in many cases, the first heroes in American culture who were not political, military, or artistic in their success. In this way, baseball heroes could be easily emulated by children, unlike other heroes in American history.... A young boy could pick up a ball, glove and bat and imitate his hero in a ritualistic sense. (Billmeyer 91)

The level of interactive fantasy play that Kurt Billmeyer describes in this quotation reveals how baseball is theorized and imagined in relation to U.S. history and culture. Such an investment in the baseball hero serves as a partial explanation for the nostalgia attached to the game; however, it also demonstrates a need to inflate the game to something uniquely “American.” As discussed earlier, baseball is intrinsically linked to the myth of meritocracy and the idea that anyone who possesses the right mixture of talent and dedication can achieve great things in baseball and, by extension, in the U.S. In his discussion of the mythical construction of baseball players in the film *Eight Men Out*, Billmeyer examines how baseball players satisfy a basic human need to create heroes. Billmeyer argues that people see players as “living evidence that certain values and assumptions deep in the American psyche still have validity” (91). He continues: “The successful ball player showed that a person could be self-made, that one could rise above humble origins and lack of education” (ibid.). The notion that a man could change his social class and even find glory and honor through his participation in professional sports partially explains what the baseball player symbolizes in cultural forms.

Sports films are hardly the only genre that actively uses classical mythology's hero construction. One of the most important aspects to hero construction is the creation of a recognizable and identifiable hero, or a "universal hero." As such, the hero is able to function as part of a myriad of allegories. Within baseball films, the hero (usually a player who plays a central role on the team featured) becomes a site for placing the film's commentary into larger social issues. Through this hero/player, baseball films negotiate issues like the egocentric athlete or corrupt owner and suggest many parallels to players and issues in the real world of professional game. When a baseball player becomes a hero, his narrative mirrors the hero's journey formalized in traditional mythology. Essential to this formula are three steps: the hero leaves home, is challenged but receives aid to conquer his test to achieve his reward, and returns home victorious (Wood 22). With this journey of the hero in mind, Wood et al. argue that "Tragedy is, however, fundamental to myth. Indeed the cycle of the mythic hero is a journey of pain, alienation, testing and failure, but also a journey that often ends in transcendent success, lessons learned and the spirit of humankind lifted" (ibid.).

While the construction of the team as a symbol of the nation's health reappears in many forms within the baseball symbolic lexicon, perhaps the strongest illustration of this trope is in the construction of heroes in these texts. Most notably, 1980s films like *The Natural* (Levinson, 1984), *Bull Durham* (Shelton, 1988), and *Field of Dreams* (Robinson, 1989) all explicitly explore the ways in which the individuals face obstacles but redeem themselves and baseball through their commitment to the team. Despite the variety of challenges that each film's hero must face, his role as hero and team player are

explored in great length. Even the slapstick comedy *Major League* (Ward, 1989) positions the team as a symbol of a diverse and changing nation. The team in *Major League* becomes especially important because its message is that the only way to overcome their shortcomings as individuals is through their collective investment in the “team” before all else. In all of these films, even when people of color are present, they are positioned as marginal to the narrative at best. In their efforts to construct the protagonists as “every man’s hero,” all of these texts examine both baseball and masculinity in crisis in specific cultural moments.

Of the one hundred-plus fictional baseball films made between 1905 and 2006, only a handful include athletes of color and even fewer position athletes of color as the hero or protagonist. Although this number increases when considering ensemble casts with people of color as secondary or tertiary characters, the fact remains that baseball films reify the dominant culture’s notion that baseball is primarily a *white* sport to which people of color are accessories. There are many possible explanations for this pattern; however, what is most significant is what these images suggest about U.S. culture and baseball more broadly. Specifically, racial, ethnic, and cultural differences are marginalized in baseball films thereby re-establishing the ways in which whiteness is revered and differences are contained in contemporary media. With this ideological pattern in mind, it is necessary to examine what happens when race is introduced on any level into contemporary baseball narratives.

Much like the canonical baseball films from the 1980s, contemporary baseball films with black protagonists use both the “team” and individual heroes to comment upon

the state of the game and the nation more generally. The obvious place that this commentary occurs is in the characterization of the diva athlete or mega-star. One of the much-discussed themes in contemporary baseball is the notion of the diva athlete or mega-star. Discourses surrounding the star status of athletes and their inflated salaries directly parallel mainstream discourses of greed and commodity cultures in which possessions depict people's worth. In this representation, the team has been forsaken for large egos and heroes are no longer "kid-friendly" because of their focus on breaking records and accumulating great wealth through inflated contracts and endorsements. With the adoption of hip-hop culture and the accompanying materialism that is frequently displayed in this culture, black athletes within baseball narratives begin by highlighting their negative traits that will need to be changed for any happy ending.

Because most mainstream American baseball texts marginalize or omit black athletes (not to mention Latino or Asian athletes), it is important to examine the rare few that position black men as the lead characters in baseball movies.²³ Three such movies position race and the sport in direct dialogue: *The Fan* (Scott, 1996), *Hard Ball* (Robbins, 2001), and *Mr. 3000* (Stone, 2004). Of these three films, *Mr. 3000* is the only film both directed by a person of color and focusing on a person of color as the protagonist. *Mr. 3000* is the story of Stan Ross (Bernie Mac) an aging baseball player who must shed his selfish behaviors and learn how to be a team player. Although the other two films are still important as they also take to task black masculinity within the world of baseball, it

²³ While several contemporary baseball narratives have *included* professional players with big egos (for example, the financially oriented character Roger Dorn in *Major League*), these characters are not central to the film but rather used as examples supporting the hero's virtues.

is important to underscore that they focus on the crisis of white masculinity. In *The Fan*, Gil Renard (Robert DeNiro) is obsessed with the fictional San Francisco Giants' outfielder Bobby Rayburn (Wesley Snipes). In this film, DeNiro has top billing and Snipes is merely the vehicle for the commentary on baseball culture. Similarly, the narrative of *Hard Ball* focuses on how coaching a team of inner city youth saves Conor O'Neill (Keanu Reeves) from his self-destructive ways.²⁴

While *The Fan* and *Mr. 3000* both feature black men as the protagonists, neither film depicts them as a hero in any of the ways described earlier. Although both films offer commentary on the issues within professional baseball today, the characters and cultures depicted are very different from the canonical baseball stories. Instead, both Stan and Bobby are black male characters who have achieved celebrity status in the sport yet must resolve a conflict between their behavior and the team-centered ideology of baseball. And as such, both characters are flawed and affected by their wealth, image, and most importantly, their skewed perception of the game. Moreover, neither character is happy.

This representation also appears via expecting professional athletes to be grateful for the opportunity to receive fame and fortune in exchange for playing a kid's game that they presumably love. Boyd comments on the way this representation is lived by professional athletes and how race further compounds the idea of restrained success; "rejection of the standard mode of behavior was a cause for concern" for owners and fans. He continues, "The mainstream did not know what to do with individuals who did

²⁴ *Hard Ball* is discussed at length in chapter five.

not buy into its philosophy, especially when they were Black figures who, the thinking went, should have been grateful for the opportunity to perform and make a good living” (38). At some point in both *The Fan* and *Mr. 3000*, the press, fans, and owners criticize or condemned the superstar athletes because they lack the desired or expected humility. While their transgressions are simply explored as affecting the teams’ ability to win, included in the narrative is an understanding that they have exceeded their accepted place within the baseball hierarchy. However, Boyd correctly complicates the intersection of race and the American Dream with which black athletes must contend in sports by adding that:

The refusal to conform, and having the money to sustain this posture, is at the core of what I am calling the redefinition of the American Dream. For quite some time this clichéd notion of the American Dream—a house in the suburbs, 2.5 kids, a dog, and a white picket fence—was dangled in the faces of African Americans like a red cape in front of an angry bull, or better yet a cholesterol-filled buffet dinner placed in front of a starving man, only to be snatched away as he’s about to eat. The American Dream for Black people was at best a pornographic tease and at worst a cruel and unusual joke that was never intended for them in the first place. (6)

Thus, these characters must be reformed so that their attitudes align with those of the team and nation.

In his seminal work on racial stereotypes in Hollywood film, Donald Bogle examines five essential “types” of blackness presented in film: the tom, coon, buck,

mulatto, and mammy. This “black pantheon,” as Bogle calls it (7), dates back to the earliest days of film but was present in literature before the invention of film and continues in the present filmic images of black people despite the many social advancements and presumed societal improvements. According to Bogle’s typology, three male figures occur: the “tom” is a good, loyal Negro who remains submissive regardless of intense oppression (3); the “coon,” in contrast to the “tom,” is a buffoon present within narratives solely as the source of amusement (7).²⁵ Perhaps the most problematic of the male figures is the “buck.” Usually presented as dangerous because of his “over-sexed, and savage, violent and frenzied lust for white flesh,” the buck becomes a depiction Hollywood films actively utilized from its invention to the present (16). Although the forms that Bogle demonstrates in this black pantheon are present in films from the start, each has been reimagined to reflect the current social and cultural tensions within the U.S. for when the films were made. Bogle’s typology becomes particularly important when examining the ways in which race is depicted in sports films as both real and filmic athletic contests are one of the main sites for exploring blackness in U.S. society. Although each of these three types are used in baseball films in some way, what becomes especially important in contemporary baseball films is how the black hero is constructed as the buck who threatens the imagined stability of baseball culture.

²⁵ Bogle also examines the archetypal images of black women in film as part of his pantheon. He argues that the “tragic mulatto” is a sympathetic character whose mixed-race heritage and cultural ambiguity are the cause of her eventual demise (9). Additionally, Bogle describes the depiction of “The Mammy” character as ranging from congenial maids to militant and bossy washerwomen; however, these characters are always presented as “big, fat, and cantankerous” (10).

In his discussion of Hollywood films' construction of race in blockbuster films of the 1980s, Ed Guerrero examines how blackness is contained and positioned in opposition to whiteness. He argues that these films rely upon the social and cultural isolation of black characters who are denied cultural backgrounds, communities, and histories (237). What is at stake for the confinement of black characters in mainstream film is important to consider in relation to baseball films given the limited range of depictions of blackness in these texts. Three concepts are essential to Guerrero's examination of blackness in 1980s films: creating a filmic reality devoid of social problems as symbolized/represented in interracial friendships; the placement of black characters in "protective custody" of the white characters who determine the relevance of the black characters; the presence of black characters who must sacrifice to help solve the white hero's problems (238-242). Through an analysis of Eddie Murphy's problematic characterizations in several films, Guerrero argues that "'strategies of containment' that subordinate the Black image and subtly reaffirm dominant society's traditional racial order" are habitual (237). The most common trope within these films is the depiction of characters of color who have been deracinated.

Although all three of these themes are prevalent in the 1980s films Guerrero discusses, they also demonstrate trends in films well beyond this time period. Specifically, the "biracial buddy film," as Guerrero defines it, also serves as a way to understand how black characters are included into white culture in other genres of film—especially sports films. Guerrero describes "biracial buddies" as being different in color but not in culture; they essentially adopt dominant mores (238). Although baseball films

usually focus on either a single hero or the team as the collective hero, the pattern of placing black characters in “protective custody” of white culture is apparent throughout the genre. Additionally, the isolation of racial or ethnic “others” in baseball films complicates the oft-embraced notion of baseball as a site for national unity by challenging the simplistic construction of the meritocracy of the sport. Instead of baseball being a vehicle for assimilation, characters of color are relegated to roles of comic relief.

Similar to Guerrero’s argument that Murphy’s characters frequently invade white cultural, social, or physical spaces in films but remain unmarked as different (243), the racialized characters in baseball films are depicted as outsiders but are only present to support the hero as a biracial buddy or for comic relief. As such, these characters are not only two-dimensional but tend to embody Bogle’s figure of the “coon.” Bogle argues that the coon is characterized as a simplistic character present for amusement, and this is certainly true within baseball films; however, not only black characters are positioned in this manner. In fact, as further support for the examination of people of color as a collective in baseball films, the “coon” in baseball films tends to be depicted as any racial or ethnic other.²⁶ Whether in the form of an Asian character who struggles with English and learning American cultural practices or the superstitious Latino character who practices voodoo, these racialized characters clearly demonstrate the behavior Bogle discusses as indicative of the coon.

²⁶ Despite their great success in assimilating into professional baseball, Latino- and Asian-centered films have yet to appear. In the chapter “Baseball Comedies and Ethnic Diversity,” I discuss how the depictions of Latino and Asian athletes are depicted as part of a multi-ethnic team.

Manthia Diawara's analysis of the constructions of blackness in films furthers the points raised by Bogle and Guerrero by arguing that such depictions prevent black spectators from identifying with the images presented. He argues that the construction of a "Manichean dualism" between black and white heroes denies spectatorial pleasure (213). Diawara argues that the "castration" of black male characters presents for spectators a challenge in negotiating pleasurable relations with the depictions (214). If this is true of films simply attempting to offer comedy, what does this say about films that are supposed to depict "American values"? And furthermore, how does this affect the alleged redemptive power of the baseball film as a way for people to restore their faith in the nation? Diawara asserts that dominant films position

Black characters primarily for the pleasure of White spectators (male or female).

To illustrate this point, one may note how Black male characters in contemporary Hollywood films are made less threatening to Whites either by White domestication of Black customs and culture—a process of deracination and isolation—or by stories in which Blacks are depicted playing by the rules of White society and losing. (215)

The creation of black characters contained within and imagined for the pleasure of the "white world" potentially prevents *all* spectators from identifying with the images presented and finding symbolic value in their depictions. Although many scholars have commented on how baseball films have served as a way to address social ills within the U.S. including racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and national concerns, it is quite

frequent for these same scholars to make very problematic assumptions about how race is connected to these theorizations.²⁷

Examining the containment of black characters and their function within the filmic white world as illustrated by Bogle, Guerrero, and Diawara offers many important insights into how racial difference functions in baseball films. In these texts, black characters are, as Guerrero posits, removed from other black people and the black world (237). Ultimately, the black athletes in these films embody what Diawara means when he concludes that “Blacks [are] playing by the hegemonic rules and *losing*” within mainstream films (216). By focusing on depictions of black male characters in the 1980s, both Guerrero and Diawara also provide a great starting point for baseball films since this period also marked the resurgence of baseball films as a popular cycle. Of this period, Guerrero argues that the Reagan era and blockbuster culture utilized the “protective custody” for dominant spectatorial pleasure (239). If, as Good argues, the resurgence of baseball films as profitable entities is connected with “the kind of stories they tell and the kind of images in which they tell their stories” (20) then the ways in which race is constructed in these films also fulfills a social or cultural need. He argues that baseball films became popular in the 1980s “because their iconography reflected the audience’s search for a model of what a functioning adult should be” (26). However, the problematic constructions of heroes of color within these films hardly offer all spectators

²⁷ One of the most common ways that this occurs is the unquestioning use of terms like “we,” “us,” and “our.” The use of such language not only engages the hegemonic desire to imagine the U.S. as having a singular and unified national identity, but it also further marginalizes the very people the scholars are attempting to recognize in their discussion.

sources of racial or ethnic pride. As Gary E. Dickerson concludes, “America is still in a nostalgic mood and seems to be, more than ever, determined to clean up the images of her heroes. But until it happens in reality, Hollywood will continue to provide us with images of the ideal hero” (158). Although Dickerson’s assessment of the relationship between filmic and real world athletes is correct, it is important to note that contemporary films do not simply embrace all heroes equally. If, as Robert Elias asserts, “Americans should care about baseball because it has been, and remains, a barometer for the health of American society,” (9) then the logic stands that the treatment of racial and ethnic diversity within these texts demonstrates that the nation’s health is far from intact given the marginalization that people of color face.

One of the most problematic aspects of how race is treated in baseball films stems from the double marginalization that occurs. Not only do very few films even include athletes of color, but the few that do either relegate the characters to caricatures or include them in the narrative only as sidekicks to the white protagonist. *Hard Ball* is the perfect example of both of these patterns. Although the film attempts to demonstrate the economic and institutional obstacles with which inner city kids must contend in order to play little league, the black characters are filtered through a white character’s perspective. Furthermore, through its simplistic presentation of black culture, the film also conveniently places all of the social ills that the children endure onto the black community without acknowledging how these realities came into being.

In the world of professional sports, bravado is key to an athlete’s success. An athlete’s swagger, boastful nature, and even trash talk frequently receive as much press

coverage as his actual play. Moreover, the creation and maintenance of an athlete's persona becomes an essential marketing tool for him to generate fan support, recognition, and, consequently, endorsements. However, the excessively money-oriented player is perceived at once as both intrinsically "American" and "Un-American." "American" because the behavior relies upon individual accomplishments and confidence that are conveniently used to convey American dominance. However, "Un-American" if the behavior becomes equated with greed. Until recently, baseball films have focused mainly on white protagonists' narratives and the players who have a wholesome, pure love of baseball. Regardless of whether representing the minor leagues or the professional level, these narratives traditionally focus on rewarding characters who embrace the ideology of love of baseball for its own sake and who disavow using baseball to gain material wealth.

Unlike the countless baseball films that relegate black and Latino characters to stereotypical caricatures on the fringes of baseball culture, *The Fan* and *Mr. 3000* attempt to develop characters of color with some complexity. Instead of simply reviving the existent ideologies of baseball as the *white* American pastime, these two films imagine how the sport is understood and lived by the contemporary black athlete. Typical of the contemporary filmic construction of the black professional baseball player is fierce independence. *The Fan* and *Mr. 3000* position selfish and showy black athletes at the center of their narratives and explore how dominant culture needs to reassert hegemonic definitions of racial identity and subservience to the nation in order to save the game from such egotism.

Although *The Fan* is about a professional baseball player who becomes the center of an unbalanced fan's life, the film does not explore in depth the complexity of the sport or heroes fully. Although the narrative involves the celebrity of Bobby, a slugger on the San Francisco Giants, who has been lured back to the team by a substantial salary, it is really about one fan who is over-invested in sports culture. Upon Bobby's return, Gil associates his fortunes with those of the athlete's and becomes so enmeshed in the player's life that eventually he stalks, kills, and kidnaps.

Flawed in several ways, *The Fan* does very little to establish Wesley Snipes as the character of Bobby Rayburn. The story includes a few references to issues in Bobby's life that might motivate his concern for success through exposition of his shared custody of his son and his superstitious connection to his team number (when he returns to the team, another player has the number he previously used). However, these facts do little to develop him as a character, let alone as a *black* character. It is quite problematic that in the first fictional baseball film in this era that focuses on a black athlete actually lacks any cultural context for his life.

One of the biggest problems within this highly stylized film is that the game is missing from the text. Rather than exploring the team as a symbol of the nation or even developing the depiction of the dangers of high-priced talent within baseball culture, the film is not really about the game but its fans. The narrative follows Gil through his life as a failing knife salesman who is estranged from his son and has lost touch with reality. Even the homoeroticism that is present in several scenes is not explored as a way to understand the fan's intense love of the game. Although in a few scenes baseball play is

foregrounded, these are very brief and unessential to the narrative. As a result, the baseball action scenes exist as symbolic moments. From the press box to the locker room and a few scenes featuring Bobby at bat or playing in the field, the film attempts to engage the viewer's existent understanding of what baseball is about without actually focusing on baseball.

Furthermore, the film also makes several allusions to real baseball practices and players in what can be assumed to be an effort to comment on the dangers of professional sports. Of course, given the over-the-top performance of DeNiro and the fact that it seems Gil would have gone insane over *any* sport, it is hard to imagine the film as actually commenting on baseball, but rather on the crises occurring in the working class family and in white masculinity. For all intents and purposes, Gil could have become obsessed with jai alai without changing the film's narrative arc. As the anti-hero of the film, Gil's character is simplified as stemming from his inadequacies which are manifested in his obsession with Bobby.²⁸

The latest in baseball films attempting to foreground race in baseball culture, *Mr. 3000* comments upon current social issues and sports culture. Essential to the *Mr. 3000*'s narrative is its construction of the new generation of athletes. Stan, as a player at the end of his career, must learn to keep up with the young athletes. And yet he is also able to teach them a few things about the world and sports in general—ultimately reminding

²⁸ Even the Latino athlete, Primo, who is presented as Bobby's adversary on the team because he will not give the superstar his number back, is presented as a caricature within the film. What is most unfortunate about these depictions is the fact that the film missed many opportunities to supplement the typical depictions of baseball and athletes.

himself of the same lessons. The most important lesson that Stan's life should teach the younger generation of athletes is that they should make preparations for their lives after baseball since their time as athletes/celebrities is limited. However, the film argues that the baseball world will provide for its players if they submit to its will and invest in the notion of the "Team."

Within the first thirty seconds of the film, director Charles Stone has offered explicit commentary on baseball athletes, sports culture, and consumer culture in the film's opening sequence. The main character, Stan, informs the audience "You don't like me because I don't sign autographs. You don't like me because I don't smile for the camera. You don't like me because I don't suck up to the press. You don't like me because I make a lot of money. But you love me. Because I'm one of the greatest hitters alive" (*Mr. 3000*). Shot in black and white, this commercial is perhaps the most compelling aspect about the film. Although there are other commercials for Stan and his teammates throughout the film, the opening sequence is the only one that offers clear and explicit commentary on baseball as a cultural and economic institution. Divided into two parts (Stan's arrogant fall from grace and his restoration), *Mr. 3000* shifts from the savvy opening to a more traditional baseball movie.

As demonstrated by the opening commercial, when athletes do not play by the expected rules (in this case, signing autographs, smiling for cameras, placating the press, and being humble about financial worth), they are both loved and hated. Some fans embrace this attitude because it embodies their own desires for such a fate; however, just as many fans resent this arrogance because the behavior shows a lack of gratitude to

those who have supported him. While the commentary presented here is clearly critical and opinionated, what is most compelling about this moment of the film is that this is supposed to be a Reebok commercial. As “unfavorable” as Stan’s actions appear to be, that a commercial would be made with him recounting all of the reasons the fan-consumer has to dislike him suggests that a great deal more is going on here. In fact, it is this “unlikable” construction that makes Stan (and his real world counterparts) so valuable for advertisers. One of the sentiments presented in this commercial is that a successful athlete does not need to follow their rules *or* seek fan approval as long as he is successful on the field. Furthermore, this disavowal of traditional images of the grateful athlete creates the rebellious figure the player everyone loves to hate.

Just as the conceptualization of race is polemical and subjective, so is the conceptualization of how blackness should be presented on screen. The debate regarding what constitutes a “positive” image of black people or black culture has been ongoing in critical race scholarship and ultimately remains unresolved. It is easy to conclude that since the film’s director is a black man, he has the responsibility to create “positive” portrayals of racial difference, especially since there are so few baseball films featuring a black protagonist. However, this is troublesome for two important reasons. First, by assigning Stone the impossible task of “correcting” the racist representations of blackness throughout film history, the unfair burden of representation is placed upon him.²⁹ This is also dangerous because it is based on essentialist notions that there is a singular “black

²⁹ The burden of representation is the expectation that when a person of color gains access to a system that has been off-limits historically, he will work to right the institutional wrongs that have been endured.

experience” that can be identified by simply acknowledging a person’s racial background. And second, every film made within the Hollywood system (especially films produced by major studios with a substantial budget) is the product of several individuals’ work. With this in mind, it is useful to consider how *Mr. 3000* engages race and racial difference. Although there are some stereotypes present within the film, the real source of racial difference stems from the ways in which Stan’s cultural background is depicted. Unlike the baseball films that contain the lone black player as accessories to the white protagonist, Stan’s character openly discusses his childhood, cultural experiences and aspirations. Ultimately, *Mr. 3000* used nuanced depictions of Stan’s background to illustrate his connection to the black community. Furthermore, because the film presents multiple forms of blackness, the end result is a film that treats racial and ethnic difference with more development and cultural sensitivity than is usually seen in baseball films.

At the heart of *Mr. 3000* is the story of an aging black baseball player who has lived his life as a star athlete and whose selfish, lascivious nature makes him hated by his teammates and by members of the press. Only concerned with his financial success after retirement, Stan learns that a recording error threatens his claim to fame: his 3000 hits. The rest of the narrative focuses on his return to baseball at first to secure the record but subsequently to right the many wrongs from his professional career. Laden with lessons that easily align with American “family” values, the film takes a critical look at corporate sponsorship, media commentary, and the construction of the Team. Within *Mr. 3000*, the Team (in this case the struggling Milwaukee Brewers) comes to demonstrate all that ails

professional baseball.³⁰ By selecting a small-market franchise like the Brewers, *Mr. 3000* explores how celebrity and egotism threaten the American Heartland. And central to this threat is Stan and his self-centered behaviors. Although self-serving behaviors are a threat to any team, Stan demonstrates more animosity towards the team than a hero would be allowed traditionally. In contrast to the characterizations of the misguided player that is common in baseball films, Stan quits the team in the middle of its run for the playoffs, openly boasts about his skills (an act that is fundamentally disavowed within baseball culture), mistreats the media, and even takes a ball from a child who has caught it during a game. It is the extreme combination of baseball transgressions that separates him from traditional heroes in baseball films. Although Stan is the most developed black character to appear in a fictional baseball film to date, he still engages Hollywood's legacy of reducing blackness to sexuality and desire.

Although *Mr. 3000* alters the traditional hero, it also builds upon several basic patterns within baseball films. In addition to a protagonist needing to learn important life lessons from his interactions with the team, *Mr. 3000* also explores the challenges that players face as they age and the game evolves without them. Much like the characterization of Crash Davis in *Bull Durham*, Stan has to come to terms with his new role on the team.³¹ An awareness of athletes' temporality is quite common in baseball

³⁰ It is important to note that the choice of which Major League team to use is of great significance in baseball movies. When baseball narratives focus on small cities, especially those in the Midwest, they are referencing several patterns within contemporary baseball and values that are perceived as residing in the Heartland. Similarly, when texts are set within major cities like New York, Boston, or Los Angeles the films are building upon certain expectations of cosmopolitan people and lifestyles.

³¹ *Bull Durham* follows one young player Ebbie Calvin "Nuke" LaLoosh (Tim Robbins) and one older player Crash Davis (Kevin Costner) as baseball teaches them lessons about life, love, and adulthood.

films. Fleeting or aging talent is a device frequently employed to convey the precious gift of making a living by playing a kid's game. *Bull Durham* is a good example of this phenomenon as it presents aging or retirement as a way to endear the main character to the audience and to explain why on earth he would seek at the end of his career a monogamous relationship over the fun- and sex-filled days of baseball. However, in these representations of the short careers of athletes, the characters never discuss that they have few options outside of the baseball world. In fact, it is their legacy, most concretely explored through the records achieved, that is the focus of narratives addressing this aging. The importance of record keeping and building a statistical legacy is important in all professional sports. However, unlike other sports and partially because of its position as *the* American sport, in baseball, a player's contribution to the Team stems not only from his play but from the records he amasses. While it is clearly a "team sport" in which the accomplishments of the team are supposed to come before everything else, baseball is also heavily rooted in a tradition of records. From pitching no-hitters to accumulating stats in strikeouts, hits, steals, runs batted in (RBIs), and homeruns, players' individual records are what determine their worth. In baseball, statistics are particularly important to assessing players "value" and impact on the game. Both within the play-by play commentary during games and in the news coverage after games, statistics become the official record for the players' performance. Consequently, the records earned are essential to the monetary value of contracts negotiated and trades that occur. The reality of baseball legacies stemming from statistical accomplishments is explored in the film when it is discovered that Stan is three hits shy of the 3000 mark.

The rest of the narrative revolves around his desire to earn those three hits so that he is not forgotten from the history books and will be elected to the Hall of Fame. Ironically—although not from the point of view of the ideologies at play—despite the clear cultural emphasis on numerical accomplishments, Stan is ultimately rewarded with a spot in the Hall of Fame because he put the team first and mended his relationship with the press.

Mr. 3000's portrayal of black athletes and blackness more generally updates the traditional baseball film narrative and comments upon the problematic business of professional baseball. As a sport film, *Mr. 3000* relies heavily upon the conventional forms of narrative—the suspenseful final game, the estranged love interest, the glitz and glamour of a wealthy lifestyle—in its efforts to examine the ego of a professional athlete who has lost sight of why he loves the game. While this is a valuable topic for a film to explore, however, by using traditional, exaggerated comedic elements to demonstrate Stan's shortcomings, there is little room for critical evaluation of the baseball system. And as a result, the depictions do little more than repeat conventions that Bogle describes in his pantheon of filmic blackness. Unlike films like *The Natural* and *Field of Dreams*, the canonical baseball films of the contemporary era, *Mr. 3000* finally ignores the spiritual side of baseball both within the players and in the game more broadly. Even though Stan seeks glory like Roy in *The Natural*, his quest is never presented as stemming from his innate love and respect for the game but rather from his understanding how the game can afford him financial wealth.

Although this emphasis could be explained by the fact that after 1975, free agency gave professional baseball players in the U.S. more control over their careers and,

according to popular discourses, the priority within the game shifted from owners controlling and profiting to players asserting their interest in achieving wealth through playing baseball. However, the canonical baseball films made in the 1980s were also made with the potential influence of free agency in the game and yet their characters still value the game. The other argument that could be made to explain the depiction of Stan as materialistic is that the consumer-driven climate of the early twenty-first century positions athletes in general in an unfavorable light. Although there is some support within the film for this argument, the 1980s in the U.S. is frequently described as a decade of excessive spending and egotistical value systems. Dickerson comments on the cultural values and tensions in the 1980s, “In an era when the real baseball players have given in to drugs, alcohol, and inflated salaries, [Roy] Hobbs [in *The Natural*] reminds the audience that the myth of the true hero must be kept alive if we are to feel good about ourselves and about our future. When the film was released, Americans still needed to be reminded and reinforced about the value of heroes in keeping their dreams alive” (136). Thus, no reason exists to assume that cultural needs have changed dramatically from the 1980s to the 2000s. With this in mind, *Mr. 3000* can be read as an attempt to deepen the characterization of the athletes Stan evokes. It can also be interpreted as commentary on the dangers of professional sports in contemporary culture. Although very few moments in the film suggest it is a cautionary tale, at several points, it does make public a discourse that is usually very private within the black community. Specifically, the fact that Stan is able to see himself in the younger players and actually change the climate on the team is very important to consider. On the surface, the narrative is about Stan

learning to see the errors of his ways; but on another level, it is also about the need for mentorship and community among the athletes of color within professional baseball. The most sincere and endearing moments of the film occur when Stan must address the young “brothers” on the team in an effort to save them from making the same mistakes he made, and the implication is that Stan did not have such mentorship when he was a player.

The image of young black men obtaining great wealth through professional sports is both popular and prevalent in popular culture. While baseball may not be the way to “move up” for black youth today, *Mr. 3000* invests in the larger social narrative of excess wealth and status being attainable through the world of sports. The phenomenon of athletes disavowing traditional roles of gratitude and loyalty has caused many sports journalists and theorists to position these athletes as a threat to American culture and poor models. The pressure for young athletes of color to uphold cultural expectations can generate several responses. Some athletes, like NBA superstar Allen Iverson openly refute their responsibility to uphold the values of which they are not a part. Other athletes of color like the much-discussed Major League player Barry Bonds openly engage the discourses of such expectations and are subsequently positioned as a threat to the game. However, Boyd complicates this positioning by pointing out that contemporary black athletes are enjoying their newfound freedoms to rebel against dominant cultural assumptions of race and masculinity. He argues that being a professional athlete provides these often disenfranchised young men the power to rebel and this power is only given to them because of their success as athletes. As a result, freedom of expression is their “version of the American Dream.... This search for

freedom though has taken place in a land where the penitentiary has often been the reality” (Boyd xiii). As Boyd argues, black men are frequently vilified in mass culture and if successful as athletes, they achieve privileges that they would otherwise be denied. In the process, as public figures, these athletes become lightning rods for criticism on many levels.

Within sports culture, the images created and reinforced within the media frequently are understood as reflections of larger cultural trends. Whether in the form of discussions of players’ large salaries or controversies surrounding players’ possible steroid use, the very athletes who are positioned as sports heroes are often critiqued simultaneously. The ways in which sportscasters and their networks describe both athletes and their teams can have lasting repercussions. In the highly media-saturated professional sports industry, commentators and sports journalists become the mediators between the sports industry and its consumers around the world. Central to the film’s narrative is Stan’s relationship with members of the press. In an effort to add credibility to Stan’s character, Stone uses real life programs like ESPN’s *Sports Center* throughout the film. The use of these forums within the narrative reminds the viewer that although Stan is a fictional character, players with similar attitudes are frequently seen on sports news programs. From sharing anecdotes about a player’s work ethic or “God-given talent” to referencing players’ connection with their “home land,” the films’ announcers sprinkle their personal opinions throughout the game. Although the film does not fully explore how bias can affect how a player is perceived, it does suggest that the so-called objectivity of sportscasters should be viewed with caution.

At the beginning of the film, Stan blames the sportscasters for not being voted into the Hall of Fame. Before his transformation into a “team player,” he antagonizes them and insults them repeatedly. In fact, it is his loose cannon persona at press conferences that causes the most trouble for Stan. In order for him to be redeemed by the film’s end, he must learn to take responsibility for his relationship with the media industry.

The deviation from a pleasant and loveable protagonist is perhaps the film’s most important variation of the traditional “hero” construction most commonly seen in baseball films. And this is where his racial construction becomes essential to consider. Instead of simply being grateful for the opportunities he is awarded, Stan’s character is more concerned with his financial portfolio and the wealth he wants to amass. And while these traits are clearly “American” and presented in other baseball films, such priorities are considered gauche and inappropriate for Stan. In contrast to Stan’s depiction, *Major League* characterizes Roger Dorn (Corbin Bernsen) as a financially-oriented player who enjoys the “finer things” and invests money for his future retirement—traits he tries to impart/share with his teammates who are not like-minded. Saving for retirement and making investments in the stock market are the polar opposite of Stan’s business ventures. Although the idea of being a “class act” is used for players of all racial backgrounds, it is most commonly used in relation to black athletes who do not defy the status quo. For example, superstars like Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods are frequently acknowledged for their “classy” behavior. While I do not contest either athlete being described in this manner, it is a dangerous compliment because it is akin to commenting

on how articulate a person of color is—an overt acknowledgement that this is a deviation from what is expected from that community.

In stark contrast to the image of the classy athlete, Stan embodies several of the buffoonish traits that are frequently used to depict blackness throughout mainstream film. Although Stan’s characterization might remain unchanged even if portrayed by a white actor, the tone, tenor, and style of the film would invariably change. Or at least how it is understood would change. For example, the image of Stan as a Leprechaun (see figure 3.1) would read quite differently with Latino, Asian, or white actors. Of course, the ultimate effect would most likely still be to evoke humor because of how ridiculous he appears in the costume.

Another such example of Stan’s racialization occurs when he visits a classroom to promote his “Reading Iz Dope” Foundation. Although this is part of his explicit campaign to improve his image so he will be elected to the Hall of Fame, it still is an example of how he is marked as “black” culturally and linguistically (see figure 3.2).³² The use of dialect alone carries class and race associations that have a long history in dominant cinema. However, the depiction of Stan is far more complicated than the traditionally one-dimensional images of black characters within baseball films. Even when he is shown as ostentatious and arrogant, Stan is presented as endearing because he

³² The film does not explore in depth that members of the press play a huge role in electing members to the Hall of Fame, but this is very important to consider in relation to how Stan interacts with members of the press. When he is not elected the first time he is on the ballot, it is clear to Stan that his statistics will not be enough to get him elected; he will need to recoup his public image.

is ultimately learning how to be an adult, a narrative arc that has been used in baseball films for generations.

In this regard, his race becomes a defining factor in *how* he acts out his immaturity and not simply a statement of his worth or nature. When he finally learns how to be an adult, he is able to develop a committed relationship and even find age-appropriate sponsors. However, his status as a sexually aggressive black man is further complicated even in his adulthood. The film opens and closes with Stan endorsing products that reflect the specific stage of his career.



Figure 3.1: Stan promotes his businesses in *Mr. 3000*.



Figure 3.2: Stan visits an elementary school in *Mr. 3000*.

The film starts by framing Stan’s arrogance in the Reebok commercial but ends with a sensual commercial for Viagra featuring his lover (see figure 3.3). Finally comfortable with his status as an adult, Stan is ready for a committed monogamous relationship and no longer fears the concept of being old enough to endorse a product connected with his declining virility. As the tagline suggests for both Viagra and Stan, “The best is yet to come.” One of the main lessons Stan must learn is that aging is a natural part of life,

even in baseball. In this regard, the narrative of the film mirrors traditional white-centered baseball films in structure and plot; however, it is the way in which the film articulates the lessons Stan needs to learn and his shortcomings that positions the film as also offering commentary on racial identity within baseball culture. Although *Mr. 3000* makes many improvements to the traditional baseball film narrative, it also engages in familiar stereotypical representations of black men in film. By endorsing Viagra at the end of the film, Stan symbolically reaches his adulthood. The Viagra commercial also challenges the traditional iconography of sexual performance commercials by deviating from the traditional white aging business man as the subject.

Mr. 3000 also takes to task the diva athlete and comments directly upon the relationship between black athlete-celebrities and the “team.” As texts consider the egos of individual athletes, the definitions and importance of both the team and the hero have also shifted. When racial difference



Figure 3.3: Stan endorses Viagra in *Mr. 3000*.

is foregrounded as it is in *Mr. 3000*, the nostalgic and light-hearted energy shifts to reveal the potential danger that can occur because of this new type of baseball hero. Essentially, it is a film about a character that needs to learn what the true meaning of team is and, in the process, restores priorities to the baseball community. The scene that clearly represents Stan changing from a selfish player to a team player also demonstrates the “hood” trope rather well. During a game, Stan sings the song from the Mister Softee ice cream truck. When asked why this song, as opposed to the much-accepted and revered

“Take Me Out to the Ballgame” that two younger players are singing, Stan explains that when he played ball as a kid on the Southside of Chicago, the ice cream truck’s anthem is all he heard when playing in the outfield. In response to this recollection, Pennebaker—the character presented as the younger version of Stan in terms of selfishness and self-promotion—replies by recounting his memories listening to the ice cream man in Philadelphia. While the moment is of little significance to the larger narrative, in this moment the urban landscape (whether in the form of the old school version or the hip hop-inflected rendition that Stan and Pennebaker respectively recall) is crystallized; their childhoods were markedly “urban” and this urban culture is still part of who they are. While it is hardly a revolutionary moment, this scene subtly suggests that while we might share one “national game,” we still live in different “nations.”

The idea of having a culturally-specific and culturally-reflective definition of baseball is at the center of the movie’s message. At several points in the film, characters reflect on what baseball is to them. Whether it is a *career*, as Pennebaker’s storyline presents it, that should be carefully managed and watched or a way to secure a place in history, as in the case of Stan’s storyline, baseball is also a way out of undesirable socio-economic situations. Although the film does not explain the differences between the “South Side” of Chicago and Philadelphia, the implications are clear: these are urban spaces, occupied by people of color. Unlike the countless baseball films in which the black community is either invisible or reduced to clichés, *Mr. 3000* demonstrates how professional baseball is as much about achieving wealth and status as it is about the many communities that embrace baseball and the diverse backgrounds within a given team.

The main difference between *Mr. 3000* and other baseball films is that it tries to develop the background and character of the black athlete beyond a stereotype. In his efforts to be known as “Mr. 3000,” Stan opens several businesses (from a barber shop to the dog grooming business) all named after his accomplishment. Stan’s character and legacy are central to the marketing in each of the commercials he makes to promote his local businesses. Instead, Stan is presented as a money-hungry buffoon with little self-control or common sense. Nothing about these commercials suggests that Stan is either a smart or savvy business man. In fact, in one of the commercials Stan appears in a ridiculous costume as a leprechaun. Such depictions are hardly an advancement of images of black athletes in baseball films, and yet, his clear awareness that baseball is a business and that he needs to capitalize off of his fame is both realistic and insightful.

In this regard, the players’ status as commodities becomes very clear. The commodification of pro sports has provided new athletes with a wealth of opportunities previous generations of players dared not even dream of. Thus, maintaining a “positive” relationship with the powers that be (owners, sportscasters, etc.) becomes an important tool for athletes who want additional incomes from their marketability. In some cases this “positive” attitude has been outgrown by athletes, but for the most part, how they present themselves is how they will be remembered. Unfortunately, for black athletes, a lot is at stake than simply their professional reputation.

Final Thoughts: Who's On Deck? The Future of Baseball Films

Baseball films have a vexed relationship with the “real.” Even when the “magical” occurs in a baseball narrative in films like *Angels in the Outfield* (Dear, 1994), the real baseball world is used as the platform for the unreal. From establishing shots of fans at baseball games to attempts to show the plays on the field with some verisimilitude, baseball movies actively encourage viewers to connect the game with the real world of (professional) play. This relationship with real Major League contests and players adds an important aspect to how baseball films are considered when they depict black heroes. Specifically, the narratives of films like *The Fan* and *Mr. 3000* raise questions of possible allegorical depictions of specific athletes. Although an argument can be made that all baseball films borrow from players in the real world, both of these films make specific allegations about the effect that athletes of color have on the game and nation. As Major League Baseball has faced crises ranging from players’ strikes to alleged use of performance-enhancing drugs in recent years, much attention has been directed at what has caused these crises.

Although Stan is a fictional character, he represents the fear of rebellious athletes in sports culture. The subversive and confrontational behaviors of athletes like Iverson and Bonds become sources of fear because they actively and deliberately challenge the utopian images of baseball and the nation. And since they are successful on the field and in terms of generating revenue for their respective leagues, little can be done to contain them in the real world. In this regard, fictional media images of baseball players like *The*

Fan's Bobby and *Mr. 3000's* Stan become particularly important. These athletes are actively combating the notion that Good succinctly states, "there is more to being a hero than belting home runs. The heroic role requires an active conscience as well as an active bat" (24). Unlike Iverson and Bonds, when presented filmically, Stan and Bobby are presented as containable. The narratives can restore them to their "proper" places ideologically and socially. By adopting the mores of baseball, these are black athletes that, although initially lacking the humility and concern for others desired by mass culture, can be saved or redeemed. Such characterizations bring a new aspect to the baseball films.

Chapter Four: Baseball Comedies and the Melting Pot: Cultural Differences in Multi-Ethnic Teams

Since baseball's invention in the late nineteenth century, the game has been used as symbol of the nation in a variety of ways. From Albert Spaulding's self-proclaimed status as the promoter of baseball as a symbol of the rapidly changing nation in the early twentieth century to the imperialist efforts to use baseball as a site for enculturating international territories, political leaders have utilized baseball to promote the game as a commercial institution and to symbolize the much desired sense of national unity. By the end of the twentieth century, this relationship became even more culturally present as media technology enabled the national identity to be mass produced or at least delivered to the doorsteps of the masses. Essential to the conceptualization of baseball as a nationalist tool is the idea that baseball represents the American Dream of financial success, cultural unity, and individual opportunity.

Historians, sports theorists, and creators of popular culture have widely embraced a simplistic conceptualization of baseball as a microcosm of American society. Specifically, the realities of racial and cultural issues in U.S. culture are rarely presented unless they serve as examples of how the sport has changed the nation. In reality, fictional films offer many insights into the *failures* of baseball culture in regards to social issues. In fictional baseball films, the game works well as a platform through which to understand the complex issues of racial and ethnic diversity in contemporary U.S. culture. These issues are particularly present within the ensemble cast baseball films

because these films focus on pulling together the disparate groups within the U.S. and sometimes globally. One of the most potent and obvious ways in which baseball films comment on socio-cultural tensions in the U.S. is by marginalizing people of color in their narratives. Within this construction, the team still functions the nation; however, it also symbolizes how cultural pluralism needs something to naturalize the “foreign” elements. The naturalization is most commonly of national aliens/foreign-born players who need baseball to help them gain membership in the nation. In this system of depicting baseball, the various members of the team represent the many factions that exist within the nation. In all of these depictions, it is the “outsider” who must relinquish whatever it is that separates him from the mainstream culture. Such teams allow various stereotypes to exist within the film and highlight the importance of baseball as a way to save, unite, and homogenize the nation.

Although teams are essential to baseball films in general, how the team is constructed and the social commentary presented within the narrative shapes the way the team is imagined. In his survey of the development of baseball films, Hal Erickson traces how baseball films have evolved from 1905 to the 2001. He argues that, although there have been changes in the social dynamics reflected in the films, the concept of the baseball team functioning as a unit challenges the rugged individualism that Hollywood has relied upon to drive narratives (6). Several fictional baseball films depict cultural fragmentation within American culture and challenge the myth of meritocracy and the American Dream. The most common area that demonstrates the fragmentation is the creation and maintenance of racial and ethnic minorities as cultural accessories to white

protagonists. Although a few fictional films foreground issues of race within baseball and U.S. culture, these narratives always do two important things: they relegate racial tensions to the past and they locate racist behavior in one character who is eventually punished within the narrative. By simplifying racial conflicts as separate from dominant baseball culture or embodied in a specific character, the systemic origins of racism are ignored and the myth of meritocracy is maintained. The isolation of race onto one character is particularly important in relation to how the baseball narrative form has evolved. In the few narratives that address people of color and their desire to participate in mainstream baseball, these films do not show them as part of an existing system of baseball.³³ As such, fictional baseball set after the Civil Rights Movement invests in the ideology that racial issues have been solved and are no longer relevant in contemporary U.S. culture. That is, until *The Bad News Bears* changed how the team model could be used to articulate social trends.

Before the release of *The Bad News Bears* (Ritchie, 1976), the most typical narrative revolved around the relationship an individual player or fan has with the game. In the pre-*Bears* era, the films use the team as an essential part of the protagonist's life, but do not show it as the site of where personal or cultural transformations are made possible through baseball. Afterwards, on this fictional team, cultural tensions regarding difference and the American Dream is foregrounded within the narrative. Class, race,

³³ For example, *Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars and Motor Kings* (John Badham, 1976) revolves around a team of black players who are denied access to the professional baseball leagues because of segregation laws. Through its exploration of the history of Negro League baseball, the film does not address the culture and tensions present within mainstream baseball.

and social acceptance as represented in individual players on the team are all presented as obstacles that the team can help individuals overcome. If the team represents a microcosm of the nation and baseball represents the idealized culture of the nation, then the introduction of this new team ensemble model reveals an important shift in how the nation and game are all understood. Specifically, the model of the ensemble team becomes a very important site for negotiating major demographic shifts within the nation in terms of racial and ethnic diversity.

After the surprising success of the *Bad News Bears* in 1976, baseball films entered an important resurgence in contemporary culture. Including the two sequels in the years that followed its release and the eventual remake of *Bad News Bears* in 2005, the film marked a significant shift in how baseball, the team, and ultimately the nation are imagined. In the post-*Bad News Bears* baseball film, the team centered narrative revolves around the team's ability to reconcile social issues. Racial differences are presented explicitly, but they are still placed in isolation from the institutions that create this dynamic. Furthermore, these films tend to use diversity as both an obstacle to overcome and a source of stereotype-based humor.

This chapter examines how contemporary team-centered baseball comedies use the ensemble cast to comment upon the tensions regarding racial and ethnic diversity in the U.S. By examining how the team is constructed and imagined in these films, I will explore what happens to the American Dream and the conceptualization of the team as a symbol of the nation when ethnically diverse teams are at the center of the narrative. Although all of these films include racial and ethnic diversity as present with baseball

culture, they also update and reinforce problematic depictions of “others.” Using *The Bad News Bears* (1976) as a point of departure, I connect the construction of a pluralistic team of misfits of the *Major League* trilogy and *Mr. 3000* (Stone, 2004) to demonstrate a new approach to diversity. In the process of examining the representations of the team in these films, I will explore how the American Dream is defined and examined in relation to race and ethnic identity, how these films negotiate the implications of cultural diversity in terms of defining what baseball represents, and how baseball is used to solve larger social problems. As such, baseball is presented as a way to naturalize these outsiders to U.S. culture and to preserve the American Dream in a rapidly changing nation. Since traditionally baseball films revolve around white protagonists and whiteness within baseball culture, the rest of the team is presented as accessories to the white hero. Moreover, very little cultural or personal context is provided within the narrative for these characters; they are simply *different* with stereotypes drawing them out in swift strokes. Although *Mr. 3000* uses many of the same narrative tropes as other baseball films, one important difference is how others are positioned in relation to a black protagonist. Unlike the traditional approach to diversity within baseball films, in *Mr. 3000* diversity is presented on multiple levels—including through the hero’s perspective.

Within ensemble-based films, racial and ethnic diversity is constructed in three ways: narrative inclusion, use of urban settings, and financially-motivated characters. All three of these techniques imply that race issues are no longer present in U.S. culture. Narrative inclusion is the most common approach to “diversifying” the characters presented within the team. In baseball team movies, the athletes of color are marked as

“different” through physical attributes like skin color or cultural signifiers like Latin last names or accents. Of the sixty-one baseball films released since *Bad News Bears*, several have attempted to address the changes that real baseball culture has experienced. Most notably, the concern or crisis in these contemporary films has been the threat of a changing value system that prioritizes financial gain over the imagined spiritual rewards of the game. Although the fear of materialism varies by film, it remains an important theme in baseball films from the 1980s onward.

The use of urban settings within baseball narratives has been present for generations, but how the “urban” world is defined and coded has been greatly redefined in contemporary texts. For example, in films like *The Natural*, the stark contrast is between town and country lifestyles—the country represents wholesome lifestyles and values while the town is a place of corruption and danger. However, in *The Natural* the virtue or danger is presented as stemming from the attributes of the settings which infect the inhabitants. The premise of the film is that individuals are corrupted when they are introduced to environments that no longer uphold proper values.

Unlike the first two ways of representing diversity, when contemporary baseball films present financially-motivated characters, the representation is not commentary on the players specifically but on the larger potential dangers of professional baseball. As such, fiscal interests are presented as the antithesis of what baseball is supposed to be about, and the players who embrace money need to be saved from their inappropriate priorities or punished if they forsake the team for financial gain.

It is important to note that in all three modes of representing difference in the ensemble cast, the characters are all isolated from their native community and, to use Ed Guerrero's concept, held in "protective custody" of white society (237-8). Guerrero argues that one of the methods for containing blackness in 1980s films is the use of a white character who as a mediator for black characters. Held in protective custody, black characters are ultimately used as a source of comic relief that reinforces the presumed cultural, intellectual, and moral significance (and superiority) of white society. Within the ensemble cast baseball film, protective custody is demonstrated through the ways in which characters of color are positioned in relation to the white protagonists. Most commonly, the characters who are presented as deviating from the accepted values of baseball culture are naturalized to the white norms and redeemed within the narrative. In the process of being naturalized, the outsiders lose their status as "others" and assume roles as partial citizens within the team-nation. The construction of the "team" in this manner becomes a way to embrace a limited type of diversity. By depicting people of color without depth, they become accessories highlighting the virtues of white culture.

Patterns of Ensemble-Cast Baseball Films

Of the many patterns at work within baseball films, perhaps the most problematic and persistent is the relegation of people of color to the social and sports margins. Despite the many improvements that have occurred within U.S. society and professional baseball since Jackie Robinson opened the door for people of color to play Major League baseball in 1947, the filmic images of these players have not evolved to mirror these

successes. Of the one hundred-plus fictional baseball films that have been made in the U.S. since 1905, less than a dozen have featured black athletes as the protagonists and none present Latino or Asian protagonists. Within the few fictional films that attempt to address issues of diversity, the tendency is to focus on the issues faced during segregated baseball. In this regard, the marginalization furthers relegating racial conflict or limited opportunities because of race to the past. As part of the desire to believe that racism is a thing of the past and invest in the idea of contemporary U.S. society as color-blind, these texts demonstrate reluctance to address fully racial and ethnic diversity in dominant culture.

One of the most popular approaches to contemporary baseball films has been to create ensemble casts that attempt to capture the “diversity” of personalities present on baseball teams. In terms of conventions, this approach allows the text to showcase more types of characters and, in theory, more racial, ethnic, or cultural diversity. After *Bad News Bears* humorously foregrounded the failures of the American Dream and highlighted the many tensions within U.S. culture through its illustration of the team as a microcosm of the larger society, this approach has been quite popular in contemporary baseball films. Although such approaches to imagining contemporary teams offers many improvements over the previous films, the treatment of characters of color suggests that much more work needs to be done before the ensemble model of diversity effectively reflects the cultural diversity in baseball. It is impractical and naïve to hope that light-hearted films would want to depict social ills seriously; however, it would be better if

these films at the very least presented the people of color and social issues with dignity rather than to continue the legacy of the negative images of diversity in U.S. film.

The patterns within the multi-ethnic baseball film demonstrate how the filmmakers understand as the U.S. a pluralist nation on several levels. First, the “differences” between the various groups are positioned as removable or things that can be remedied through proper induction into American culture. Second, the sources of these differences are also marked as the sources of humor which further marginalizes diverse peoples. And thirdly, the creation of culturally different others also reifies the presumed “normalcy” of whiteness. Given the history of immigration to the U.S., it is highly unlikely that any of the “white” characters are devoid of ethnic difference; however, these traits are minimized because they are presented as more the character’s idiosyncrasies than traits of stemming from his racial or ethnic identity. Of course such constructions of racial and ethnic diversity are both problematic and reductive, but it also indicates how the *core* identity trait of an “American” is imagined as that of a *white* American. By rendering the dominant characters’ race as invisible, the films (and the countless scholars who elide the concept of white racial identity in their discussion of the films) reinforce many of the popular conceptualizations of race within the U.S. These films attempt to solve the race and ethnicity dilemma by naturalizing the “others” which further supports the idea of the U.S. as a cultural melting pot free of diversity. Although the team is presented as a stable unit until the arrival of these “others,” team-centered baseball films suggest that there is always a need to reinforce its hegemonic order.

In their discussion of how baseball films construct an idealized and unified “America,” Robert Rudd and Marshall G. Most argue that:

Consistent with a vision of community that emphasizes tolerance and diversity, baseball films of the 1980s and 1990s are completely devoid of *racial conflict*.

With the exception of those films whose stories are prior to the integration of the game, the communities portrayed in the baseball films of this era are *harmoniously integrated* with black, whites, Asians, and Hispanics, all playing, living and bonding together. (43 emphasis added)

When examining how the team-centered baseball narrative functions in regards to ethnic or racial diversity, three tensions or issues emerge as the dominant mode of address in regards to “others.” The three narrative tensions (all of which revolve around what people of color lack) are verbal language skills, counter-cultural behaviors, and aberrant religious practices. By the end of the respective team-centered films, the players in question have learned how to be more “American,” or more accurately, have relinquished that which has made/marked them as outsiders and have chosen to be part of the team instead of a member of their original community. The three tensions within team-centered narratives exemplify how baseball films comment upon issues of class, race, and gender identity within U.S culture; yet they also demonstrate the ways in which the films occasionally offer untraditional interpretations of the American Dream.

The *Bad News* Baseball Team Model

There are many possible explanations for the box office and critical acclaim of *The Bad News Bears*. Within the narrative, the team is presented as the modern melting pot and is predicated explicitly upon part of the American Dream—bringing the tired, huddled masses together in pursuit of personal success. Matching the general cynicism of the late 1970s in the U.S., the film demonstrates many important cultural shifts. No longer is the world of little league baseball safe and peaceful. The film also deviates from the idyllic images of childhood and suburbs. Rather than depicting the kids as innocent, the team is made up of youth who smoke, curse, fight, and generally protest all forms of adult discipline. One part intolerance and two parts bravado, the *Bad News Bears* is the progenitor of the misfit-filled multicultural team.

Although *The Bad News Bears* places a team as central to the narrative, the film actually revolves around the washed up alcoholic coach, Buttermaker, and how he works through issues in his life by coaching the team. The premise of the film is that based on the actions of an aggressive councilman, the team is formed to allow all kids a chance to play. As such, the players are the leftovers: the uncoordinated, goofy, and essentially unwanted and unwashed. Since the other teams have rejected the future Bears and the other fathers are all busy at work, the only person left to coach the team is the person society does not want: Buttermaker. While the film follows him through his life lessons, it also highlights several characters on the team: the lone girl and star pitcher Amanda, the bad mouth and fisticuff-friendly Tanner, and the mature, rebellious bad boy Kelly. Although a few references exist to the parents who should shape their lives, over all,

these children are left to their own devices. Somehow, despite their status as underdogs, they come together as a team and ultimately make it to the championship game (a traditional symbol of success in baseball films). The Bears lose the game but have fun and play like a team. The second film, *The Bad News Bears: Breaking Training* (Pressman, 1977), revolves around most of the same characters in their pilgrimage from California to Houston, Texas, in order to compete in a contest at the Astrodome. In what will become a formula embraced by many youth baseball movies for decades, it is the sight of this motley crew playing in the huge venue that encourages sentimentality and hope. The final film of the original franchise, *The Bad News Bears Go to Japan* (Berry, 1978), takes the nation-centered team narrative to a little league tournament in Japan and reinforces all of the assumptions about how baseball is uniquely “American.” Collectively, this trilogy serves as a useful way to understand how the ensemble team functions symbolically within baseball films.

Because of the high standards within the community’s little league organization, several young boys have not been selected to play. This exclusion is considered as “un-American” to Councilman Whitewood because he believes all boys should be able to play baseball. As a result, another team is formed to allow Whitewood’s son and the other children who have not been included to find a place in the nation’s pastime. The connection between baseball and the nation is clearly established during the fanfare of the season opening celebration. During the event, Whitewood delivers the opening remarks and embraces baseball as a way to build character and manhood. Set in the suburbs of Southern California, the team consists of various types of kids. This diverse team is

simultaneously a site of mixing and hostility that reflects the larger social shifts of late-1970s culture. As Tanner, the most honest and bigoted player, describes the team when a girl joins their roster, “Jews, spics, niggers, and now a girl?!”

In order for this team of eleven-year-old misfits to function as a unit, each player needs to learn something about baseball and what it means to be part of a team. As a result, each character has a trait that needs to be adjusted in order to become a true member of the team and in order for the team to function successfully on the field. Despite their cultural differences, Tanner is torn by his place on the team. He understands that he is both out numbered by the groups he openly denounces and loyal to protect them from harm brought upon by outsiders. In this regard, the team as nation metaphor is particularly important. As the bigoted Tanner learns to accept those who are willing to become assimilated members of his “team,” the film clearly suggests that one of the attitude adjustments needed in contemporary culture is to recognize the importance of protecting the team/nation. Once the bellicose and always angry Tanner is willing to fight to protect the same people he readily disparages, he has fully embraced the concept of team-first nationalism. It is important to note that this shift occurs simultaneously as the team begins to work together. Once this situation is set up, then, the three narrative tensions operate on a secondary level to teach the same lessons to the other players.

Lost in Translation? Linguistic Assimilation and Cultural Isolation in Baseball Films

One of the most prevalent tropes within contemporary baseball culture is the creation of an internationally-fused baseball team. In this international environment, several assumptions are made about baseball, the role it plays in the world, and how to engage in baseball culture in the U.S. Although each of these areas present potentially problematic constructions of national identity as articulated through the exploration of the U.S versus the rest of the world, the most troublesome division between “American” and internationally-born players is how English language skills are used to denote membership or alienation to the game and the nation writ large. Within team-centered baseball films, the role that language plays takes on several symbolic and narrative forms. From the Spanish spoken by peripheral Latino characters to the hyper-stylized ethno-speak of black characters, the ways in which these stereotyped characters use language serves not only as a way to marginalize them further but also to reinforce their narrative presence as sites of humor. By creating and maintaining athletes of color as simply humorous accessories only present to enhance the white protagonists’ narrative value, the byproduct is the reification of baseball as a site for white American men to find themselves.

Although on the surface *The Bad News Bears* presents a pluralist vision of the U.S., it also problematically constructs the three players who represent racial and ethnic diversity. Miguel and Jose Agilar, two brothers who are not given much contextualization beyond that their father is the gardener for one of the other boys,

represent the “spic” to which Tanner refers. In addition to being introduced to the team via their father’s subordinated role, Jose and Miguel are unable to speak English through most of the film. Like Tanner, Jose and Miguel need to learn how to be part of the team as they improve their on-field performance. In terms of their linguistic diversity, the brothers occasionally speak to each other in Spanish but mostly are silent participants on the team. However, by the end of the film, they have advanced both as players and as “Americans” as demonstrated when they display their new ability to engage in trash-talk in English.

The other character to represent racial diversity in the film is Ahmad Abdul Rahim. The lone black kid on the team and the only black character in the entire film, Ahmad is a complex character. At the beginning of the film, he clearly articulates his desire to emulate his hero Willie Mays. Other than Tanner, Ahmad is the only person on the team who truly seems to believe in the importance of the game. Fiercely competitive, he is both ashamed and dismayed by the Bears’ humiliating loss at the beginning of the season. So distraught about the loss, Ahmad sheds his uniform, climbs a tree in his underwear, and hides from his family and the rest of the community. In an oddly sentimental moment, Buttermaker consoles him and teaches him that the only way to be a loser is by giving up.

Ahmad also becomes a significant character because he is an allusion to the Black Power movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Although Ahmad ignores Tanner’s racist epithets, he challenges the racism he faces from opposing teams. The team finally comes together and has a chance to lash out at the people who look down at them when a fight

breaks out after a base runner aggressively tries to score and tackles Amanda who is covering home plate. During the fracas, Ahmad has an opportunity to respond to the racist player who challenged him earlier in the game. Ahmad joins in the brawl announcing “Here’s what I’m gonna do about it, cracker!” Although this is hardly an emancipatory rejoinder, it is one of the few examples of the racialized or ethnic other actively responding to the marginalization and discrimination he faces. It is important to note that he lashes out not at his team but at the powerful team that has all of the resources the Bears lack and that rejected the kids in the first place. Although Ahmad is not marked as an outsider because of his language, he is presented as a potential victim of the racist language of those around him. Ahmad finally fights back by adopting the standard racist language of dominant culture—a sort of ironic victory since he uses the racist language of U.S. culture to stand up for himself.

In addition to using dialect as a marker of difference, language is also used to ascertain whether a character has successfully integrated into U.S. culture. Through its use of language as a way to “other” non-U.S. born players, *Major League* clearly engages in the mythical discourse of baseball as the great uniter within American culture. One of the most popular baseball comedies from the late 1980s, *Major League* is also a great example of how issues of diversity function within ensemble baseball films. The premise of the film is that the team, the Cleveland Indians, inherits a new owner—former stripper Rachel Phelps—who wants to move the franchise to a more appealing location. Due to legal obligations to the city, the only way she will be let out of the contract and will be able to move the team is if they do not generate enough revenue. Rachel decides to

destroy the team's prospects by assembling a team of misfits and denies them the proper resources to which professional athletes have become accustomed. The team that Rachel creates features several caricatures. The core characters are an aging veteran player who is the team leader Jake Taylor (Tom Berenger) who is found drunk and disheveled in Mexico before he receives the call to return to Cleveland; barely reformed ex-convict and all-around bad boy Rick "Wild Thing" Vaughn (Charlie Sheen) who is in jail when he receives his call to try out for the team and is paroled early to pitch for the team; pretty boy and financially-driven Roger Dorn (Corbin Bernsen); speedy and buffoonish Willie Mays Hayes (Wesley Snipes) who emphasizes style over substance and who focuses on wanting to break the stolen base record; Latino outfielder and slugger Pedro Cerrano (Dennis Haysbert) who has emigrated from Cuba in search of religious freedom, actively practices voodoo, and speaks heavily accented English; Eddie Harris (Chelcie Ross), the aging Christian fundamentalist pitcher, who has a Southern-inflected accent and advocates using any substance possible to improve his pitching. Of these characters, the only one who isn't a caricature of a group or even positioned as belonging to a marginalized group is the protagonist and team leader Jake Taylor. Although ostensibly this is a team-centered narrative, the film only acknowledges the conflicts and interests of the other players as they influence or affect Taylor. As such, the narrative revolves around this aging white player's one last chance to find professional success on the field and resolve his personal issues off the field through his quest to win back his former girlfriend.

While the premise is rather simplistic, the film offers several comments about the many things that threaten the game's success. At the core of the film is a narrative about class—the working-class city and fans, the “average Joe” manager who was selling tires before receiving the job, the protagonist who is not “classy” or educated enough to date a librarian, the nouveau riche show girl owner, and the celebrity status that baseball can bring to a medley of misfits.

The class politics of the film are central to the progress of the team. At several points throughout the narrative, devoted fans comment on the team's progress. Although attendance at games increases as the team finds success against the odds, the core constituents present throughout the narrative represent the true core of baseball and consequently American culture. Four distinct groups encompass this “core”: a group of working-class men at a diner, two construction workers, two Asian men who work on the grounds crew at the ballpark, and the loyal “tribesmen” who sit in the bleachers for every game in stereotypical “Indian” accoutrement. At each narrative turn, these groups offer commentary on the team that reflects how much progress has occurred. From the opening “these guys suck” to rejoicing at the end, these groups represent the types of fans who engage in baseball culture. Of particular importance are the Asian grounds keepers who are denied names, identities, or even a specific national background and are the only non-whites presented in the barometer.

Despite the millions of Asian-American people living in the U.S., the simplistic construction of Asian cultures as homogeneous, consolidated into one identity, or interchangeable is a common depiction in Hollywood cinema. Most commonly

demonstrated in the presentation of characters who speak accented English, the correlation of class and race as depicted in baseball films is important to consider. Much like style of dress and the culturally reflective mannerisms that are used to position characters in terms of race and region, style of speech also indicates education and class levels. Although the montage of working-class fandom serves as a way to reinforce baseball as the working-man's game that is popular in many of the 1980s baseball films, it also highlights class and race issues within baseball culture.

In *Major League*, the two grounds keepers revive a popular way of marginalizing Asian characters. Each time the two workers comment on the quality of the team in their native language. Although they are neither named nor given narrative-influencing roles in the film, they speak in their undefined Asian language and the subtitle translates their comments. When they comment “these guys are shitty”(see figure 4.1) it is supposed to be a funny moment because the weaknesses of the team both transcend national bounds and also add to how various outsiders understand the game. However, this moment also draws upon the idea of not knowing what “they” are saying and the fear of people who speak other languages when in the U.S.—a concept that is increasingly problematic throughout the *Major League* trilogy.

The depiction of the grounds crew is anchored in racist sentiments since the moment would not be humorous if the speakers were not “othered.” The same way that old people or children cursing tend to be used to elicit laughter in films, the humor stems from their Asian background. Arguably, the same effect could be

achieved through the depiction of foreigners cursing in their own language; however, since the film repeatedly positions Asian languages as a site for humor, much more is at work here than simply an acknowledgment of linguistic difference. The racial sentiment present in this



Figure 4.1: Asian grounds keepers at work in *Major League*.

characterization is not because the grounds crew think they team is not very good, but rather through *how* they express their assessment. Much like the other peripheral working-class characters that are seen throughout the film, the Asian characters are “othered” by their language.

Similar to the construction of the grounds crew in *Major League*, *Mr. 3000* also explores the unnaturalness of Asian men in relation to an American baseball team via the characterization of the team’s Japanese pitcher only known as “Fukuda.” Again, language is the way in which Fukuda is ostracized within the team. As discussed in chapter three, the film’s narrative revolves around Stan Ross’s journey to understand the importance of the team and to learn how to become a selfless baseball player. One fellow player is Fukuda who greets Stan by trying to call him an asshole but stumbles through the insult and bewilders Stan. As one of the players explains to Stan after this encounter, Fukuda learned English very well in Japan but never mastered the art of cursing.

Throughout the rest of the film, Stan embarks on teaching the younger players various lessons about how to play the game better and the importance of coming together as a team. Although he teaches everyone something about the game itself, the main

lesson that he teaches Fukuda is how to curse properly. Again, the narrative positions the isolation that foreign men experience as the byproduct of their own cultural deficit.

Hence, not being able to curse properly positions these men as outsiders not because of xenophobia or flagrant racism, but because their language differences prevent them from being one of the guys and properly American. Before Fukuda can be fully integrated into the team, he must learn how to curse in English.

Mr. 3000 also builds upon a long tradition of emasculating Asian men in American films; however, it presents a “cure” for Fukuda’s isolation. Much like Ahmad in *Bad News Bears*, by adopting the accepted traits of an American baseball player, Fukuda can be redeemed. The concept of social redemption of Asian men via baseball is glaringly obvious within the last two movies of the *Major League* trilogy. Of interest here is how these films use subtitles to translate and other the Asian characters. Specifically, these films use subtitles to construct and challenge language differences. In *Major League II* (Ward, 1994), a Japanese player named Isuro Tanaka (known only as “Tanaka” by his teammates) joins the team. From the first scene in which he appears, Tanaka is presented as a fanatical and crazy player. Tanaka speaks very little English and quickly confronts Cerrano because of their religious differences. The narrative explains that after the previous season, Cerrano has gone on a journey to find salvation. In the process, he discovers Buddhism and forsakes this voodoo practices. When Tanaka joins the team, he declares that a true baseball player is a samurai warrior and that Cerrano’s peaceful nature is a threat to the team. Although Tanaka is a passionate player who is

rather skilled, he is presented as a two-dimensional character and barely developed as a character beyond his crazy style of play and language deficiencies.

By the final installment in the trilogy, *Back to the Minors*, the narrative is explicitly racist in its construction of Tanaka's use of language. Specifically, the subtitles openly acknowledge that the content of his statements do not matter and instead make up what he is saying. On one level, the subtitles literally translate what Tanaka says, but the film also plays around with the audience's expectations (see figure 4.2). One example of this occurs during a ritual before Tanaka bats. As seen in figure 4.3, when Tanaka's extreme behavior as a samurai baseball player becomes beyond comprehension, the subtitles resort to stereotypes and mockery by saying "Something about Mt. Fuji... we think." This is an odd moment because instead of the assumed objectivity and omniscience that the subtitles should have, they become personified as American translators and are just as confused by Tanaka's actions as the audience. Although this is a seemingly unimportant shift and an attempt at humor, using subtitles in this manner further others Tanaka and literally presents him as beyond "our" comprehension.



Figure 4.2: Tanaka and Cerrano involved in a ritual in *Back to the Minors*.



Figure 4.3: Random Japanese subtitles in *Back to the Minors*.

Another such example occurs when the team manager Gus and Cerrano visit Tanaka at his amusement park. In this scene, the subtitles randomly include Japanese characters without explanation as in figure 4.3. What is worse is that throughout both movies, English subtitles are used to explain what Tanaka says even though Tanaka speaks English (see figure 4.4). When describing his frustration with his post-baseball life, Tanaka tries to explain to his teammates that he is bored with his life. Instead of developing his character or presenting him as a human being experiencing universal challenges, the narrative emphasis of the scene becomes trying to understand his English. Rather than engage their friend or support him, Gus and Cerrano force him to explain what he means when he says he has “no peace of brain.” Again, humor derives from Tanaka’s lack of communication skills and his inability to master idiomatic expressions in English. Of course the misuse of idiomatic expressions is a challenge for non-native English speakers; however, this is just one more way in which Tanaka is presented as a site for amusement. It does not help that he is dressed in a flamboyant pirate costume that one assumes is part of his role as the owner of the amusement park, but this, too, is complicated by Cerrano (who is traveling with the team on a road trip) being dressed in yet another ethnic costume (see figure 4.4). Again, both men are presented as unnatural within baseball culture and lovable buffoons. The most problematic aspect of this scene is the inclusion of the Japanese subtitles. All three characters are speaking English in this scene, and yet the subtitles highlight that Tanaka is in fact an alien and causes much confusion for Gus. This could be considered a playful experiment with film conventions; however, this explanation ignores the larger context in which the Japanese text occurs.

Every aspect of Tanaka’s nationality—his religion, his culture, and his personality—are presented as humorous and unnatural. Despite his fierce loyalty to the team and his passionate play, he is still constructed in a simplistic manner.

Although xenophobia is one possible explanation for how language is used within these films, such depictions suggest that more than fear of foreigners is at work. In every scene, Tanaka’s characterization

demonstrates stereotypes of the Japanese samurai (see figure 4.5). On one level, it

seems unlikely that simultaneously the *Major League* trilogy would marginalize people of color and offer useful insights about how foreigners are perceived in the U.S. And yet, Tanaka’s character reveals part of the foundation for xenophobic “Speak English” sentiments in U.S. culture. An example of this fear is presented when Rachel degrades the team, and Tanaka smiles at her and openly insults her by saying “May you be mounted by a rabid dog” (see figure 4.6). Rachel, who has no idea what has actually been said, smiles awkwardly and leaves the locker room. Although his ability to speak to her in a directly defiant manner would appear to empower his character, because he is explicitly caricatured throughout the film, the moment is simply reduced to another example of his language difference. On one level, that Tanaka can smile at the corrupt owner and insult her in Japanese at the same time gives him something his teammates lack: a method to express his dislike of how he is treated. However, on another level this



Figure 4.4: Tanaka explains his problems in *Back to the Minors*.

moment engages one of the reasons why non-English speakers are frequently harassed in the U.S. Ultimately, Tanaka gains no power from this moment so his resistance is both contained and limited to those who understand Japanese. Regardless of how successful he is on the field, Tanaka will be an outsider. Unlike Fukuda who can learn to curse and become part of his team, even when his team learns how to work with him, Tanaka is permanently relegated to the margins of baseball culture. By the end of the *Major League* trilogy, Tanaka has become incorporated into the team and is affectionately known as Taka by his teammates. However, despite his assimilation into the team, Tanaka is still presented as crazed and the source of humor.



Figure 4.5: Tanaka prepares for battle in the outfield in *Major League II*.



Figure 4.6: Tanaka insults Rachel in *Major League II*.

Baseball Relativity: Naturalizing the Odd Behaviors of Outsiders

In his description of *Major League*, Good synthesizes the team as made of up “of clods and clowns” (23). After describing characters as juvenile and prissy, he demonstrates how naturalized cultural othering is in the film: “There is rightfielder and voodoo worshiper Pedro Cerrano... who believes he can’t hit a curve ball because his

bats are ‘sick’” (ibid.). Ultimately, Good concludes that the team is composed of “emotionally or morally flawed” players whose on-field performance reflects these personal deficiencies. This summary is important to consider in relation to how cultural difference is imagined in baseball culture. In terms of race and ethnicity, *Major League* does examine how baseball unites people from various backgrounds. Fitting with the larger trajectory of baseball movies, *Major League* invests in baseball as the sport of opportunity regardless of class origins. As within the American Dream baseball film model, the narrative shows how within the game, class ascension is possible. The criminal can be reformed in Vaughn, Taylor can overcome his Peter Pan syndrome, a lucrative life can be achieved through careful financial management as in Dorn’s life, and even the ever-present obstacle (the thing that challenges you the most) can be overcome through perseverance in Pedro Cerrano’s eventual conquering of the curveball. Even the warring groups in society can find learn to live together—the Christian pitcher Eddie Harris and voodoo practicing Cerrano can learn to accept each other; the metal-heads and the preppies who are seen enjoying the team’s success can find common ground. To secure how far the team (and nation) has come by the narrative’s resolution, before they can defeat their nemesis the New York Yankees, each player is shown as reaching his potential. Specific to their position and role on the team, in the final game each of the core characters has a spectacular play to demonstrate how the successful team relies on each of the team members to reach its potential. Although the final game scenario is a common trope within baseball films, *Major League* revives more than just a win for the team for it shows how baseball is a way to naturalize the outsiders in a pluralistic society.

Good discusses the characterization of Cerrano as simply “flawed” because of Cerrano’s belief system not because of a behavior. Demonstrating what Guerrero refers to as cultural isolation, Cerrano represents the problematic construction and discourse of difference in baseball films (237). Unlike his teammates who face the challenge of changing their value system to mirror the American ethos of hard work and team play, Cerrano is presented as inherently flawed within the film because he comes from a belief system that lacks “normal” values. Furthermore, Cerrano’s “otherness” is positioned as a coon whose rituals serve as a source of humor throughout the film. From the tributaries he constructs to improve his hitting to the prayers to and conversations with his bat, Cerrano epitomizes how these films represent the way ethnic others translate baseball to their own cultures. Though these acts are a hyperbolic representation of the superstitions that are quite common within baseball culture (and sports culture more generally), the implication is that people of color engage in crazy, illogical, and unnatural rituals. Unlike the odd superstitions presented in films like *Bull Durham* (for example, one of the main characters wears women’s lingerie and tries to breathe through his eyelids to improve his pitching), Cerrano participates in aggressive practices/rituals like desiring to like sacrifice live chickens in the clubhouse and building altars to their gods—visibly altering the accepted climate and culture of the team’s sanctuary.

Much like how language differences marginalize people of color in these films, the personal *style* of the athletes also marks them as at odds with expected norms. Even in the most socially progressive baseball narratives, these depictions reproduce the historical iconography of race in film. As Donald Bogle argues, the pantheon of images

of black characters in films relies on simplistic constructions of race and gender. While the modes of these representations shift based on cultural changes, the core practice remains unchanged. For instance, the coon character is easily revived as a ready source of comedy regardless of how the film presents a diverse team environment.

From the moment he is introduced in *Major League*, Willie Mays Hayes is a showy athlete who is not to be taken seriously. In essence, Hayes is the coon because of his buffoonish behavior. Hayes's emphasis is on style over substance which is succinctly established when he arrives



Figure 4.7: Hayes arrives at training camp in *Major League II*.

driving a Volkswagen Beetle that has been modified to accommodate the hood of a Rolls Royce (see figure 4.7). Clearly concerned with his image, Hayes becomes the embodiment of what threatens baseball's legacy: the self-serving athlete. Since he is hardly developed enough to pose a real threat, Hayes ultimately serves as an accessory to the lead character's virtues. For Taylor, the values of modesty, humility, and teamwork have been learned but Hayes demonstrates the polar opposite beautifully.

Although far less troubling than the depiction of Cerrano, Hayes also becomes a symbol of how dominant culture fails to understand black culture. As demonstrated in figure 4.7, Hayes actively invests in style as an essential part of his personality. When Hayes earns his first base hit at the beginning of the film, he informs the first baseman on the opposing team that he has purchased one hundred pairs of batting gloves, one for each

base he plans to steal during the season, a feat that has only been done twenty times in the history of the game. The desire to become one of the few athletes who have had such a successful career on the base path is clearly a lofty and admirable goal for a baseball player. However, that Hayes is not someone who needs to be taken seriously is reinforced when he is thrown out because the first baseman tricks him by saying that his shoelaces are untied. Hayes's attention to sartorial displays surpasses his professional obligations. He makes unnecessarily risky plays, dances whenever possible, and dresses in flashy and bright colored clothing to distinguish himself from his teammates. He makes unnecessarily risky plays, dances whenever possible, and dresses in flashy and bright colored clothing to distinguish himself from his teammates. As the team starts to come together later in the film, a montage summarizes each player's increased success.



Figure 4.8: Hayes tracks his success in *Major League*.

For Hayes, this success is demonstrated through the flashy graffiti-styled mural of his name above his bed and the image of several batting gloves nailed to the wall (see figure 4.8).

Religious Others

Baseball in its pure form is purer than today's religion. It is, perhaps, something more tangible to hold on to; something more miraculous.

(Dickerson 152)

Of the three essential tensions within the team centered baseball film, the most poignant and problematic is the construction of religious difference as a threat to the team-nation. Although these films never explicitly position Christianity as the dominant religion of the team, it is assumed to be the traditional religion ... that is, after baseball. Many baseball scholars have compared the sport with religion because it has a belief system and superstitions that all of its true fans understand. In relation to *Field of Dreams*, Thomas Altherr and Roger C. Aden both also explore the “magic” that is at work within the film, especially the game’s ability to transcend time and space. Altherr argues:

Baseball, already rich in its mythic associations, has added a religious appeal. Consciously working in previous folkloristic traditions about baseball, [W.P.] Kinsella has laid on another layer of a new myth, a religious gloss, which [Phil Alden] Robinson has decked out in luscious color, making Iowa glow like heaven. In these fruitful artistic interchanges, baseball has once again proved its mythopoeic qualities, its capacity to engender emotional allegiance in an American audience hungering for sustaining myths for generations to come. (61)

Similarly, Altherr argues that in writing the novel that is the inspiration for *Field of Dreams*, W.P. Kinsella uses recognizable baseball lore and nostalgia to invest the sport with distinct religious overtones (57). For Aden the religious connections within the film fall into three basic symbolic representations: Ray as Noah—both must “build” the vessel that will save their respective communities; the disembodied voice that requires Ray and

Noah to act based on faith, not fact; and the salvation or spiritual rejuvenation that is experienced for all who “believe” in the potential for miracles (225-7). Aden makes several useful points about the role of the disembodied voice that guides Ray’s actions as part of the film’s religious trope. Such discussions of baseball are typical of how religion is habitually connected with baseball. Although the films most associated with the religious aspects of baseball are the much revered canonical baseball films like *Field of Dreams*, religion is also an important cultural marker in the ensemble team films.

While the scholarship on baseball culture in film tends to ignore or minimize race and ethnicity in general, the most blaring and problematic analysis is in regard to how others are characterized religiously. One such example of short-sighted scholarship is Good’s discussion of Latino characters:

The Latino second baseman in *Bull Durham* ritualistically rubs his bat with a chicken-bone cross. ‘Takes the curse off the bat and makes me hits,’ Jose confides to a teammate. We laugh, perhaps, at his superstitions, but later when his girlfriend puts a hex on his glove, he commits three errors in a single game. Similarly, in *Major League*, Cuban-born Pedro Cerrano sets up a voodoo idol named Jo-Boo [sic] near his locker and leaves the ugly wooden gnome offerings of cigars and rum. (31)

Good simply suggests that these images are presented for humor’s sake, but his discussion of the construction of the Latino player as ritualistic and primitive is quite problematic. He continues,

Although meant to be humorous, these incidents still reveal the existence of terrifying primal forces somewhere beyond the margins of the *known world*.

Minor characters like Jose and Pedro generally cause minor mischief by enlisting the forces. A major character like [Roy] Hobbs [from *The Natural*], on the other hand, causes major upheaval. Once he begins to communicate with his gods, he precipitates crises, disrupts established patterns, releases unexpected creative energies. (31-2)

Religion is hardly the main difference between these characters, yet Good only focuses on how the various characters' religious beliefs affect the narrative. It is not surprising that Good simplifies how Jose and Cerrano are depicted as the scholarly discourse on baseball culture is both incomplete and insensitive to how Latino players and other people of color are stigmatized and othered within baseball culture. Good is correct to acknowledge how difference is used as a source of humor within the films. However, it is impossible to examine these representations in isolation; they must be connected to the ideologies from which they derive. It is hard to imagine viewing Cerrano's characterization in *Major League* without recognizing the explicitly racist images; however, his odd behaviors (for example, he takes a teammate's golf club cover because it will make a good "hat for bat" and the demands he makes on the team like a live chicken to sacrifice before the big game) are simply reduced to being an example of baseball's redemptive powers in baseball scholarship. Although the informal baseball discourse suggests that the game is a religion for true fans, an assumed Christian

undercurrent is also present within these films. This assumed religiosity is only visible, however, when a character deviates from the expected invisible religious culture.

In *Major League*, religious deviations are presented through the characters of Cerrano and Harris. Cerrano, who is introduced at the beginning of the film as defecting from Cuba for religious freedom, is instantly othered because of his religious beliefs. Harris is presented as too involved in Christianity



Figure 4.9: Cerrano in his ritual garb in *Major League*.

although it is hardly demonized but rather presented in the form of Harris wanting to pray before a game and a few platitudes about Jesus. This construction of the zealous Christian is contrasted with how Cerrano is presented as being quite different. The film suggests that although neither form of religious devotion is ideal, the controlled and familiar form of fanaticism (i.e., the characterization of Harris) is acceptable but the indecipherable primitive practices of foreigners (i.e., Cerrano's investment in the dangerous voodoo practices) are a threat to the baseball and American status quo. Cerrano's beliefs are met both with curiosity and fear. Harris openly condemns Cerrano's practices and is threatened by the fact that Cerrano has more faith in Jo-Boo than in Jesus Christ. However, even in such explicit conversations about faith, baseball skill is used as the measurement of the god's power. When Cerrano explains that Jo-Boo can help him hit a curveball, Harris asks if he is implying that Jesus cannot hit a curveball. By discussing religious differences in such a light-hearted manner, the film

both accepts and rejects religion through the game itself.³⁴ Although the narrative suggests that religious others can be incorporated into the team's culture, in no way is this assimilation without a price. To join the team, the characters must either forsake their religious beliefs or sublimate them for the greater good—which in this case is the team's chances for victory. In this regard, the melting pot ideology of U.S. culture is particularly resonant: to become an American means erasing whatever marks you as different.

In his discussion of how baseball films have changed by the 1980s, Gary E. Dickerson furthers the simplistic reading of religion in *Major League*. In a comparison between *Bull Durham* and *Major League*, he states:

Another new element in the most recent baseball films... is baseball as a religion *A bit more subtle* reference appears in *Major League*. Pedro Cerrano (Dennis Haysbert) worships a voodoo god named Joboo [sic] who is supposed to remove evil spirits from his bat Finally, Cerrano rejects Joboo and says he will hit the ball without Joboo's help. It is capturing baseball's championship pennant that *rescues* Cerrano, not Joboo and not Christianity. (152, emphasis added)

This brief summary of Cerrano's character demonstrates how racial and cultural differences are understood as flaws that must be remedied. In the film, Cerrano's cultural background is reduced to something from which he needs to be "rescued" and ignores all of the ways that the film marginalizes him because of this difference. Instead, Dickerson

³⁴ Religious deviation has been a fear within both fictitious and real baseball culture for generations. As recently as June, 2007, Latino players and coaches of Major League teams were the subjects of discussion regarding Santeria in professional baseball culture. For a sample of this discussion, see Kevin Baxter's article "Religion Under Wraps."

echoes the film's treatment of Cerrano's beliefs as something devoid of communal ties and cultural history that can be solved or erased via baseball culture. The film explicitly examines how Cerrano's religion inspires fear and concern among teammates, but is eventually accepted because he 1) does not try to convert them; and 2) it has the potential to help the team succeed. Ultimately, the religion is a contained form of difference and does not prevent the team from succeeding.

Both Good and Dickerson attempt to examine how othered characters like Cerrano function with baseball narratives; however, both of their analyses leave much to be desired. My issue with the treatment of difference in these films is that it lacks historical positioning. Specifically, it is not enough to acknowledge in passing that Latino characters are marginalized or disrupt the status quo in these films. By treating difference in isolation (i.e., Cerrano in terms of his religion without at the very least acknowledging the history of pressure to convert people deemed to be religious deviants and the fear of African-based religions in the U.S.) the markers of difference that compound and heighten the oppression of "others" cannot be understood fully.

Harris is the more moderate threat to the accepted forms of whiteness because he is closer to the white norm. As a southern white man, he can still benefit from the privileges whiteness affords him, but he is also simultaneously mocked for his extreme devotion to his Christian practices. Before the first game of the season, Harris requests that the team take a minute to engage in the tradition of saying a group prayer. As Harris argues, "Not all of us are savages like Cerrano." Most of his teammates relent and bow their heads, but they do so begrudgingly. The moment is clearly a reflection of Harris

and his desire to teach his teammates to be God-fearing Christians. The dissenters are Cerrano and Dorn, the materialistic and self-centered player who would rather worry about his investment portfolio than the team's success. While Harris is clearly positioned as religious, he is also depicted as "Southern." This part of his identity is vaguely conveyed in his soft Southern drawl that compliments his presentation as a religious zealot. Like most of the outsiders within this film, little development is given to Harris's cultural background, yet he is still marked as deviating from the expected codes of baseball culture. This characterization is particularly provocative because as Harris becomes more of a part of the team, he stops questioning the so-called deviant voodoo practices of his teammate and even turns to them in hopes of extending his career. By the end of the film, Harris has relented and even warms up in the bullpen with Jobuu by his side. In this regard, the cultural deviance that is presented as a threat to the team-nation is ripe for co-optation and adaptation. By adopting grossly simplified interpretations of voodoo, Harris renders the threat controllable, less threatening, and maybe even useful.

It is important to note that the only people who explore the voodoo practices are the characters who are already marginalized. Willie Mays Hayes considers the power of the rituals when he copies Cerrano and blesses his locker with a snake; Harris eventually brings the Jobuu idol to the bullpen to assist him when he warms up. Although Cerrano ultimately declares during the final game that he no longer needs Jobuu, he has influenced his teammates and they are now trying this foreign religion. Ultimately, the film concludes that Jobuu is not a threat to the team because it helps them win, but its

presence is deliberately positioned as a potential obstacle that non-U.S. players can introduce to the team.

The constructions of religion in *Major League* continue in its two sequels. *Major League II* continues the narrative and features many of the same characters from the first film. By the final installment, *Back to the Minors* (Warren, 1998), race and religion are the only source of humor within the narrative. At the end of the first film, Cerrano has forsaken his investment in voodoo and has even disavowed his loyalty to Jobuu although others accept his voodoo in general. When the second film opens, he arrives at training camp a changed man. Rather than the bare-chested snake-toting Cerrano who instantly intimidates his future teammates with his grimace, the film establishes him as converted. Presented in Buddhist robes (see figure 4.10), the narrative explains that during the off-season Cerrano has traveled around the world and found a new faith. At the very least, his religious beliefs are presented as constantly shifting which is potentially offensive.

Of particular importance in *Major League II* is the introduction of Cerrano's future partner in religious experimentation, Tanaka. Although they are at first presented as opposing forces, the two quickly develop a mutual respect and friendship. At one point early in the film, Tanaka, with the help of his pocket Japanese-English dictionary, tries to teach Cerrano that a baseball player must be a warrior. With the assistance of subtitles and odd gesticulations, Tanaka tells Cerrano that he must forsake his peaceful ways and find his "marbles" if he is to be a successful player. The idea that a baseball team is no place for serenity is useful to consider given the great lengths to which some

scholars have gone to demonstrate the transcendence that baseball can provide players and fans in a rapidly changing society.

Through partaking in several rituals, Tanaka helps Cerrano to find his “marbles” and the team is able to prosper. However, while all of the players have an obstacle to face—Taylor must accept that he is too old to play and must assume a leadership role on the team; Vaughn must return to his bad boy ways and forsake the



Figure 4.10: Cerrano in his Buddhist robes in *Major League* .

trappings of financial success; Hayes must abandon his desire to be a power hitter and instead accept that his role on the team is that of an acrobatic and multi-purpose utility player. However, Cerrano faces a much more troubling and complicated challenge: he must find his manhood and thus return to his angry and aggressive state if he is to be useful to the team. Cerrano is so conflicted by the need to redefine his beliefs that he even adjusts his altar as a way to allow both influences in his life (see figures 4.11 and 4.12). Although he hopes that he will be able to unite multiple religious doctrines in his life, Cerrano ultimately has to tell Jobuu that their relationship must change while he finds his way. On every level, this depiction reinforces these religious tenets as being superficial and Cerrano as a lovable kook who simply wants to succeed as a baseball player.



Figure 4.11: Cerrano introduces Jobuu and Buddha.



Figure 4.12: Cerrano explains to Jobuu that his faith has changed.

When the trilogy resumes in *Back to the Minors*, Tanaka and Cerrano develop an odd homosocial relationship that revolves around their shared status of being religious, linguistic, and cultural outsiders. As they grow closer as friends, their rituals become more complicated and are foregrounded. Each player learns how to be a warrior and to find inner peace through baseball, and yet they remain the source of humor. In several scenes, Tanaka and Cerrano take turns escorting each other to the plate enshrouded in a mysterious hood (see figure 4.15). This ritual is particularly problematic because it is never discussed or explained but instead is simply presented for the audience and the fans within the movie to enjoy. And as such, the ritual is just another crazy thing that the two characters do while it reinforces their status as cultural outsiders. The bizarre and unexplained rituals even bring Tanaka and Cerrano to an activity that is intended to help them become better players by having them clear their minds and imagine the ball. In this scene, Baker (the rookie who represents the future of white baseball) watches the two as they engage in this act of synchronicity and faith. Cerrano sits with a shroud over his head and a cigar in his mouth while Tanaka instructs him to clear his mind and focus on

his objective (see figure 4.16). Tanaka then throws the ball at Cerrano who instinctively catches it just before it reaches his head. When Baker tries to engage in the same training activity, he is knocked to the ground because he is unable to match their level of religious transcendence. Arguably, Baker is presented as a dolt who is clueless about everything; however, when he tries to join his teammates in their pursuit of spiritual clarity, his ability to master the mental exercise adds another level of humor to the ritual. Although religion is presented as having its merits in baseball, only characters of color who need the guidance or faith are in need of such support, with the exception of the Harris who is a moderate outsider as he is both old and Southern.



Figure 4.13: Tanaka challenges Cerrano's Buddhist beliefs in *Major League II*.



Figure 4.14: Cerrano's Buddhist altar in *Major League II*.



Figure 4.15: Tanaka removes Cerrano's shroud before he bats in *Back to the Minors*.



Figure 4.16: Baker watches Tanaka and Cerrano's ritual in *Back to the Minors*.

Although far less central to its narrative, *Bull Durham* also marginalizes the only Latino character Jose by rendering him as only relevant to the white male-centered narrative through his deviant religious practices. During one of the team's crises, several characters are worried about "normal" things like what to buy a teammate for a wedding gift. Jose is worried that his girlfriend has placed a hex on his bat. Unlike his American teammates, Jose's concerns are the supernatural and irrational. As these deviations demonstrate, even the religious differences assumed by "others" in baseball films still reinforce the accepted cultural standards of white masculinity.

Final Thoughts

The dominant discourses of sport culture frequently position sports as the great equalizer—the social, cultural, and ideological force that has the ability to reduce the importance of national borders and cultural difference. However, media constructions of this concept—even when noble in their intent—may be made without racial and cultural sensitivity. Until the release of *Mr. 3000*, people of color were peripheral or hero-enhancing accessories in baseball films. Little effort was made to connect these characters to communities or even acknowledge that there are many ways to engage in baseball culture. Instead, baseball was presented as a way to solve white protagonists' search for individuality, redemption, or success. The ensemble team narrative changed how difference was represented in relation to dominant expectations of what baseball and the nation represented.

By engaging in the ideology of the baseball as a way to achieve the American Dream and unite the nation, the game became a way of achieving the so-called “melting pot” of American society. Despite efforts to present baseball as a way to unite people in an increasingly fragmented and pluralistic nation, the ways in which racial, ethnic, and religious others are treated do little to advance the notion of cultural equality. If the team is a metaphor for the nation, then it seems more than fair to conclude that these teams demonstrate just how difficult it is to access the promised equality when not all characters are represented with respect.

More Images from *Major League*



Figure 4.17: Cerrano's grooming practices.



Figure 4.18: Cerrano steals one of Dorn's golf club covers as a "hat for bat."



Figure 4.19: The oiled up Cerrano lifts weights in the locker room



Figure 4.20: Taylor offers Cerrano fried chicken in lieu of sacrificing a live chicken before the big game

More Images from *Major League II*



Figure 4.21: Tanaka leads the bench in a cheer supporting Cerrano by shaking marbles in bags.



Figure 4.22: Tanaka celebrates the team's victory by jumping into Cerrano's arms.



Figure 4.23: Hayes arrives to spring training in style.



Figure 4.24: Cerrano the Buddhist cares for the pigeon he has hit during an at-bat.

Chapter Five: The Great American Hoodscape: Baseball, the American Dream, and Urban Landscapes

I don't see any American dream; I see an American nightmare.

(Malcolm X).

The American Dream is predicated upon notions of social class ascension and the acquisition of the symbols of middle-class status. As a result of the ideologies of the American Dream, middle-class values, commodities, and lifestyles are presented in popular media as both desirable and attainable to all Americans. These ideologies become particularly dangerous when they condemn both the communities and people for failing to attain the elusive American Dream. Within this value system, the people who attempt to attain all of the trappings of the imagined middle-class reality—home in the suburbs, traditional family structures, etc.—are represented as loyal and hard-working Americans in popular media. And the people who either refuse or fail at achieving these symbols are assumed to be lacking the character that is assumed to be essential to success. Embedded in this system is the proposition that failing to attain physical symbols of success such as suburban home ownership is a sign of a failed character, or worse, an active disavowal of the desired symbol.

On the simplest levels, the American Dream functions as a binary opposition between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” And as such, the expectation is for the suburban landscape to be the desired goal for all people. In the case of the American Dream, the “opposite” becomes symbols of economic failure—under-developed urban

areas, unemployed or under-employed people, and, in general, representations of the underclass. Within the popular imagination, specific social classes are constructed as being more valuable than others without ever explaining why these communities are in their present state. In this imagination of the American Dream is also the notion of the Urban Nightmare—the danger and dread associated with all things within the inner city or urban areas. The binary opposition of the suburb and urban landscapes oversimplifies the constructions of both communities; however, the consequence of creating an urban place of fear and dread is that people of color (the presumed inhabitants of these areas) are relegated to the margins and subjugated within dominant culture.

This chapter examines the ways in which baseball as the American sport becomes a symbolic site to comment upon constructions of domestic landscapes and class structures. Furthermore, this chapter examines how problematic commercial constructions of working-class communities and the urban landscapes in which they inhabit correlate to baseball's American Dream and the nation's larger racial tensions. In order to explore the relationship between baseball, class identity, and race, I will use several recent depictions of the urban landscape in films and commercials to demonstrate how these images complicate the dominant and accepted constructions of the American Dream. Although commercials and films are very different, both media forms are closed texts that used contained narratives to entertain. Within their short narratives, commercials comment on social trends with the specific aim of selling products. Furthermore, when viewed as short films, these sports commercials build upon the treatment of race in baseball films. Given the absence of people of color in substantial

roles in baseball films, these commercials also function as a useful compliment to constructions of racialized athletes.³⁵ The task of analyzing in depth the sports commercial is worthy and would yield telling results; however, my focus is on how baseball as the American game is translated to the urban landscape as commentary on the American Dream.

Baseball and the Hoodscape

Across contemporary media forms, depictions of urban landscapes frequently revolve around images such as run-down buildings and trash-filled streets. In addition, when people are presented in these urban spaces, they are usually people of color. Such imagery is in stark contrast to the traditional images of suburban culture which usually feature well-manicured lawns, spacious homes, and white adults situated within this world. As prevalent as the suburban landscape is in popular culture, so is the image of the urban center. This urban landscape becomes essential to an examination of how race affects depictions of the American Dream. When urban areas are presented, they frequently feature images such as youth playing in the streets, dilapidated buildings, and loud, chaotic streets. These images demonstrate hood-specific iconography that actively draws upon how working-class communities are imagined and reveals several ideologies at work within the creation of this “hoodscape.” The most prevalent ideology in this hoodscape is that the urban landscape is in constant crisis. In films and commercials, this

³⁵ While many different codes and conventions are used within the advertising and film industries, I do not aim to explicate industrial differences, but rather the representational practices of both mediums.

“hoodscape” becomes an urban landscape replete with static and problematic images of inner cities and has been utilized to depict the underclass relegated to these areas.

Although recent films and commercials may reflect stylized elements of real urban culture today, the themes and tensions presented have been a part of the set of symbols used to mark class and racial difference for generations.

In her book *Black Noise*, Tricia Rose examines the ways in which black culture is reproduced and constructed within rap and hip hop videos. Through her discussion of how the ghetto is constructed in hip hop video culture, Rose argues that the places presented as symbols of urban decay were more than just locales selected for the videos; they were frequently tied to the performers’ hometowns and regional origins. What she understands as the “ghetto specificity” (the representation of real urban places that are recognizable to a select group of people) of these videos is very important to consider in relation to how other media forms have attempted to depict urban areas (11-12). In this construction of the ghetto or “the hood,” the urban landscape is a place of identification and a home of real people. Rose argues that these images were used in rap videos to create authenticity of the urban experience; however, the use of the urban landscape in this capacity reduces the communities presented to a series of stereotypes that become the iconography that connotes not just the lack of monetary resources, but the people who live there as well.

Rose argues that “Rappers’ emphasis on posses and neighborhoods has brought the ghetto back into the public consciousness. It satisfies poor young black people’s profound need to have their territories acknowledged, recognized, and celebrated” (11).

Ironically, the urban landscapes that Rose discusses as presenting powerful depictions of the harsh realities of living in urban areas in the 1970s and 1980s were so successful in these videos that they have become the symbols for media makers to use without sensitivity or cultural awareness. The most poignant distortions of the urban landscape have occurred in recent television commercials for sports products. Instead of reflecting urban areas as communities, these commercials use stereotypical iconography to depict urban areas as dirty, decrepit, and devoid of order. A number of these advertisements also emphasize this hoodscape as a veritable playground where young men of color, who lack parental supervision, express their wildness and physicality. The inherently political depictions of people who have pride in their communities despite its state of disrepair have been replaced by carefree, young brown bodies playfully enjoying their adult-free worlds of urban decay.

Since the increased popularity and lucrative crossover of hip hop music into dominant culture in the mid-1990s, the iconography of the hoodscape has transcended its use in music video culture and has become a useful and profitable tool in marketing a variety of products. The most marketable aspect of the hoodscape is the imagined “toughness” of the environment and its denizens. Images of the hoodscape have become particularly useful in selling sports culture as a way to symbolize organic sports culture that is untainted by structure and order. The athletes portrayed in the hoodscape are men of color who, despite their athletic abilities, are presented as lacking proper equipment and safe places to play, so they simply use whatever spaces they can find to engage in sports. This construction of the urban sports playground reinforces two powerful

stereotypes: first, people of color are content to reside in such conditions and lack desire to improve their lives; and second, these communities are the opposite of white, suburban communities.

However, the images of the hoodscape engaged in these commercials lack the very “realness” that Rose examines. Unlike the videos in which artists position themselves in their childhood and adolescent neighborhoods as part of their identity, these commercials strip the community of markers to denote the real inhabitants and instead rely on simplistic images to draw upon existent urban fears. Furthermore, these commercials ask the viewer-consumer to recognize, but not identify, the urban spaces they depict, for recognition of the people or images presented would provide the very humanity that the commercials actively try to erase.

Such constructions of the hoodscape also appear in fictional baseball films, but far less often as these texts are rarely interested in the urban landscape. The hoodscape becomes a way to contain brown bodies and a symbolic representation of the American Dream’s failures. One such example of this construction of the urban hoodscape is how *Hard Ball* (Robbins, 2001) uses baseball and the inner city to reaffirm a crisis of white masculinity. The film’s narrative revolves around Conor O’Neill (Keanu Reeves), a white man who has a gambling problem. His entire life lacks direction until he is forced into coaching a team from the Southside of Chicago. The rest of the film focuses on the lessons the impoverished children can teach him about his life. By the end of the film, the gang violence on the rundown streets of the neighborhood has claimed the life of one of the team’s youngest and most innocent players. *Hard Ball*’s hoodscape is emblematic

of how urban areas are presented as a place of dread and danger; people do not live here voluntarily, but rather they try to survive their lives within the community. Although the film presents baseball as the only positive thing in the children's lives, it also demonstrates that within this imagined hoodscape, even when the dream of a better life is presented, it is not enough to save the kids of color from their fate. However, the game can restore the lost and bewildered white hero's sense of purpose and meaning. Through his time in his symbolic urban prison, Conor finds the self-esteem and direction that makes him a worthy suitor for his love interest. Although the children are left to hope that a better opportunity arises, the film's resolution is that by experiencing how bad things *could be*, white masculinity can be restored.

As demonstrated in *Hard Ball*, the American Dream is not at work within the urban area. Instead, the people of color live in federally subsidized housing and without any sign that they could seek more. The film shows the youth at school, involved in baseball, and in few settings in their community; however, very few adults are involved in their lives. Save for the two litigious mothers who threaten Conor because his irresponsibility, parents are missing from the boys' lives. As a result, baseball is their only salvation and even their participation in the sport is jeopardized by the lack of resources and their ability to get home safely after dark. Because joining a gang is the only other after school activity for the boys, baseball becomes a chance to survive their environment (see figure 5.1).

Early in the film, as two of the players walk home after practice has ended. While joking around and discussing various matters, the boys hear gunshots and freeze. A

moment later, they look at each other and proclaim in unison “nine-millimeter!” and continue on their way home, completely unfazed by the gunfire they have just heard. Oddly enough, in several other scenes, the boys are more concerned about gunfire; however, this short scene establishes the youth as aged beyond their years because they live in such a dangerous world. And yet, they are still young boys who are playful and simply want to be successful athletes.



Figure 5.1: Gang members and burning cars await the boys when they return home from practice in *Hard Ball*.

Although they are far more socially aware than the depictions of white youth in contemporary baseball films, the characterizations of the boys as disenchanting with their worlds is very similar to the team in *Bad News Bears* (Ritchie, 1976). In this regard, *Hard Ball* is particularly conflicted. On one level, baseball provides them with a place where they can act their age and have fewer worries than in the rest of their lives. And on another level, even when on the playing field, the boys are portrayed as sexualized and foul-mouthed as they curse at every possible turn. Contradictions abound in the film and yet it is ultimately the story of how a season of coaching saves Conor from his purposeless life and many addictions.

Inherent in the discourses of the American Dream is the notion of cultural unity and homogeneity—a nation that succeeds because all of its members are honest, hard-working, and committed to achieving material wealth. This is the opposite of how the

black community is presented in *Hard Ball*. On one level, the community members are presented as gang members and mothers trying to protect their children. In contrast to the bleak conditions presented as the reality of living in the hood and their presumed financial status, all of the boys attend Catholic school which suggests that their families are invested in trying to provide their children with a sound education. However, in the end, motherly love is not enough to prevent violence and save all of the children. The errant bullet that kills G-Baby, the team's youngest and most spirited player, completes Conor's transformation into a responsible adult. By the film's resolution, Conor has applied for respectable employment at the Catholic school and has started a romantic relationship with the boys' teacher. However, despite winning the championship game, the boys have not fared as well—one player has been forced into a gang after being kicked off the team for being too young and another boy has died in the senseless violence of the inner city.



Figure 5.2: The playing field in *Hard Ball*.



Figure 5.3: G-Baby is killed moments after he hits the game-winning base hit in *Hard Ball*.

Although *Hard Ball* depicts the hoodscape as a place of dread, the same symbols of this culture are used in other media forms to present the inner cities as a site of desire. Despite the impoverished conditions and the apparent dangers that the inner city supposedly possesses, the hoodscape is frequently imagined as the source for hipness and cool cultural trends. As I will discuss at length later, this desire creates a simplistic way of understanding urban cultures and the people who inhabit these areas. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said demonstrates a way to conceptualize such constructions of binary oppositions. Said argues, “the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (1-2). This conceptualization of the “East” as a place of contrast and deviation from the standard culture is particularly useful to consider in relation to constructions of the hoodscape. Rather than define American urban centers for what they actually have or how they were formed, popular discourses invest in the idea of a cultural wastelands to position the hood as a metaphorical “east” through which to define itself. Through his analysis of the cultural uses of the “East” as a place lacking refinement and high culture found in the “West,” Said examines relational definitions of cultures. He continues “In a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexibility *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand” (7).

It is this positional superiority that becomes especially important when considering how the hoodscape engages dominant discourses of nationhood and the American Dream. One of the byproducts of such cultural positioning and dismissal is a

simplification of the inhabitants of the denizens of these communities. The negativity associated with the urban centers is transferred to the individuals who live there, and since frequently little effort is invested in creating images of the communities which reflect the individuality or local specificity of actual communities, all urban poor (who are usually presented as people of color) are presented as homogeneous and lacking the drive to succeed. Unlike the images of urban areas that Rose discusses, the images in these commercials are presented to reveal the people, practices, and landscape without points of identification in the real world. However, the creation of iconographic symbols of economic disadvantage is not enough to create the “hoodscape.” In order for the values, images, and people of urban centers to have cultural resonance, they must be presented in relation to an “other” or, in this case, the dominant culture. Within the binary opposition of the suburban versus hood landscapes, each cultural sphere needs the other to have meaning and relevance.

Without the lush landscapes of suburban images, the hood would not be a cautionary tale. Within this paradigm, the “hood” becomes representative of both the underclass and people of color who inhabit the area. The symbols of the urban hoodscape are easily recognizable—rundown buildings, graffiti-laden walls, and trash-ridden streets. Regardless of whether the content is presented as cool and hip, as is often the case, the hoodscape becomes a place that is both quarantined and undesirable. While a depiction of urban landscapes that illustrates the lack of resources people face could be understood as a critical look at how the American Dream has failed people of color, the tone and tenor of these representations suggests that life in the hood is great fun. They do

not position the landscape or inhabitants as in need of social attention but rather as athletic bodies that will reinvent the style of play that will eventually be adopted within mass culture. And yet, a sense of desire is associated with the depictions of the hoodscape. The athletic freedom and style that these men of color shamelessly demonstrate is clearly admired and longed for by dominant culture. The freedom from fear and restraint—no adults are present in the fantasy hoodscape, just athletic youth following their bliss—also heightens the contradictions of this binary opposition. Although I do not believe that these commercials are solely responsible for affecting social attitudes regarding the conditions in urban areas, there are political and social repercussions for this construction of the ‘other’ as a child and the urban landscape as a place of fantastic escape. Such constructions reinforce existent attitudes and naturalize notions of the underclass that are prevalent throughout dominant U.S. culture.

Selling the American Dream: Class, Race, and the Hoodscape

Of the many recent advertising campaigns to embrace actively the idea of selling the hoodscape, Gatorade’s “Is It In You?” commercials beautifully demonstrate how the urban landscape and brown bodies are represented as objects for sale and markers of class-based difference. The best example of this theme is the Gatorade’s “Diamonds” (2004) commercial. Set in an undetermined urban area, this commercial focuses on the ways in which kids of color participate in sports. Through a series of images, the style and confidence that these presumably disenfranchised kids possess as they play sports is clearly conveyed. Throughout the commercial, voice over and the use of select phrases

presented as on-screen text position the viewer as an outsider in need of cultural translation. As demonstrated in figures 5.4 and 5.5, in this hoodscape, the baseball and even its equipment are different in the hood. The commercial opens with the statement that “some diamonds are rough” and immediately calls attention to several important cultural dialogues. Most obviously, this expression uses the idea of a raw diamond to suggest that despite the youth playing in the street, talent may exist that could some day be celebrated. The other important referent here is the idea that some neighborhoods are “rough” or dangerous. Is this a “rough” neighborhood? Perhaps it is a “rough” diamond to play stickball, but the commercial is suggesting more than just the challenges of playing sports in this manner. Of course the statement also evokes the stereotype of urban youth dressed in this manner and carrying a stick as a source of danger if removed from the context of playing baseball. Implicit in the commercial is the contention that sports are useful because they provide a “positive” and non-threatening outlet to divert the young men’s physicality.



Figure 5.4: Stickball in Gatorade’s “Diamonds.”



Figure 5.5: Diamonds are rough in Gatorade “Diamonds.”

The most problematic about the depiction of the hoodscape within “Diamonds” is its creation of an urban landscape that lacks places for adolescents of color to play safely. Repeatedly, the images presented comment upon the ways in which the hood provides recreation. In addition to depicting baseball in the street as seen in figures 5.4 and 5.5, the commercial also comments upon basketball and football within the hoodscape. In figure 5.6, a black youth practices slam-dunking a basketball in a shopping cart full of trash. The text to accompany this image speaks volumes for how the hoodscape is imagined: anything is a hoop here. The commercial suggests that the child playing basketball is unfazed by playing in a trash-filled area. The implication is that the players will be able to find success because they had “it” in them all along. This depiction reinforces the conceptualizations that black people “naturally” excel at basketball and that stylized play comes from urban centers. While I am not arguing that basketball is not a popular sport within the black community, I am taking issue with the construction of what that urban space looks like and the suggestion that the community is satisfied with such conditions.

Ideologically, the urban landscape is thus presented as a place where the American Dream was either never present or never sought by its inhabitants. As demonstrated in “Diamonds,” that brown kids are resourceful enough to use shopping carts as basketball hoops and fire hydrants as bases suggests the resilience of the youth and their deep desire to play the games they love. On one level, by resorting to making do with what is available to them, the youth demonstrate ingenuity and creativity. However, also embedded in these images is the presumption that the youth are content in

their surroundings and the belief that as long as the residents have sports, they will be fine. After all, as the tagline for the commercial “Is It In You?” suggests, as long as “it” is in you, then you will be fine. Obviously, for Gatorade the “it” is also the product the company wants consumers to purchase. To compliment this sentiment, the voiceover asserts that “the only thing you need is what’s inside.” These statements clearly suggest that hard work will bring rewards regardless of how un-level the playing field was when you started. In this regard, the American Dream becomes about escaping the urban centers (in this case via participation in sports) and people of color using their bodies in order to escape the conditions in which they live. As much as the elusive images of suburban life are problematic, the construction of brown communities as people and places to be feared is far more dangerous. On every level, “Diamonds” engages the familiar symbols of the hoodscape that have become canonical from trash-strewn streets to shoes on telephone wires.



Figure 5.6: Makeshift basketball in Gatorade’s “Diamonds.”



Figure 5.7: Urban recreation in Gatorade’s “Diamonds.”

Gatorade’s “Street Life” (2005) commercial reiterates the sentiment of the hoodscape being a place of danger yet ripe for physical creativity. Although baseball (or even stickball) is absent from this commercial, it demonstrates explicitly how the urban landscape is imagined as a place of fear and dread. Literally positioned as playing in traffic and destroying the community around them, the athletes in this hoodscape are talented, resourceful, and free to play as they would like. The result of such freedoms is highly stylized and dangerous play as figures 5.8 and 5.9 demonstrate.



Figure 5.8: Playing in the street in Gatorade’s “Street Life.”



Figure 5.9: Stylized play in Gatorade’s “Street Life.”

As in “Diamonds,” the play occurs (presumably) without adult supervision but that is hardly the most problematic of what is presented within the commercial. Set to the 1979 song “Street Life” by Randy Crawford, the narrative echoes the song’s lyrics: “Street life, cause there’s no place I can go. Street life, it’s the only life I know.” Much like the “Diamonds” commercial, “Street Life” suggests that the hoodscape is a place of fear and dread. The urban-inflected voiceover that narrates the commercial informs the audience that “If you’re gonna play out here, you not only have to be tough on the

outside, you're gonna have to be tough on the inside.” To support this statement, the images of the commercial feature young people of color participating in several sports.

Assumptions about the people who inhabit urban areas logically accompany such constructions of the hoodscape. Because the areas are run-down, the logic follows that people do not care about their surroundings—how else do you explain fact a parent would allow their children literally to play with trash? At the very least, such depictions of the hoodscape are problematic and reductive. Not only do they present a world in which brown bodies frolic in the streets, but they also demonstrate that the only commodity men of color have are their athletic capabilities. In this hoodscape, participation in sports is not only recreation, but a way out. Furthermore, such depictions also create a male-centered urban landscape in which women of color are either completely invisible or on the margins of the narratives. As imagined in this commercial, the hoodscape might be a fun place to visit, but is a dreadful place to live.

The criminality of urban and brown youth is an important concept in the construction of sports culture in the hoodscape. The fear of brown youth reappears in many discourses, often coupled with a precarious mixture of both envy and fear. While this commercial clearly presents youth of color as playful, the images presented are directly linked with other dominant images of kids of color, in particular the criminal figure frequently presented in fictional and news media forms. If figure 5.7 was presented in isolation of this commercial, it would not be difficult understand the young men as running from law enforcement officials or other members of their community. Again, like in figures 5.4 and 5.5, these are powerful, strong men who are neutralized by

their participation in athletic contests. They are not “threatening” figures but strong, virile men who can be contained within the sports world. The notion of the criminality found in the hoodscape also extends into depictions of professional athletes.

Although totally different in terms of the narrative and style, Pepsi’s “Shoot the Moon” (2005) commercial also presents brown men engaged in deviant or dangerous athletic activities. Unlike the Gatorade commercials, Pepsi’s “Shoot the Moon” features arguably the two best baseball players today, Alex Rodriguez and Vladimir Guerrero. Although the two athletes are very different, both have been revered for their innate talent and skill as baseball players—commentary that is inherently linked with centuries of racist ideologies centered on the presumed athleticism of people of color.³⁶ “Shoot the Moon” is of interest because of its construction of these athletes as youthful vandals.

Set in what looks like a professional baseball stadium empty and at night, the narrative of this commercial revolves around Rodriguez and Guerrero engaged in a competition to see who can hit the longest homerun. Although the stadium lacks markers to help the viewer identify it, both players are in their real team uniforms which connects both athletes to their identities as Major League Baseball stars. Although voiceover does not narrate the commercial, it is clear that they are competing for a Pepsi which is positioned on a nearby table. Guerrero bats first and hits a long homerun which breaks the windshield of a car in the parking lot, setting off its alarm. Rodriguez bats next and

³⁶ From not allowing athletes of color to occupy “thinking positions” in various sports to explicit discussions of the natural talents that have allowed them to become professional athletes, articulating racist expectations for athletes of color has been prevalent for generations. In both formal and informal discussions of athletes of color, the commentary frequently minimizes the work ethic that has invariably contributed to their status as professional athletes. For further discussion, see John Hoberman’s *Darwin’s Athletes* and Dave Zirin’s *What’s My Name Fool*.

hits a homerun that shatters the streetlight in the parking lot. At his next at bat, Guerrero's homerun hits the moon. When the moon shatters, both players look at each other like two kids who have just broken a neighbor's window (see figure 5.10). Rodriguez says "Run!"—which is the only dialogue in the commercial—and they flee the scene. Before the commercial ends, Rodriguez returns for the soda and then runs away. Although the commercial seems to represent the two players as youthful, talented athletes, they are also imagined as vandals. Literally emerging from the shadows and brandishing their bats as weapons, the players are simultaneously dangerous and child-like. While they are talented and can readily demonstrate their skills, their competition evokes the play of children who compete for small tokens or bragging rights.

The idea of the modern athlete as vainglorious speaks to larger trends within contemporary sports culture. What is the commercial suggesting by presenting two of the most talented and best paid players in such a competition? And what does it say about how athletes of color are imagined if two of the most successful baseball players are presented as child-like? At the very least, that their drive and talents have pushed them too far (that is, they have literally destroyed the moon) and they know that they should run when the moon shatters further confirms the narrative's portrayal of the players as childlike. Although the commercial does not explicate how the athletes gained entry into the stadium, the assumption is that they are there unlawfully based how quickly they retreat.

Many aspects of this commercial comment upon racial politics within baseball culture. Of particular importance is the music chosen to accompany the competition. Throughout the commercial, Flamenco-influenced music highlights the players' competition. The inclusion of Spanish-inflected music adds another



Figure 5.10: Guerrero and Rodriguez before they flee in Pepsi's "Shoot the Moon."

important aspect worth consideration. The commercial is highlighting the "Latinness" of Guerrero and Rodriguez. Both of these players are Latino, though their cultural and ethnic differences demonstrate the diversity within the Latino community. The players embody the challenge of defining "Latin" heritage, a subject that has been of some debate within the baseball community in recent years.³⁷ Rodriguez, who was born in New York City and is of Dominican descent, was raised in New York, the Dominican Republic, and Miami. In addition to being the highest paid player to date, even though he is still in the prime of his career, Rodriguez has been revered as a future Hall of Fame inductee and possibly the best player ever. Guerrero, also of Dominican descent, receives far less

³⁷ The creation of a Major League Baseball-sponsored Latino Legends programs brought the issue of Latino culture to the foreground in 2005. From whether specific players like Ted Williams formerly of the Boston Red Sox should be considered in the Legends group to how to classify the American-born players of Latin descent for things like the World Baseball Classic in 2006, players' Latino heritage has become especially important of late.

media attention than Rodriguez, but is also clearly positioned as one of the greatest all-around baseball players ever.³⁸

Although this commercial is not set in an urban center and is set in a professional sports stadium, its narrative evokes the same ideas of the brown kids playing in the street. According to the commercial, Rodriguez and Guerrero are like the neighborhood kids—they have plenty of talent and can get into trouble when left to their own devices. Despite their many accomplishments, these are still two players from the barrio.

Poor People of the World Unite: Baseball and the Global Hoodscape

Much like the “Shoot the Moon” commercial references the global reach and international appeal of professional baseball, Gatorade’s “Sport is Sport” (2004) also engages the hoodscape as the place in which brown bodies master their respective sports. Although this commercial focuses on brown youth playing many sports, the theme of innate talent despite circumstances and the value that one should make the best of his environment echoes the same sentiments presented in dominant discussions of the hood, kids of color, and the American Dream. The foundation of this commercial is quite simple: sports are the great global equalizers and can unite people despite their cultural, racial, and social differences. The narrative revolves around young men (with the exception of two quick shots of track runners and swimmers, all of the participants in this

³⁸ The pair also highlights the complexity of defining racial identity as defined by physical attributes such as skin color and hair texture. Traditionally, Guerrero would be considered as “black” and Rodriguez as “Latino.” However, both men are Latino ethnically and culturally.

commercial are male) engaging in several sports. The voiceover is particularly illuminating in terms of the ideologies at work:

Sport is Sport. A foul's a foul. A dunk's a dunk. Ten feet on the west side is ten feet on the east side. An out's an out, no doubt about that. And a bat's a bat, even if it's flat. Football is football, unless it's foot-ball. Where the game's the same wherever it's at. Now, a win's a win. A loss is a loss. But no matter what, you better come with it. Or don't come at all. Because it's 90-feet to first, no matter where home is.

On one level, the narrative suggests that sports have the ability to connect the world and help people of diverse backgrounds to find a common language. However, the visuals of the commercial tell a different story. Although the commercial depicts organized sports and informal sports, the presentation of sports around the world revolves around kids of color playing on dirt fields with inadequate materials. As the voiceover suggests, that these sports are identifiable as baseball, basketball, and soccer, but the extreme difference between the resources available highlights the disadvantages of these developing nations. As both figures 5.11 and 5.12 demonstrate, even if “sport is sport,” that brown children happily play soccer bare-footed in the street engages many discourses of class and social disenfranchisement. The image of two children clutching a trophy made of tin foil (see figure 5.11) presents the same sentiments as Gatorade's “Diamonds” commercial—despite their circumstances, sports enables these youth to feel pride and joy. While they are not slam-dunking a basketball into a shopping cart, they are making do and finding joy in their participation in sports. Although the possibility of being able to transcend the

bounds of their socio-economic class via sports is another way to understand these images, these commercials rely more on how sports can bring joy to the lives of poor people more than it invests in the financial opportunities of professional play.

Without sports to contextualize these urban figures, they would evoke very different responses. If removed from the context of sports, these images (see figures 5.11 and 5.16) would have different meanings and suggests that sports become a very powerful and important way to control the bodies of men of color. The threat of black masculinity is neutralized because the men are safely contained both in the hoodscape and in the world of sports. The close-up of Guerrero (figure 5.11) could easily be used to connote danger or aggression.



Figure 5.11: Close-up of Guerrero in Pepsi's "Shoot the Moon."



Figure 5.12: Gatorade's "Street Life."

It is, of course, problematic that the hoodscape is only marketable when sports culture and products are for sale. In fact, this is perhaps the most dangerous aspect of these texts. Rather than creating images of real people or communities, these texts reaffirm the marginalization that people of color experience in dominant culture by

highlighting that they only matter if they can bring entertainment and revenue into the corporate system as either athletic or musical performers. While popular discourses may suggest that youth of color and their adult counterparts embrace these facts as a reality, one would be remiss not to see that people will take what they are given if they are only given one way to access the American Dream.

Another compelling aspect of this commercial is its use of professional or organized sports as well as play of kids in developing nations. From shots of football star Peyton Manning to basketball star Vince Carter playing in their respective venues, this commercial explicitly addresses the way sports are played within the U.S. And this is precisely the goal of the commercial: to demonstrate the ways in which sport culture exists around the world.



Figure 5.13: Barefoot soccer in Gatorade's "Sport is Sport."



Figure 5.14: The tinfoil trophy from Gatorade's "Sport is Sport."

However, the depiction of sports outside the U.S. is quite problematic. The bias of the commercial shows through the way it positions non-U.S. sport culture. Despite

soccer being the sport that unites most of the world in its several lucrative professional franchises, the only images of soccer players are of poor, urban kids playing half-naked and barefoot in the street. Internationally recognized figures like white English soccer player David Beckham, for example, are not used as the references for soccer but native children happily enjoying the game despite their lack of the resources that would allow them to enjoy the game safely. Of course Gatorade may have many reasons not to choose figures such as Beckham (most obviously the cost of including more high-priced athletes), but more is at work here than simply a desire to reduce the cost of the commercial. Ultimately, the commercial is reifying the idea that while sports are important around the world, some parts of the world have not fully developed.



Figure 5.15: Bare-chested youth in Gatorade’s “Sport is Sport.”



Figure 5.16: Soccer in the street in Gatorade’s “Sport is Sport”

“Sport is Sport” is hardly the first commercial or media text to suggest that sports culture can unite the world; however, that this commercial explicitly addresses the role of sports in developing nations asks the viewer to accept these communities as both lacking resources and satisfied with their social realities. That the “others” presented lack

national or cultural markers to give them a definitive identity further complicates this construction of developing nations.³⁹ Other than being presented as people of color, little information is provided to ascertain the larger social contexts for the images. This simplification of the idea of “others” illustrates Edward Said’s observations of the investment in creating both positional superiority and binary oppositions of the haves and have-nots. As figure 5.15 demonstrates, the distance between the game in the street and the stadiums where professional teams play is quite great, but the youth are simply happy to play the game they love.

Final Thoughts

Since the mid 1990s, many cultural shifts have occurred to increase the visibility of urban culture within dominant media forms. The mainstream popularity of hip hop has increased the marketability of the styles and trends from urban centers. Despite the move to accept trends, dominant media forms still marginalize these cultures. In this regard, the depiction of sports in the hoodscape illuminates many tensions within contemporary U.S. culture. While hip hop culture has popularized fashion styles previously only accepted in urban areas, it is important to note the ways in which the people conveying these styles are portrayed in the images of the hoodscape. Rather than demonstrating the ways in which these communities influence cultural trends, these

³⁹ The one exception to the generic portrayal of people of color is the presence of two Chinese boys playing basketball. They are presented as playing on a court in an undetermined urban center to represent the “East side” of the narrative; however, they are still present to denote their difference from players in the U.S. Again, like the characterization of Tanaka in the *Major League* films, the use of foreign language is used to mark the boys as outsiders. In this case, it is the use of Chinese characters on the wall of the court that either marks the neighborhood as being in the “East.”

commercials illustrate how contained these communities are. Nothing is liberating or empowering about the images of bare-chested young men playing in the street. The very fact that these physically powerful men of color wearing baseball hats backwards are presented only as athletes demonstrates how very limited the images are.

The creation of iconographic symbols of economic disadvantage is not enough, however, to create the “hoodscape.” In order for the values, images, and people of urban centers to have cultural resonance, they must be presented in relation to an “other” or, in this case, the dominant culture. Within the binary opposition of the suburban versus hood landscapes, each cultural sphere needs the other to have meaning and relevance. Without the lush landscapes of suburban images in the canonical sports texts, the hood would not be an evocative tale. Much like welfare discourses that over-represent recipients as people of color, the imagery used in creating and maintaining the hoodscape relies upon this same imagination. However, such constructions are imagined, the fact remains that there are consequences for such depictions. Although many manifestations of the hoodscape ideologies appear in media texts, understanding these tropes as a way to comment upon the American Dream reveal just how color-coded social mobility and class ascension are in the popular imagination. As these media texts demonstrate, the hoodscape is quite prevalent in contemporary culture, and its intersection with sports culture is as natural as the images of idealized America suburbia.

Chapter Six: Conclusion: Shifting Meanings of the National Game

If film is a mirror of society, and it is, then baseball films reflect a society that is confused, evasive, perhaps even dishonest in dealing with racial issues. On the most obvious level, the films are about democracy, about teamwork and sportsmanship, about the moral rightness of giving everyone a chance to play the American game . . . But on another level, the unintentional or semiconscious, the films are about the dark continent of the Negro leagues, about paternalism, about lifting up the white man's burden. (Good 151)

Baseball is more than just a game. Beyond attempts to use the sport as a metaphor or symbol for all aspects of U.S. culture and abstract concepts like rugged individualism, baseball has become a set of symbols and values that functions as an ideological platform for commentary on a variety of social issues in U.S. culture. Although baseball has been used as a narrative device and ideological platform across media forms, Hollywood films have actively engaged the notion of baseball as an essential aspect of U.S. national identity. Baseball films are grounded in ideologies of Americana, nostalgia, and nationalism while also encouraging fantasy and escape. And as such, the myths created in these fictional texts offer an excellent way to understand the hegemony of a single, unified American identity while simultaneously demonstrating the perceived threats to this identity. Within this construction of baseball, the American Dream is presented as intrinsically linked to the game and its culture. While each media

form utilizes specific codes and narrative tropes, they all invest in the basic baseball mythologies which promise the acquisition of citizenship, spiritual renewal, and middle-class status through participation in baseball culture.

Throughout the twentieth century, baseball films attempted to demonstrate the connection between the sport and changes in U.S. landscapes and culture. Despite the many social advances in the second half of the twentieth century and the increased accessibility for people of color to participate in professional baseball on all levels, baseball films have yet to remove these characters of color from the margins of baseball storytelling. Instead, these characters are repeatedly reminded that they are second-class citizens whose function is only as accessories to white leads. Even when they are the record-setting slugger or base-stealer, their story remains untold, incomplete, or relevant only when connected with the white hero.

As baseball films have evolved over the past century, their narratives have attempted to address the social tensions that exist in the real world. Whether trying to position baseball in relation to the Civil Rights Movement that sought equal access to the American Dream or the passionate resilience of Latino athletes, baseball films repeatedly attempt to represent how the inclusion of people of color affects the construction of whiteness and conceptualization of the U.S. as a nation. By acculturating people of color through their participation in baseball culture, baseball films modernize the ideologies of the American Dream that have existed for over two hundred years.

Unlike their filmic counterparts, sports commercials explicitly use baseball to sell images of the American Dream. In recent years, advancements in technology have

facilitated the process of marketing American sports culture and merchandise globally. Despite the desire to maximize profits by promoting American sports around the world, the images created to promote the global sportscape consistently position “others” within a hierarchy of nations based on economic wealth. Advertisements featuring impoverished youth playing baseball, soccer, and basketball around the world function to reify the idea that America is the land of opportunity. Instilling the virtues of “play” as a way to better the individual and society as a whole, these commercials present sports as a vehicle through which to achieve the American Dream. Although advertisements offer an informative look at how baseball is understood, because of their length and separation from the actual game being played, not enough scholarly attention connects these constructions with the sports ideologies of U.S. supremacy and foreign inferiority as demonstrated in baseball films. Much like fictional baseball films, these texts also reflect the ideological current of the moment and demonstrate the tensions and fears baseball represented at that specific cultural moment. As demonstrated in *Mr. 3000*, an essential aspect of baseball celebrity is a star’s ability to generate high-paying endorsement deals. The reciprocal relationship between on-field performance and commercial viability becomes a useful way to assess how the athlete is perceived. In this regard, commercials both echo and create the tensions in baseball culture through their depictions of the sport and its superstars.

Project Overview

Given the many volumes that have been written on every aspect of the game, the prospect of finding something new to say about baseball culture is a seemingly difficult task. And yet, when considering the ways in which baseball scholars have ignored or minimized racial and ethnic difference within these representations and presumed the whiteness of the game, it is essential to reexamine the way the game is imagined in U.S. culture. As this project has demonstrated, contemporary fictional and commercial representations of baseball demonstrate that the construction of baseball as a site of production for the American Dream and national identity is both unstable and rapidly changing. The role of the nation remains particularly important as efforts to globalize baseball coincide with efforts to redefine the game as “American.”

The traditionally idyllic construction of baseball as a site of opportunity that is untainted by oppressive conditions because of its virtuous connection with the values of the American Dream—equal opportunity, fair play, a level playing field on which anyone can achieve greatness—no longer works when considered in the light of the many intense challenges that people of color faced trying to gain access to these rewards. As demonstrated throughout this project, baseball films and commercials actively represent the sport as both a literal and symbolic playground for white men. The fictional baseball field becomes the space where they can define themselves and reconfigure who they are outside the stadium. Outside of these films in the “real world,” these men are flawed, mortal, and loved conditionally. However, as players on the field, they can achieve immortality, earn the love and adoration of countless masses, and find a community

bigger than they are. Women love them despite their flaws; young children aspire to be them; countless fans line up to for them to scribble their name on anything available. This mediated dreamscape of baseball provides white men with solutions for the problems and challenges they face as men in the modern industrialized world. In this regard, baseball becomes a platform, a system of beliefs, and a dreamscape where these white men can safely negotiate what it means to be a man today. As I have argued throughout this project, the depictions of white people and people of color in these texts reinforce the ideology that participation in sports can redeem the seemingly innate flaws of outsiders and deviants.

In chapter two, I examined how *Field of Dreams* and *The Natural* represent the dominant portrayals of baseball in contemporary films. These films demonstrate the elemental aspects of the baseball films of the modern era. The recurrent depiction of the American Dream as a singular, unified “Dream” that is unaffected by race is particularly problematic considering how baseball films ignore the ways in which many cultural backgrounds influence how it is lived. Even when the disparity of access to the “dream” is acknowledged in popular discourses, little attention is given to the fact that not *everyone* has had access to this dream. Or rather, that the dream has been both color-coded and color-defined throughout U.S. history. To imagine the American Dream to be equally accessible to everyone is both simplistic and historically inaccurate, and yet, the American Dream has had an important role in the communities of oppressed peoples.

There are many implications for defining baseball as white and connected to an unrealistically simple agricultural past. One repercussion of defining baseball in this

manner is the relegation of diversity to the footnotes of baseball history and culture. Although baseball films are not intended to reflect the history of the game, when examining the canonical films, it is impossible to ignore the ways in which the sport is used to retell the national history and define the game as essential to white American identity. However, as chapter three demonstrates, when the protagonist is a person of color, the mythologies of baseball culture are complicated and offer insight into how various communities understand the game. While the images and narratives in these films vary from the canonical films, the convergence of race and baseball suggests that many more stories about the game need to be told. Furthermore, as the discussion of *Mr. 3000* demonstrates, the similarities between the traditional white characters in baseball films and the black baseball hero do not elide how characters like Stan Ross are still inflected by a racist history. As such, how baseball functions as a way to change the undesirable traits in the character needs to be examined in relation to the history of racist depictions of black masculinity in U.S. film.

Similar to the ways in which racialized heroes challenge the canonical constructions of baseball, the narratives focusing on the multi-ethnic team reveal how the melting pot mythology of the American Dream are complicated when diverse groups are united on one team. The films focusing on multi-ethnic teams offer perhaps the most poignant commentary on how baseball functions as an ideological platform in contemporary U.S. culture. As I examine in chapter four, when the American mosaic is presented in these films, people of color are over-simplified or reduced to stereotypes. This construction of diversity isolates characters who lack national or cultural affinities

and presents them as contained within baseball culture because of their difference. With these depictions in mind, baseball becomes an important cultural and social mechanism as it provides a seemingly innocent way to naturalize people who would otherwise be outsiders within U.S. culture. Inherent in discourses of the American Dream is the notion that when people of various backgrounds erase their difference, they can achieve financial status and personal freedom in the U.S. Although baseball films offer a palatable form of naturalization and acculturation—after all, access is granted to any character who embraces the dominant ethos of selflessness in the name of the team—such constructions of difference have a troubled history in the U.S. The idea that the U.S. had the ability to bring “civilization” to the unlearned masses fueled nineteenth-century international policies and agendas. It is difficult to examine the xenophobic depictions of international players without considering the history of adversity immigrants have faced in the process of trying to become “Americans.”

The containment of “others” reappears throughout sports culture. At first glance, sports commercials imply that people of color play a prominent role in defining the standards of athletic achievement. However, as I have demonstrated, upon closer inspection, despite the visual inclusion of brown bodies, the spaces in which people of color frequently occupy within sports culture demonstrate that little has changed in these depictions of athletes of color. In fact, the images reinforce age-old racist ideologies that position non-Western and non-white peoples as inferior in cultural and social development. Rather than showing the ways in which sports are played on a *variety* of levels around the world, these texts rely upon images of impoverished brown bodies

participating in grassroots sports culture. This commercial sports climate suggests that through participation in sports, people of color can engage in dominant cultural values and therefore become part of the nation. Thus, the depictions of marginalized athletes of color suggest that the relationship between race and national identity is still largely unresolved. Although I have only explored the extreme poverty that is associated with athletes of color in sports commercials, it is important to note that extreme wealth is also presented in advertisements depicting professional athletes of color. The problem remains that sports advertising only invests in these extremes and ignores the millions of people in the middle.

Although a few scholars have attempted to negotiate how racial difference is imagined in baseball films, much more is needed in regards to baseball and race. Unlike the discourses of race and sport that focus on boxing, basketball, and to a lesser degree football, baseball has been ignored by critical race scholars who focus on sport. Other than the references discussed throughout this project, baseball is understood as most relevant to the Civil Rights Movement that led to Jackie Robinson's famed role in integrating the professional leagues or contemporary issues of uniting teams from many backgrounds. The many stories between the 1947 integration of MLB and present realities are left untold or oversimplified. And as such, the discussion of race in baseball films is often short-sighted. Rather than fully positioning the marginalization of people of color within these films, scholars note the ways in which "difference" appears and occasionally suggest that these depictions are problematic. For example, Robert Rudd and Marshall G. Most argue that:

The idea that baseball might serve as a site for the integration of peoples of diverse backgrounds into a common community has long been a central theme of baseball's ideology.... In an era increasingly marked by conflict and tensions between cultures and ideologies, the baseball films of the 1980s and 1990s offered a vision of cultural harmony. But, most significantly, the idealized communities they portray are not communities in which everyone is the same, but rather are *communities in which people who are different from one another come together to form bonds of acceptance, caring and friendship.* (43 emphasis added)

These depictions are far more telling than the scholarship suggests. While films like the *Major League* trilogy hardly present racial conflict, they certainly demonstrate the intolerance and fear that is associated with bringing disparate groups together on the playing field. Another example is William Simons's discussion about how baseball mediates the potential conflicts of living in a diverse world. He elides the implications for the characterizations of people of color in *Major League* by simply concluding that baseball allows a crew of misfits in "discover a collective identity that transforms them into winners" (196). Rudd and Most and Simons do not directly state that the "difference" in these films are a threat to American culture; however, they inadvertently demonstrate how diversity must be neutralized if the victory is to be achieved. Rather than discussing what these films reveal about how racial difference is experienced in contemporary American culture, they focus on the "harmony" that can be achieved through teamwork. Ultimately, I agree with their assessment of how these films treat diversity, but I take issue with the failure to acknowledge what such characterizations of

diversity reveal about racism, and how they compound the marginalization experienced by oppressed peoples.

The conflicted relationship between sports culture and diversity reveals a double bind of sorts. On one level, sports culture embraces the idea of people of color excelling in a variety of sports. However, this success is not without a cost. Because the success of athletes of color potentially threatens white dominance as it is imagined in baseball films, the narratives need to contain the power that it attributes to these peoples. And on another level, the success of athletes of color engages discourses of fear that can be traced throughout modern history. As I discuss in chapter five, the fear and desire of the “other” is prevalent in sports as demonstrated in the depiction of the stylized play of people of color in the hoodscape. The creation of an urban hoodscape becomes a useful way to convey the conflicted space that men of color maintain in sports culture. A place of decay and under-developed, urban areas are repeatedly deployed as a site of danger and the source of innovation within sports.

As the discussion of the Gatorade’s “Sport is Sport” commercial demonstrates, sport is imagined as a way to escape undesirable environments. The depictions of youth around the world participating in sports regardless of their economic resources reinforce the ideology that character is defined by one’s actions, not one’s origins. Such an oversimplified construction of sports in a globalized context is particularly telling as it reveals how racial and national identity are commodified. The under-development and poverty of formerly colonial nation-states are exploited in an effort to sell a product (in this case Gatorade). Predicated upon the idea that sport unites people regardless of race,

creed, or national background, the campaign also simultaneously highlights the ways in which developing nations are positioned as lacking the resources of “civilized” nations. In both the voiceover and the visual images present within this commercial, the positioning of the U.S. as superior to under-developed nations is hard to ignore. From images of shoeless children happily playing soccer in the street to the narrator explaining that regardless of whether people can afford to buy the proper materials to participate safely in sports, the premise is that sports culture unites people around the world. Although there are several prevalent patterns in how baseball culture defines and presents diversity, these portrayals are unstable and vary based on which aspect of U.S. culture is being presented. These contradictions within the media constructions of the American Dream and baseball reveal how the game functions as a platform to comment upon a wide array of social issues.

Implications for Future Research

Of the sixty baseball films made since the *Bad News Bears* introduced the diverse team model in 1976, only a handful even attempt to foreground athletes of color as central figures or protagonists. Similarly, only a few depict the impact of international players in the sport. As the number of regions where baseball is played has increased, so have the various nations’ ability to introduce successful players into professional play in the U.S. Major League Baseball now includes players from several countries that are not traditionally considered to be part of the baseball community. Despite the prominence of athletes from multiple nations within professional baseball, mainstream media culture has

not adjusted the depictions to reflect the reality of global diversity within the sport. In the most recent fictional baseball films, national origin and racial group membership determine how athletes of color are portrayed. Within these texts, baseball is imagined as American and mostly white. When people of color are presented, they are depicted as secondary to the essential aspects of baseball culture or in need of the many lessons baseball can offer them.

While I have chosen to examine baseball's role in U.S. history and culture, many analogies and comparisons can be made between baseball and other sports, especially in terms of the treatment of race and gender. It is my hope that this project illuminates significant ways to think about baseball in relation to other sports and cultural forms more broadly. And furthermore, that baseball scholarship begins to address the implications for the stereotypical and marginalized depictions of diversity within these oft-studied texts. Diversity in baseball films needs to be more than just stories about integration and Jackie Robinson. If baseball is a representation of American life, then the filmic representations of the game should reflect the many stories of overcoming social ills that have occurred throughout the history of the game.

Beyond the many problematic depictions of diversity are the stories left untold. These absences reveal as much about baseball media culture as the simplistic and stereotypical images of people of color. Where are the fictional films about the legendary play and humanitarian work of Puerto Rican Roberto Clemente who embodied the essence of the American Dream during his career from 1955 to 1972? And where are the films that highlight the extreme fanship that Latino players like Mexican Fernando

Valenzuela inspired within the U.S. and Latin America in the 1980s? One possible explanation for the absence of narratives on either of these players is that there is not a market for such texts in the U.S. Another explanation is the investment of U.S. mass media outlets to safeguard baseball as something for white America. With this logic in mind, people of color can participate in baseball culture and consume baseball products, but the national myth of baseball as primarily an American game relies upon the myth that the game is not loved or played anywhere else, or at least not with the same skill.

In the evolving geo-political climate, the ways in which baseball is understood as a tool for national identity development in contemporary U.S. films and commercials has changed a great deal. But how have baseball films and commercials adapted to the changing demographics of sports culture? If the so-called “Latinization” of baseball has changed the way the game is played around the world, why are the representations of baseball culture in fictional films and commercials so insistent upon relegating characters of Latin descent to stereotypical depictions? What will it take for baseball to become an egalitarian institution in fictional depictions? All of these questions highlight how the American Dream and U.S. national identity are explored within dominant constructions of baseball. Furthermore, given the many social advancements in terms of race relations and cultural opportunities for people of color within the U.S., the ideological aims and social role baseball plays in U.S. society have necessarily changed. But where is the scholarship addressing these important shifts? And more importantly, scholarship exploring Hollywood filmmakers’ apparent commitment to maintaining baseball films as a site for white male heroics and brown male buffoonery is long overdue. Given all of

the shifts in the global sports market, it is essential that sports theorists acknowledge the latent and manifest racial hierarchies prevalent within fictional baseball texts.

Despite the importance of baseball around the world, fictional media texts produced in the U.S. still rely upon the outdated and hegemonic view of the sport as solely an “American” game. One of the legacies of imperial contact is a mindset that positions specific “others” as symbols of the conquest their nations have endured. The narratives of dominant baseball media forms demonstrate this relationship well by selling the containment of racialized and ethnic others from around the world. Through the often problematic constructions of developing nations and the characterization of brown bodies, the sports media industry actively invests in the ideals of domination and exploitation of weaker nations. These films and commercials erase the social and political factors that have led to the diversification of baseball culture.

There is a need for greater scholarship on how global sports culture has been negotiated by receiving nations. Scholars such as Mark Dyreson, C.L.R. James, and others have aptly demonstrated that sport has also been used to resist the imposition of culture. That is, host communities do not simply digest American cultural forms but develop alternative meanings for the imposed culture. This resistant or negotiated interpolation of the imported culture is particularly absent from fictional baseball films and commercials. For example, rather than suggesting that Pedro Cerrano in *Major League* came from a rich Cuban culture that has produced phenomenal all-stars who played professionally in the U.S., the trilogy invests in his religious difference and his hyper-masculine physique. How did Cerrano learn how to play baseball? How does

baseball in Cuba differ from the sport in the U.S.? Such questions need not alter the larger narrative, but certainly could have been referenced if the films sought to define him as more than a caricature. The same argument could be made for the construction of Japanese players in relation to the depictions of Tanaka and Fukuda from *Major League* and *Mr. 3000*.

Given the increase of international professional athletes in the U.S., the ways in which the team-nation is imagined necessarily changes. These ruptures in the seemingly stable construction of national identity suggest that, in sports, athletes frequently have fragmented national identities. Baseball culture becomes like an artifact left behind after U.S. interactions with other nations and reveals the reach and power of U.S. cultural forms. The combination of proximity to the U.S. and various economic interests in these areas made baseball a useful political tool, a recreational ambassador of sorts. Although much farther away from the U.S., baseball became an important part of culture in Japan as early as the 1870s. Based on other agendas, the public discourse on baseball in both regions of the world reflected and changed based on the political needs of the era. This is completely omitted, and instead, Japanese players (i.e., Tanaka and Fukuda) are simply presented as aliens who do not really understand what baseball is all about. As MLB initiatives to use the Japanese professional league as a farm system continue to grow, what remains to be seen is whether mainstream fictional films will embrace this relationship or continue to treat the newcomers with fear.

Although the scholarship on issues of diversity within baseball films leaves much to be desired, it has started to examine how gender roles are constructed within these

texts. Specifically, Most and Rudd, Simons, Gary E. Dickerson, and Howard Good, all examine how the inclusion of women as either sexual partners or potentially castrating matrons have altered the way masculinity is constructed within the films. The complexity of the analysis of these depictions suggests that the scholarship is catching up and perhaps more thorough examinations of race will follow.

Final Thoughts

Because baseball films rely either on the idea of finding spiritual rejuvenation or comic relief within their narratives, it is highly unlikely that films focusing on the hardships immigrants face will become a box office staple. However, the question then arises: why are the heroes of these films always white? Is it impossible to include a Latino or black protagonist in *The Natural* or *Field of Dreams*? Furthermore, when will feature films depict Latino characters with complexity, depth, and within their own communities? It is ironic that baseball (and professional sports more generally), one of the most diverse aspects of U.S. culture, are so repeatedly imagined as white. When Hollywood and the advertising industry fully embrace the many possibilities of this rich multicultural terrain, then baseball films will truly have achieved the equality upon which its ideologies are built. Although the game itself has changed dramatically since its invention over a hundred years ago, its popularity still manages to capture the loyalties and dreams of people around the world. Through magic, laughter, and spectatorial identification, contemporary baseball films vivify the hope that is inherent in the U.S. as

a land of opportunity. Hopefully the day will come when that hope was represented as truly available to all.

Appendix: Baseball Films by Year⁴⁰

1915:

Little Sunset

1921:

As the World Rolls On

1927:

Casey at the Bat

1935:

Alibi Ike

1942:

Pride of the Yankees

1948:

The Babe Ruth Story

1949:

It Happens Every Spring

The Stratton Story

1950:

The Jackie Robinson Story

1951:

Angels in the Outfield

1952:

The Pride of St. Louis

1953:

Kid from Left Field

1957:

Fear Strikes Out

⁴⁰ For a complete list of baseball films, see Erickson's *Baseball Filmography* or Harvey Marc Zucker and Lawrence J. Babich's *Sports Films: A Complete Reference*.

1958:

Damn Yankees!

1962:

Safe at Home!

1973:

Bang the Drum Slowly

1976:

Bad News Bears

Bingo Long's Traveling All-Stars and Motor Kings

1977:

Bad News Bears in Breaking Training

1978:

Bad News Bears Go to Japan

1979:

Kid from Left Field

1981:

Don't Look Back: The Story of Leroy 'Satchel' Paige

1983:

Tiger Town

1984:

The Natural

1986:

A Winner Never Quits

1987:

Long Gone

1988:

Bull Durham

Eight Men Out

1989:

Field of Dreams

Major League

1991:

Talent for the Game

Pastime

1992:

The Babe

The Comrades of Summer

A League of their Own

Mr. Baseball

1993:

The Man from Left Field

Rookie of the Year

The Sandlot

1994:

Angels in the Outfield

Cobb

Little Big League

Major League II

The Scout

1995:

Past the Bleachers

1996:

Ed

The Fan

The Last Home Run

Soul of the Game

1998:

Major League III: Back to the Minors

1999:

For the Love of the Game

A Little Inside

2000:

Angels in the Infield
Finding Buck McHenry
Perfect Game

2001:

*61**
Hardball
Summer Catch

2005:

The Bad News Bears
Fever Pitch
Game 6
Sandlot 2

2003:

Pitcher and the Pin-Up
Air Bud: Seventh Inning Fetch
Bleacher Bums
The Rookie

2004:

Freedom Park
Hustle
Mickey
Mr. 3000
The Winning Season

2006:

The Benchwarmers
Everyone's Hero

2007:

American Pastime
Chasing 3000
The Final Season
The Perfect Game
Sandlot 3

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Vita

Giovanni Nichole Willis was born in New York, New York, on January 28, 1974, the daughter of Evelyn Wynn Willis and Peter Charles Willis. After graduating from the Fieldston Schools in Riverdale, New York, in 1992, she attended Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts. At Tufts University, she studied English and Education. Upon earning her Bachelor of Arts degree and a provisional Teaching Certificate, she started her career as a high school English teacher in Concord, Massachusetts. While teaching at the Concord-Carlisle High School, she also earned her Master of Arts degree in Education at Tufts University in 1997. In 2000, she entered New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. In 2002, she earned her Master of Arts degree in Cinema Studies from New York University. After completing her degree, she returned to the classroom as a high school English teacher at the Hackley School in Tarrytown, New York. In 2003, she began her doctoral studies in the Radio-Television-Film Department of the University of Texas at Austin.

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