RACEBALL

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND MYTHS OF AMERICA IN BASEBALL LITERATURE

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In its theory and practice baseball embodies some of the central preoccupations of that cultural fantasy we like to think of as the American dream. Anyone who does not understand the game cannot hope to understand the country.

--George Grella, "Baseball and the American Dream"

Until very recently, and regardless of the race of the author, the readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white. I am interested to know what that assumption has meant to the literary imagination.

--Toni Morrison, Playing in the Dark

In the summer of 1973, Henry Aaron, an African American rightfielder for the Atlanta Braves, was set to eclipse Babe Ruth's all-time homerun record of 714, a record few thought could be rivaled, and one which many did not want to see surpassed. Aaron, the last Major Leaguer previously to have played in the Negro Leagues, received hundreds of thousands of letters, most of which threatened his life and the safety of his family, asserted that he had no right to compete with Ruth's record, and pronounced that regardless of his achievements and fame, he was a "stinking nigger, just the same."[1] Twelve years earlier, when Roger Maris (like Ruth, a white player for the New York Yankees) had challenged and then bettered Ruth's single-season homerun record, there was also public outcry, and many fans and baseball insiders alike rooted for Maris to fail.[2] This added pressure and attention levied on Maris, however, contained nothing of the venom, affront, and real threat which surfaced when Aaron, a black man, began to step into and even supplant the mythic space of baseball's most venerated hero and representative figure.

Henry Aaron's confrontation with his "Homerun King" predecessor, Babe Ruth, is a good point of departure for this essay because it

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[1]See Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, Baseball (New York: 1994) 429; see also Aaron's autobiography, I Had a Hammer (New York: 1992).

[2]Even after Maris surpassed Ruth's homerun total, many baseball fans were still unwilling to give up Ruth's right to the throne. Initially, a "distinctive mark," an asterisk, was placed by Maris's name in the record books to indicate that he had the luxury of hitting his homeruns in a baseball season which had increased in number of games since Ruth's time.

signals ways in which baseball has been imagined and written about--as myth, metaphor, reverie--and how the narratives which have built up around the game continue to inform and form the ways in which it is perceived. Moreover, the stories of Aaron and Ruth are immersed in the weighted narratives of baseball, African Americans, and what it means to be an American male. The texts which will be examined in the following chapters of this paper each involve aspects of these distinct narratives. The standard baseball story, the narrative-base in all these texts, incorporates a set of imaginative and literary conventions that constitute a kind of national baseball mythology. The key components of this myth include the rural-pastoral origins of baseball (and "America"); the role of the game in creating bonds among males (particularly between fathers and sons and almost entirely to the exclusion of women); and the vision of individuals from various origins recreating themselves as "American men" and building a better life than they had previously known. Since the United States lacks a long history and an inherited national mythology, an enduring and professed-to-be indigenous sport like baseball was readily utilized as a source for a common heritage, a shared identity, a usable past.[3] For over one hundred years, writers of both fiction and non-fiction have tapped this mythic source (and thus established and perpetuated its myths) both to celebrate the game and the national identity it represents and

[3]In order to stress baseball's inherent "Americanness," A.G. Spaulding, one of the game's first and most vigorous promoters, falsely claimed in 1905 that research had proven baseball to be an indigenous invention (with no inheritance from foreign-born sources like cricket and the English children's game rounders) conceived by Abner Doubleday, a Major-General in the United States Army, in Cooperstown, New York, in 1839.

to question the professed national ideals embodied in baseball. Baseball literature carries with it a group of conventions, and all subsequent writing which employs baseball works either within or against this mythic narrative.

The second narrative wending its way through these texts places African American figures in a baseball setting. Because baseball can be seen as a mirror of American society, it reflects not only the country's celebrated origins and ideals, but also the national wounds of racism, exclusion, and inequality. These stains on baseball and America's history are plentiful: black athletes were barred from playing in Major League baseball, segregated white and black leagues operated simultaneously, and the process of integrating black players into mainstream, Major-league baseball has been troubled in a variety of telling ways. The presence of African Americans in baseball narratives, therefore, presents a picture which diverges from and struggles with a real history of the game and the country, as well as with a history of what baseball has symbolized and how it has been imagined.

This paper will examine moments in literature where the narratives of baseball as American myth and those involving African Americans converge, moments where authors confront (either consciously or not) the implications of both narratives within the same shared space. It is at these moments of convergence that the mythic language surrounding the game and its interaction with African Americans are thrown into dramatic relief. A myth, says Roland Barthes in his Mythologies, is a kind of "metalanguage," a narrative which refers to and talks about

another narrative; it is at least twice removed from any referent which exists in reality. "What is invested in the concept," writes Barthes, "is less reality than a certain knowledge of reality."[4] Examining this space will reveal how myths operate and continue to affect an understanding of personal and national identities, especially since this space involves the intersection of the emblematic discourse of baseball with a black presence that appears to question the very tenets of established national memory.

Black and white authors who deal with an African American presence in a baseball discourse often use baseball's literary conventions differently, in part because these tropes, received narratives, and stock images connote and mean different things to each. The figure of the black male, for example, possesses its own mythic place in the imagination and discourse of many white authors. In the same way that baseball is used as a creative tool with which to develop one's identity, the imaginative uses of blackness serve as a means to define both a personal and a collective (white) identity.

This analysis of how baseball's myths function in regard to African Americans, then, will focus upon how white writers define themselves through the myths of both baseball and race; it will show how the language used by these authors occludes, describes, romanticizes, employs, and understands black figures. This essay will also consider instances where African American authors envision themselves or other black characters within a baseball context, an act of creation which challenges a white objectification and vision of a

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[4]Roland Barthes, Mythologies (New York: 1972) 119.

voiceless black "other". These texts by black authors highlight the access baseball (and the sense of America it signifies) offers as a symbol to African Americans, as well as the images of self-mythology it affords black males in America.[5]

There is a paucity of baseball literature which incorporates African American figures and close to no critical work which examines this intersection of baseball literature and representations of African Americans. The baseball narratives discussed in this paper were chosen from only a handful of viable alternatives, and have received little critical attention as representations of African Americans and baseball's literary conventions; they are often the best or the first of their kind, or the most compelling in their relationship to baseball's standard tropes. In her Playing in the Dark, Toni Morrison comments upon the absence of scholarship which analyzes the "Africanist" presence in American literature; this critical void, she argues, is due in part to a tradition of silence on issues of race and a kind of political correctness which obscures the language of the debate.[6] "Raceball" thus attempts to break new ground in the study of African Americans and baseball in a literary context. Only Gerald Early, whose works are studied in this paper, has written extensively about the dearth of baseball fiction by and about African Americans and

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[5]Gerald Early looks at the "images of self-mythology" located in the autobiographies of black baseball stars Jackie Robinson, Willie Mays, and Frank Robinson. "Athletics provides," he writes, "the only extensive survey for analyzing black male ambition in a context where its expression has had an enormous impact on American culture at large." Gerald Early, "House of Ruth, House of Robinson" (1990) 248,249.

[6]Toni Morrison, Playing in the Dark (Cambridge: 1990) 9.

what this absence and presence have meant. This paper differs further from other scholarship on baseball literature because it looks not only at baseball fiction, it also explores one playwright as well as a wide array of non-fictional works such as essays, journalistic books and analyses, and autobiographical observations (including those of Early himself) about baseball. The way baseball narratives are used to construct personal identities will apply, therefore, to both characters in fiction and authors of non-fiction (like Early) who write themselves personally into their texts through anecdote and autobiographical reports.

Although a brief summary of the history of baseball literature is included here, the few texts which will be discussed in no way give a complete account of how black and white authors incorporate an African American presence into a baseball discourse. However, these texts do speak to one another in that they employ the same baseball literary conventions, confront multiple narratives in similar fashions, and refer, in one way or another, to the two most conspicuous points of intersection between baseball's myths and African Americans: the Negro Leagues and Jackie Robinson's integration of baseball after 1947. A close examination of these texts provides a series of variations and commentaries on the baseball myth and how it relates to the American myths of rural roots, upward mobility, and male bonding.

Roger Kahn's autobiographical book, The Boys of Summer, chronicles his years as a journalist travelling with and writing about the Jackie Robinson Brooklyn Dodgers. Many of baseball's literary conventions function in Kahn's account to show how the game, and particularly the

Dodgers, represents a tie Kahn feels has with his father, his sense of what is beautiful and important, and the development of his own identity. But Kahn also writes with particular conviction about Jackie Robinson and integration, something which further defines his identity and his sense of the game. In the race-crazy moment of Robinson's entrance into the white world of baseball, Kahn keeps the narrative of baseball and its myths separate from a discussion of Robinson and integration, and it remains possible for the first romantic and idealized version of the game (in which Robinson has a place) to exist unscathed alongside the exclusionary and race-centered second version.

John Craig's Chappie and Me and Jay Neugeboren's Sam's Legacy, both novels, feature white protagonists who acquire a usable identity through intimate involvements with the "outsiderness" of Negro League baseball. In Chappie and Me, a white baseball player with little skill puts on blackface and joins a barnstorming Negro League team; he gains an insider's status in the world of these black ballplayers at the same time that he experiences their alienation and exclusion. Sam's Legacy focuses on a "white-hipster"--not unlike Norman Mailer's infamous "white negro" persona--who has the first-person memoir of a former Negro League player thrust upon him. Like Kahn in his interactions with Robinson, this character figures out his own identity through the narrative of a black ballplayer, who himself struggles with the various meanings baseball and race offer him. The dilemmas over racial identity and racial objectification in both novels call forth a whole range of images of black athletes, the tropes in which they are placed, and the often problematic and confusing ways in which these figurations

are employed.

Both Barry Beckham's novel, Runner Mack, and August Wilson's play, Fences, works by African American writers, place black protagonists within the master narrative of baseball in order to show how certain national myths speak and do not speak for black Americans. Beckham's protagonist is denied the chance to play baseball in a post-Jackie Robinson era; the main character in Fences, Troy Maxson, is a former Negro Leaguer currently well past his prime. These two works of fiction employ the conventions of a baseball literary discourse (rural origins, fathers and sons, sports as a liberating escape) but tell stories which then contrast sharply with the standard myths. Fences, in particular, displays a range of self-mythologies which Troy pulls out of his closet-full of stories about baseball, family, prison, work, and racism. Through the lens of baseball, this play investigates the contradictions embedded in African American life and the effects these incongruities have had on black male identity.

Finally, African American literary critic Gerald Early explicitly identifies and explores the significance of those moments where baseball and race share the same loaded space. Early's often autobiographical and self-referential style make him a subject of this study as well as a secondary source. While Early's writing can be compared to Kahn's work in the sense that it uses both a deep-seated love of baseball and a racial analysis of the game to reflect upon a personal and collective identity, Early grapples with the presence of these two concurrent narratives in just the way Kahn does not. Early analyzes how baseball's employment as a metaphoric tool in the process of self-

definition differs when in the hands of whites and blacks; Early also presents his own experiences with baseball in order to incorporate his personal contradictions involving race, nationality, and family into a general understanding of what baseball reveals about blacks in America.

Although "Raceball" focuses primarily on "race" and not "gender", it is illuminating also to take note of the extent to which baseball and most sports literature operate within a male realm and male-dominated discourse. The mythic narrative arrives at a personal and national identity through links between men, especially fathers and sons. One of the conventions of the genre is that through sports, athletes escape the forces of socialization--namely women and children, who are depicted as the living antitheses to the "natural man." As the texts of these white and black authors confront a point of intersection between the myths of baseball and those of black males, women are continually excluded, objectified, or wholly misunderstood. The language used to describe baseball is immersed in "maleness", and the placement of women as distant and antithetical "others" more tellingly reflects the ways men interact with men, even, at times, men of different races. When present, women further affect how characters define themselves and one another, how they relate to the game and ideas of "play," and how black male figures are represented in this all-male sphere.

When he challenged Babe Ruth's homerun record, Henry Aaron had to contend with Ruth's historical accomplishments as well as an image of Ruth as Legend. Ruth is baseball's most mythic star: an "American

Adam" who started from meager origins and reached the pinnacle of success; a possessor of a peculiarly unique style and skills which were the basis of his achievement; the greatest hitter of homeruns, the quintessential symbol of power, conquest, and expansion. The reality of Ruth's personality--his seedier off-field excesses of whoring, bullying, and overindulging in food and alcohol--has been replaced with an anaestethized version of his character; Ruth was "recreated" (the actual promise of the "American dream") as an exemplar for a nation and its youths. Certainly this celebrated image of Ruth affected the hundreds of thousands of people who wrote Henry Aaron in 1973 and 1974, most of whom had probably not seen Ruth or Aaron play, and some who may not have been all that interested in baseball.[7]

Aaron also had to do battle with his own image. He was a black man who hit homeruns without flair, who went about his steady and above-average business on the field without dramatics or playful exuberance, totally unlike the images constructed by and about other black baseball stars (the fierce competitor Jackie Robinson or the joyous showman Willie Mays). Joe DiMaggio, another white New York Yankee who attained heroic status, was glorified for his quiet, deliberate style which was seen as dignified and graceful; in Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea, the character Santiago repeatedly refers to him as "the Great DiMaggio," an exemplar who suffers stoicly

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[7]There was a diminished interest over-all in baseball in the 1970s. By the start of the 1970s, a player's strike loomed (and occurred during the 1972 season), the before-unmentioned disreputable side to players' lives became public knowledge, and more Americans watched football than baseball. See, for example, Ward and Burns, Baseball 421-464.

and bravely through adversity. Aaron's similar style, however, invoked images of "the folk Negro," the plantation hand, a shuffling Step'n Fetchit character.[8] Aaron's history, his off-field comments about racial injustices, and his mere presence reminded people of the then defunct all-black leagues in which he had played and made them see the more dubious aspects of their beloved game.

Here, where Aaron and Ruth battle for homeruns and, more significantly, for a place in the mythic realm of American ideals, their narratives share the same space and reveal the underside, fears, and conservative and exclusionary myths of a country defined as much by its race-relations as by its institutions, laws, and wars. While these discourses can be seen as separate, there are also times when they can not be isolated, when their interaction highlights how baseball's myths relate to African Americans, which in turn reveals things about the game, about race, and about how we attempt to define ourselves and one another through the weighted language in which we are deeply immersed.

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[8]Henry Aaron, I Had a Hammer.

I

BASEBALL'S LITERARY CONVENTIONS

Baseball became an imaginative component of literature in the late nineteenth century when dime novels and juvenile fiction began employing the sport as a subject and setting for its stories. Because baseball focuses on a series of showdowns between two individuals--a pitcher and batter--and these individuals are surrounded and backed up by a larger collective--the home and visiting teams--it readily supplied material for these formulaic narratives, with their cliff-hanger drama and quickly sketched heroes and villains. The most popular and representative of this literature, tales of the Yale sports hero Frank Merriwell, sold up to 500,000 copies weekly in serialized publications.[9]

These popular juvenile fictions established many of the conventions by which baseball was dramatized and used as metaphor, conventions that ensuing sports literature would have to write within or against. Story after story within this genre emphasized the allegedly American ideals of democracy, fairness, hard-work, and native pluck. Each offered a parable in which the country's competitive sense, drive for success, and ingenuity were displayed and personified. The schools and sports teams in this literature stood as models for the adult "real world." Not unlike frontier tales or westerns, sports in these stories were a realm where boys tested themselves and became men,

[9]Christian Messenger, Sport and the Spirit of Play in American Fiction: Hawthorne to Faulkner (New York: 1981) 171.

where they learned the lessons necessary for careers in business or the military. Baseball represented an arena free from women and other societal constraints, where males could prove their worth and individuality, and a place which offered socializing instruction to its future leaders.[10]

Specific aspects of baseball's origins and play added to the game's image as a symbol of American ideals and a romanticized, rural past. First, baseball is unlike most other sports ^U^^that it is controlled by no time constraints and can continue endlessly as long as the third out is kept at bay. The game can thus feel timeless, a sense which is heightened further by the few changes baseball seems to have undergone during its seasonal presence year after year. This continuity, along with its meticulously recorded statistics, makes the game feel trans-temporal: players and teams of different eras are constantly compared to and seem to be competing with one another. In a country of such growth and flux, baseball has become a tie to the past, something which seems inherently American, a staple of American culture since the antebellum period onwards. The "Americanness" of baseball was also fostered by its fictionalized origins; it was promoted as an

[10]Michael Oriard, "The Athlete-Hero and Democratic Ideals" Journal of American Culture, 1978; Christian Messenger, "Sport in the Dime Novel" Journal of American Culture, 1978; Benjamin Love and Mark H. Payne, "To Be a Red-Blooded American Boy" Journal of Popular Culture, 1975; and Rudolf K. Herle Jr., "The Athlete as Moral Leader" Journal of Popular Culture, 1975 all talk about the metaphoric conventions these fictions establish for ensuing sports literature. Messenger, Sport and the Spirit of Play and Wiley Lee Umphelt, The Sporting Myth and the American Experience: Studies in Contemporary Fiction (Lewisburg, PA: 1975) discuss, in particular, the relationship between stories of athletes and frontier-tales, like those of James Fennimore Cooper.

indigenous American institution invented by a Civil War hero in rural New York. As early as the middle of the nineteenth century, Walt Whitman had already described baseball as an integral component of the country's cultural dowry:

> Well--it's our game; that's the chief fact in connection with it; America's game; it has the snap, go, fling of the American atmosphere; it belongs as much to our institutions, fits into them as significantly as our Constitution's law; is just as important in the sum total of our historic life.[11]

Baseball's link to America's past reflects its association with rural origins, its closeness to nature, and its tie to the image of the country's edenic beginnings. In fact, baseball was developed and fine-tuned in cities; but its rural identity was promoted at precisely the moment when urbanization and industrialization had begun to make ideas surrounding the freedom of play and the pastoral images of baseball all the more attractive and marketable. Baseball seasons coincide with summer, and the ballpark can seem a verdant haven in the midst of crowded, urban centers. The game's romanticized origins are connected, as well, to the ways in which baseball is seen as a bond to previous generations and a nostalgic past, as a real and symbolic personal and collective heirloom passed between American men, a link between fathers and sons.

Europeans immigrating to America in the first half of the twentieth century often appropriated baseball as a means to make themselves feel more like part of the country. In Abraham Cahan's 1898 novella Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto, a Jewish immigrant goes about Americanizing himself by understanding the game of baseball and

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[11]Quoted in Ward and Burns, Baseball xvii.

affiliating himself with the local team. Baseball essayist Michael Honig asserts that "as the most conspicuous embodiment of immigrant assimilation, baseball became a symbol of the American dream."[12] For first-generation immigrants, and in the memories of their children, baseball became a symbolic rite of passage which defined the break between the vestiges of an older, European life and a new American identity. In a great deal of American fiction, especially that by Jewish, New York men, baseball became a tie to a nostalgic American childhood.[13]

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, baseball remained a tapped source for juvenile fiction, journalism, and popular films. Rarely, though, was it a subject of "high" literature; despite its popularity, baseball was not taken seriously enough to use it as a means to represent reality and to do battle with complex issues. Ring Lardner, a famed sports journalist around World War I, was one of the first writers to make baseball a subject for more serious fiction. Lardner's baseball stories feature players who are less heroic than their idealized, ivy-league counterparts. His comic, often epistolary plots involve coarse and semi-illiterate characters whose transitions from country to city are more troubling than they are glamorous. In

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[12] In Mike Shannon, Diamond Classics (Jefferson, NC: 1989) 49.

[13] A few of the writers who fit this billing are Roger Kahn, Philip Roth, Mark Harris, Jay Neugeboren, E.L. Doctrow, Eric Rolfe Greenberg, Gerald Green.

Steven Reiss was one of the first scholars to do an extensive investigation of the sociological role baseball played in these "American themes" of rural origins, ethnic assimilation, upward mobility, and democracy. See, for example, Reiss's The American Sporting Experience (New York: 1984).

You Know Me Al (1916), Lardner depicts a "baseball rube" through a series of letters this player writes to a hometown pal. The letters reveal an arrogant, small town athlete lost in the big city: ignorant of city ways and the mores of his baseball team, highly unselfconscious, and unable to learn from his experiences--hardly a symbol for any moral ideals.[14]

John R. Tunis's fiction for adolescents, written in the 1940s, moved the baseball hero further into the depths of a complicated and unpredictable world. Tunis's characters are simply good athletes rather than heroes; in addition to facing opponents on the field, these athletes deal with an array of real-life issues. In Keystone Kids, published in 1943, a rookie, Jewish baseball player is verbally attacked and socially excluded by his Brooklyn Dodger teammates. Anti-semitism and bad baseball persist until the rookie's manager tells him that he has a new identity: he is no longer a Brooklyn Jew, he is now a Brooklyn Dodger. Tunis's lesson was one of tolerance; the America he described was a democracy still struggling to meet its own ideals.[15]

Apart from Lardner, few authors used baseball as a subject for serious, adult fiction before Bernard Malamud's 1952 novel The Natural. But sports and athletes were a common feature of a great deal of serious literature before 1952, even if baseball was not. For writers like Hemingway and Fitzgerald in the first half of the twentieth

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[14]See, for example, Messenger's chapters on Lardner in Sport and the Spirit of Play.

[15]Leveritt T. Smith, Jr., "John R. Tunis's American Epic; or, Bridging the Gap Between Juvenile and Adult Sports Fiction" (Rutherford, NJ: 1991).

century, as for John Updike in the second, sports were one possible means with which to critique American society. The lessons athletes learned in their sport, these writers revealed, did not necessarily provide them with either the morals or the keys for success in the real world. According to literary critic Christian Messenger, athletes for these authors were "bewildered men whose aggression is incongruous and futile when applied to life outside the sport." The Great Gatsby's Tom Buchanan, Messenger explains, is an ivy-league, all-American football player left ill-equipped for life after football: sports have prepared him for nothing.[16] This incongruity is also the premise of Updike's 1960 novel Rabbit Run and its later sequels, in which the main character retreats from life because the real world fails to match the excitement he once felt and the success he achieved as a high school basketball star.

Malamud's The Natural critiques American society by entering and exploiting baseball's myths. Roy Hobbs, a baseball hero described through Arthurian lore, confronts the monolith of his own persona, which is built up to symbolic proportions through the combination of his baseball prowess, the media, fans, and his own self-centered desires. As a "natural man" from rural origins who finds in baseball his *raison d'être*, Hobbs is corrupted and oppressed by the modern world's bureaucratic, corporate machinations. Baseball in The Natural is an institution which smothers unreflective escape, the very thing

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[16]Messenger, Sport and the Spirit of Play 180. Gerald Early also writes about Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises and Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby: "Those books are the absolute unraveling (unwriting and rewriting) of the American myth through sports." Gerald Early, "House of Ruth, House of Robinson" 227-228.

that had once brought Hobbs to the game.

Over the last thirty years, two kinds of baseball non-fiction have become especially popular. In one type, a kind of personalized essay style, writers express their love of baseball; analyze the game's history, symbolism and dynamics; and describe their own experiences with the game.[17] The second type, baseball biographies and autobiographies, has remained the most prolific of baseball narratives. These stories of players' lives, written for both juvenile and adult readers, typically present a player as an exemplar of the perseverance, hard-work, and morality which lead to success. Originally these narratives reproduced only a rarified image of baseball's symbolism; however, Jim Bouton's 1970 baseball autobiography Ball Four ushered in a legion of exposé-style accounts which debunked baseball's myths and publicized the vulgar aspects of player's lives which, in figures like Babe Ruth, had always been overlooked. Bouton ignored the locker-room adage, "what goes on here, what is said here, stays here," and depicted players who were crude, maladjusted, unintelligent and sexually promiscuous.[18]

African American characters were generally absent from early sports literature, rarely appearing in writing by white authors. Their

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[17]Some of the most prominent baseball writers of this genre are Roger Kahn, Roger Angell, Thomas Boswell, Donald Hall, John Thorn, George F. Will, Daniel Okrent and David Halberstam.

[18]Even with the unveiling of baseball's underside, the game remained a symbolic source for reverie and positive American myths. In the same manner in which separate discourses developed when African Americans entered the game, narratives of baseball's myths were kept separate from and unaffected by narratives of sexual promiscuity, substance abuse, and stupidity in the game.

absence is hardly surprising: during these years African Americans had neither access to most major league teams or schools of higher learning where major spectator sports were played, nor could they take the occupations of soldier, businessman or politician for which the morals of these stories were meant to prepare young men. Immigrant writers for whom baseball provided a sense of belonging--they could root for teams, join teams, write about teams--might also shy away from depicting black athletes as full-blown characters since recent immigrants often defined themselves in opposition to African Americans; that immigrants could claim baseball in a way that a group already living in America could not proved that they had risen in the ranks of American society and were not on the bottom. Yet African Americans were present in American sports throughout the twentieth century. Some black athletes in the first half of the century had even reached the pinnacle of success in sports like boxing, cycling, and track and field; black baseball players of renowned skill performed in all-black leagues as well as internationally.

The lack of black figures in an imagined sports landscape is certainly an effect of social exclusion along the lines of race, but it also demonstrates the excluding power of baseball's mythic discourse. While baseball reflects democratic ideals, the game and its myths shut out African Americans. Baseball's myths are white myths: the ideals of assimilation, the American dream, and romanticized rural origins did not apply to black Americans. An African American image in this literature would have muddled and problematized the easily communicated metaphors baseball called forth. This literal and symbolic exclusion

of African Americans from baseball may go a long way to explain the lack of popularity the game has had with black fans and writers. The game carries with it a declaration that "American" means white, and that African Americans are not a full part of the game or the country. Other popular American sports like football and basketball do not carry this stigma.

In 1947, when Jackie Robinson became the first African American to play Major League baseball in the twentieth century,[19] his presence, as well as the presence of the black players who followed him, transformed the way baseball could be imagined. It seemed that if baseball had been a continual source of white reverie, a place where its actors and their actions signified ideals and origins of the country, then a black man, now literally standing within that mythic space, would either come to represent those beliefs or alter them. Americans might look in the mirror of baseball and see, placed alongside an idealized American identity, a black male face with a different legacy and its own set of mythic connotations. With integration, therefore, baseball became a battlefront not only for the actual dynamics of America's social and political life (racial integration, the possibility of more opportunities for African Americans, a new level of acceptance), but an epistemological struggle over how reality would be interpreted, imagined, and recreated as well. A question addressed by this paper, then, is what happened when blacks

[19]Moses Fleetwood Walker, in 1884, was actually the first African American to make it all the way to the Major leagues. Black players were never officially excluded, but a "gentleman's agreement" was reached between club owners in 1887 insuring their absence. Ward and Burns, Baseball, 44.

and whites shared the same symbolic space, the same landscape to which certain metaphors refer? And, how did white and black authors reevaluate the hermeneutics of this mythology and their place within it?

One way writers represented this changed landscape was simply to change nothing; black characters, as literally happened with segregated leagues before 1947, remained absent in much baseball fiction after 1947. Many baseball novels mined the game for precisely those symbols which would have been problematized had black characters been included. In The Natural, a novel about the essence of the game and the myriad forces which suppress that essence, no African American characters are present or even referred to. Roy Hobbs plays in a baseball setting which jumps in time as it refers to numerous events in baseball's history; he plays in circuses and rag-tag semi-professional leagues during a twenty-five year liminal exile from the major leagues, but, unlike what a real player would have experienced during the same years, never with an African American player.

In another popular and celebrated baseball novel, W.P. Kinsella's Shoeless Joe (1982), an Iowa farmer builds a ballfield over his crops so dead baseball players who had not fulfilled their baseball dreams, like the 1919 White Sox who were banned from the game and the protagonist's own father, can finally play again. Amidst the pastoral romance of this magical Iowa ballfield, the nostalgia of an earlier era, and the baseball motif of bringing together fathers and sons, it might seem obvious that the image of skilled players who have to suffer an eternity of frustrated baseball dreams relates to black and Negro

League stars. But no African American player is mentioned in the story.[20] Likewise, in Robert Coover's The Universal Baseball Association, J. Henry Waugh, Prop. (1968), an accountant dreams up an entire baseball universe which follows players from the field to their lives outside the game, to the formation of societal myths emanating from baseball; again, not one of the players is black. Even in Bouton's Ball Four, when the events which debunk the game's idealized image--drinking, looking up women's skirts, and womanizing in general--are being depicted, the team is presented as all white.

One can imagine, as Toni Morrison does in her work of literary criticism, Playing in the Dark, to what extent a white mythology is defined by what it is not--black--regardless of whether that blackness is dramatized or given a voice. Morrison writes that "no romance is free of the power of blackness, especially in a country with a resident population, already black and who had been enslaved."[21] The texts by white authors examined in the next two sections of this paper all present a baseball mythology which includes African Americans. These sections on Roger Kahn's The Boys of Summer, John Craig's Chappie and Me, and Jay Neugeboren's Sam's Legacy look at the ways white authors represent African Americans within the romance of baseball. In his

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[20]The magic of baseball in Shoeless Joe also forces the reclusive author J.D. Salinger, a character in the novel whose ties to baseball are made evident, to reenter society and publish his writing. Ironically, in the saccharine film version of the novel, Field of Dreams, Salinger's character is turned into an African American novelist played by James Earl Jones (who also plays the character Troy Maxson in the Broadway productions of Fences).

[21]Morrison, Playing 37.

Mythologies, Roland Barthes argues that the "other" in a mythically weighted discourse is either made "same"--"weigh like against like, appropriatable"--or entirely different--"irreducible, a pure object, a spectacle, a clown" (Barthes, 143). African American figures in these texts by white authors both fall into Barthes's dichotomy and are used by these authors to critique society. On the other hand, texts by African American authors in the second half of this paper will be used to look at how baseball is an historically and symbolically white image. These baseball narratives explore the extent to which black authors and their characters can both employ baseball's metaphoric conventions and glean an identity through these details of the game.

II

ROGER KAHN'S DOUBLEPLAY

The contentious intersection of baseball's myths with African Americans is epitomized by Jackie Robinson's presence in Major League baseball in the 1940s. Lawrence Levine writes in his study of African American folklore Black Culture and Black Consciousness that folk heroes are characters who do not merely transcend reality and its societal restrictions; they also mirror changing reality (Levine, 439). Levine's definition of a folk hero fits Jackie Robinson. Robinson's desegregation of baseball, the first major American sport to be integrated in this century, preceded "Brown versus the Board of Education" and the official outlawing of "separate but equal" by almost a decade; the obsessively watched and repeatedly recreated socio-drama of Robinson's first years in the league brought racial tensions to the surface of national social life and set the tone for the Civil Rights Movement to come. Robinson became a symbol for both whites and blacks. Ken Burns, director of the 1994, eighteen-hour documentary Baseball, regards the first time this black man wearing number forty-two for the Brooklyn Dodgers took the field as the greatest moment in the history of the game.[22] "Another Emancipation Day for the Negro race," wrote Sportswriter Baz O'Meara at the time of Robinson's 1947 entry into the majors.[23]

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[22]See the book version of Ken Burns' documentary: Ward and Burns, Baseball xvii.

[23]Jules Tygeil, Baseball's Great Experiment (New York: 1983) vi.

In The Boys of Summer (1971), Roger Kahn, a baseball journalist, essayist and novelist, describes baseball's union with Jackie Robinson. The first half of this semi-autobiographical account describes Kahn's years as a reporter for the New York Tribune covering the Brooklyn Dodgers from 1952 to 1953. In the book's second section which takes place in 1970, Kahn revisits thirteen of these now-retired Dodgers. He narrates observations of these encounters and tells stories about the lives of the ballplayers before, during and after their careers in baseball.

At least three distinguishable yet interconnected narratives can be identified in Kahn's account. The Boys of Summer is, first, about Kahn himself and how baseball has informed his personal identity. The book is also yet another rendering of romantic baseball literary conventions. Finally, it is about baseball in a charged historical moment: about the Dodgers and the race-crazy years of Robinson's entrance into the league. Kahn tells an aspect of his own autobiography and personal interaction with baseball; he presents a picture of the Brooklyn Dodgers imbued with all the romance, idealism, approbation, and metaphoric understanding the team offers him; and he reveals those aspects of the Dodgers' story which involve difficult issues of race, racism, and the "experiment" of integration that Jackie Robinson represented and enacted. The two narratives that Kahn tells about the Dodgers--the ideal and the racially problematic--emerge from the same source--the team--yet they are kept spatially and linguistically separate. Kahn explores one baseball narrative--that which involves the myths, symbols, and enchantment of the game's conventional

discourse--while keeping the other narrative--concerning African Americans and racism in white baseball--isolated from and unimportant to the first. Furthermore, both of these narratives about the Dodgers circle back to supply Kahn with two distinct definitions of himself.

At the start of The Boys of Summer, Kahn explains that the Brooklyn Dodgers of Jackie Robinson's era are, for Kahn himself as for many baseball fans, one of the most adored and romantically remembered teams of all time. The love of and identification with these Dodgers is and was particularly intense for a number of reasons, many of which reveal the public's readiness to invest baseball with larger significance. First, these Dodgers were one of the most talented teams ever, with an assortment of uniquely skilled and individually exciting players. In writing about these men, Kahn recreates their actions with images of sheer beauty and precision worthy of their allure. He describes how Carl Furillo, "a powerful monolithic man," calculates the carom of a hit ball against the rightfield wall and rifles it back to the infield; how Duke Snider leaps into the air, floats "thirteen feet into the air," and pulls a ball back into centerfield, denying a homerun; how Billy Cox, "squinting in a crouch" at third-base and ready "to spring," smothers lined shots into the dirt with his "small black and ancient" glove; and how Jackie Robinson, "the cynosure of all eyes," jockeys off a base, increasingly disquieting a pitcher who, along with everyone watching, can sense the pulse and reflexes of a man about to run. Kahn writes tenderly, as well, about intimate Ebbets Field, the home ballpark of the Dodgers, where "it was only a short trip from the grandstand to the fantasy that you were in the game"

(xii).[24] Furthermore, the Dodgers were transplanted to Los Angeles at the end of the 1950s, thus leaving a void in Brooklyn, a place for nostalgia to grow wildly around an image of a team which became fixed in the minds of fans. Even the failures of this team--success just shy of victory--made them more representative of and endearing to the fans who cheered them. "You may glory in a team triumphant," Kahn writes,

> but you fall in love with a team in defeat. Losing after great striving is the story of man, who was born to sorrow, whose sweetest songs tell of saddest thought, and who, if he is a hero, does nothing in life as becomingly as leaving it...The team was awesomely good and yet defeated. Their skills lifted everyman's spirit and their defeat joined them with everyman's existence, a national team, with a country in thrall, irresistible and unable to beat the Yankees (xii).

It is the fact that baseball is difficult and defeating, baseball writer Roger Angell points out in a similar vein, with its poor odds of hitting safely and impossible measurements against perfection, "that entrances us and makes us care," that makes it easy to see the human condition in the game.[25]

Kahn develops an even greater affinity for the Dodgers because he is a resident of Brooklyn and because his father is and has been a fan of the team as well. As revealed in so much of the literature which surrounds the game, baseball creates an inclusive community where ties, mostly between men, are easily established; baseball gives men--fathers and sons--something to talk about. Unlike conversations about other sports, the talk surrounding baseball is also about all the other

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[24]In Philip Roth's Portnoy's Complaint (1967), it is Alexander Portnoy's fantasy that he is in the game at Ebbets Field--that he is Duke Snider, the Dodger centerfielder.

[25]Roger Angell, "Hard Lines" IN Baseball (New York:1994) xxv.

things the game symbolizes and represents. Kahn depicts the way baseball brings together men of different backgrounds, social classes and beliefs; unlike the discussion of other sports, as these men talk: while these men discuss the game with one another, Kahn's father, a teacher of literature, engages an Irish-American man with a strong Brooklyn accent and later a man with a soiled jacket and lousy teeth in discussion about the game with the same earnestness he has shown in conversations about Ulysses with colleagues in his living room. Similarly, Kahn talks baseball with equal interest and intensity to strangers in bars, sportswriters and ballplayers. The only substantial connection Kahn portrays between himself and his family is the one he and his father develop around baseball.

But Kahn also loves this Dodger team because it did in fact change the world. These Dodgers were "the first integrated major league baseball team," and thus, Kahn believes, "the most consciously integrated and, perhaps, the most intensely integrated team" (xvi). The Jackie Robinson "experiment" was a catalyst for the Civil Rights movement of the nineteen sixties and the attempts at integration that followed. In the same way that Mark Twain could proclaim in the 1890s that baseball was "the very symbol, the outward and visible expression of the drive and push and rush and struggle of the raging, tearing, booming nineteenth century,"[26] Kahn sees the Dodgers as the perfect mid-twentieth-century emblem. The make-up of the team reflected the changing demographics of Brooklyn, a borough first invaded by an influx of European immigrants and then, like the Dodgers with Robinson, with

[26]Quoted in Ward and Burns, Baseball 31.

black Americans migrating from the south.

In Kahn's estimation, the Dodgers represented an ideal of integration. Baseball allowed the Dodgers to develop ties with one another which transcended even the perceived differences of race. Members of the team were united under the common purpose of winning games; they were also united when branded with the epithets of "nigger" and "nigger lover" alike. "These men," Kahn reflects, "marched unevenly against the sins of bigotry" and altered the game and the country forever (xvi). Kahn relates how the Dodger teammates literally shared the same space and were compelled, on some level anyway, to see one another as individuals. This interaction is most apparent when the team travels together by rail in the Jim Crow south during spring training and Robinson's mere presence escalates racial tensions. The way Kahn describes the train on which the Dodgers travel between these storms of racial divisiveness makes it seem like a romanticized, land-bound Pequod on which players enjoy the liminality of an enlightened, equal society. Kahn lists the ways their lives "mix together almost naturally" as they talk, play cards, eat, and sleep together in close quarters (105). The Brooklyn Dodger fans also accept Robinson because they root for the home team and its players, the team they have pulled for their whole lives. Kahn tells the reader that fans, for the most part, want to know if a player can hit and field--not the color of his skin. Robinson, much like the Jewish character in Tunis's Keystone Kids, is able to acquire the identity of Brooklyn Dodger and to eventually discard the one of "nigger."

An underlying theme of The Boys of Summer, as in many baseball

stories, is the way accounts of baseball involve the interaction of men with men and fathers with sons--often to the exclusion of women. Baseball calls forth a convention of recreating oneself through manly acts of heroism, and to young male fans, baseball offers possible models for manhood. Therefore, the dynamics between a son and his father, often the first and foremost model of manhood, is a fitting topic for baseball literature. Kahn's adult identity was achieved, he feels, by emulating his father, a college baseball player and longtime Dodger fan. As a child looking for models of manhood, Kahn dreamed of becoming a Dodger himself--an exalted and considerable image. Kahn's affinity for the Dodgers is initially established by his father; the manly persona he does acquire, that of writer and a part of the Dodger organization, involves following his father's lead as well. In Kahn's household, where literary discourse was "bread, air, water, fire, life," and in which he felt alienated from all but his father, a career which combined baseball and literature was the perfect niche.

Kahn identifies other father figures in this coming-of-age story: fellow newspapermen who offer advice, other sportswriters with whom he travels, and writers like Frost, Hemingway and Joyce whose works he studies in both child and adulthood. He actually imagines himself, as he begins his career covering the Dodgers, to be like Stephen Dedalus traversing Dublin streets or Nick Adams exploring northern Michigan. Nevertheless, it is the image of his biological father Kahn returns to when the Dodgers he has watched and reported on lose some of their core players and are no longer _the_ same Dodgers. Kahn considers the metaphoric implications of this ending in the closing sentence of the

book's first section:

> The team was broken up and with my father dead there was no one with whom I wanted to consider that tragedy, and because there was no one, I recognized that the breaking of a team was not like greater tragedy: incompleteness, unspoken words, unmade music, withheld love, the failure ever to sum or say good-bye" (196).

In this instance, then, baseball is only a means to a different and more important end; the game seems important because it brings people together, but what is really important is the togetherness, not the game. Baseball's place as the only point of interaction between Kahn and his father indicates not only the glory of the game they shared, but the limitations of a life in which they are never able to relate on more significant or intimate levels.

As Kahn establishes his male identity in The Boys of Summer, women play a secondary and, at times, an inhibiting role in his life, the life of a boy figuring out how to be a man. While Kahn defines himself through baseball, he defines himself in opposition to women. Kahn's first sexual encounter with a woman, for example, (watching the family's German maid taking a bath) is assessed in relation to baseball: Kahn quickly decides that his confused, sexual thrill was trivial in comparison to the thrills to be found in baseball. Kahn's sister becomes a character in the story only when she is stricken with polio; she gains a voice, albeit a minor one, when, in her immobilized and weakened state, she becomes both a tireless reader and a Dodger fan. It is as if her role as intellectual and cripple makes her appear less feminine to Kahn, and thus more prone to interact in a baseball discourse. Kahn supplies his mother with a voice throughout his narrative, but it has the unsettling shrillness of nails on blackboard.

Kahn's mother is the uninitiated female who tries to break the bond that Kahn and his father share, who belittles Kahn's interest and career in baseball. She shouts Kahn's father's name as father and son talk and play baseball together, and she tells Kahn himself that he must read "real" books; later, she insists that he get a more "worthwhile" job. His mother's one attempt to relate to his interest in baseball occurs when she buys young Kahn a baseball uniform; but, rather than purchasing a Dodger uniform, she gives her son a St. Louis Cardinals outfit--a mistake that offends Kahn and indicates his mother's general ignorance and inability to understand either him or the game he loves.

As Kahn's story progresses, women play no significant role in the worlds of newspapermen or ballplayers either--as co-workers, friends, wives. As Kahn excitedly prepares to report on the Dodgers for the first time, he makes an off-hand reference to the fact that he picked up a car and a wife somewhere; later he mentions that he and his wife did not relate to one another until their son was born; eventually he explains with equal disinterest that he and his wife have now divorced. These passively-conveyed asides used to describe women are particularly startling when compared to the romantically-charged language Kahn lavishes on game-day events and <u>his</u> Dodgers: a phenomenal catch at centerfield or a homerun by an opposing player which dashes World Series hopes. Kahn defines himself through baseball; being a part of the Dodger season is more crucial to his identity than being a husband. The realms that most interest him are those in which men interact solely with other men. An African American male "other" demands to be

confronted once he steps on to the field; a female "other" (black or white) need not become part of a white male's identity because women are absent from "the field," the space where men prove and define themselves.

Kahn's two loves--baseball and literature--seem to inform one another as they simultaneously offer him a greater understanding of the world and of his adult, male self. What Kahn really does as he chronicles his career as a writer is to write himself into the narrative of the Brooklyn Dodgers. He makes himself a part of that memorable team: one of the "boys of summer." As Kahn travels with the Dodgers he becomes privy to the underside of baseball; yet it is precisely his acquaintance with these seedier details that solidifies his membership in the team fraternity. Inclusion in this circle of men, along with his acceptance into the all-male world of newspaper writers, defines Kahn's ascension into adulthood. Kahn narrates how players and journalists accept him as a writer and as a companion; Kahn is invited to a movie by one player, he drinks with another group of men associated with the game, and he banters aggressively in the locker room with a naked Roy Campanella, the Dodgers' catcher. Kahn relates with pride that he is sometimes subjected to the same kinds of practical jokes and endearing profanities that the players dish out to one another. He even indicates that he has actually affected the team's success--by writing articles, offering advice, and instilling confidence in the players with whom he interacts.

That Kahn is successful writing himself into the narrative of the Brooklyn Dodgers becomes particularly evident in the book's second

half, when Kahn describes a series of visits paid to thirteen retired Dodgers in 1970. As he tells the stories of his visits, of the lives of these men before, during and after baseball, it not only becomes clear that these men think of Kahn as a part of their experiences with the Dodgers, but that in Kahn's assessment, too, the narrative of his own life before, during and after 1953 has become commingled with those of the players; his own story has gained equal footing with their's. Kahn is even the person who connects the now disparate lives of these ex-teammates: he passes along greetings and updates between them and then places their stories alongside one another's within the covers of his book.

These ex-ballplayers face two deaths, Kahn suspects: when their reflexes lose the slightest edge and they can no longer compete with younger men, they face a premature death of retirement. The ex-players he visits no longer do the thing which set them apart and made them heroic; their "summers" are over, and Kahn's own narrative is now the most authoritative. It is Kahn who lives on after the games end, who flourishes most when only the discourse remains. He taps into a common baseball literary trope that the game has no time constraints: he keeps the third out at bay and retains opportunities to prove himself the hero. "Frost could compose with wit at eight-six," Kahn writes; "they slumped in hitless demise at thirty-five" (205). In 1970, not 1953, Kahn creates, gains fame and financial reward, and comes to life as a writer. Kahn makes the passive, often "feminized" role of writer into his heroic baseball identity.

It is this insider's perspective which gives Kahn a particularly interesting take on Jackie Robinson and the issues which he and the team represent. Throughout most of the text, Kahn keeps his discussions of the team's significance in his own and other fans' lives separate from the problematic issues of racism and integration which surround Robinson. When Kahn writes about Robinson he writes about the seemingly separate topics of injustice, prejudice, and politics.

At certain times, however, Kahn tries to write about Robinson as merely a Brooklyn Dodger, just another player, as part of a discourse unconnected to racism and politics. Above all else, Kahn stresses, Robinson was just out there earning a paycheck. Kahn shows the extent to which Robinson became an assimilated part of the team and the baseball establishment when Robinson's baseball "chatter"--a quickly moving barrage of censure for the umpire and encouragement for his pitcher, Ralph Branca, which Robinson broadcasts from his position at second base--is reproduced verbatim by Kahn.

> '[Ball one] Oh no. Ball shit. Don't worry. Bear down, Ralph. Where was it? Where was the pitch? Goddamnit, ump, do the best you can. Don't let him bother you, Ralph. Bear down. [Ball two.] Good pitch. Goddamn good pitch. Where you looking, ump? Stay in the game. Bear down, Ralph. Don't mind him. [Foul ball.] There's one he didn't blow. Bear down. [Ball three.] Oh, no; oh, shit. Where was it? Where the hell was it? ... Attaboy. Good pitch. [Ball four] Hey, ump, what the fuck are you trying to do?' (120-121)

Here Kahn shows Robinson speaking "baseball," a language free from issues of race and politics; by reproducing this "chatter," Kahn shows how Robinson is included in mainstream baseball, but this language also acts as an obscuring veil which distances a closer reading of Robinson's interactions. Robinson's diatribe from second base, in

fact, is like a less anaesthetized version of the "everyman" baseball-talk Robinson uses in the one-dimensional, moralized Hollywood film The Jackie Robinson Story, in which a retired Robinson, already chunky around the gut and jowls, plays himself as a college and rookie player. In this film, Robinson's complete lines of dialogue in response to the questions and concerns of other characters consist of "jeez", "gosh," and "I never thought of that."[27] In a film which could not include the profanities of his real baseball language, Robinson speaks in empty phrases which remove him from larger socio-political issues and make him a product only of his on-field physical acts.

But these representations of Robinson as just another player are rare in The Boys of Summer, as they are in most baseball texts. Instead of merely using language to make Robinson a deracinated Dodger, Kahn uses language to a different end. Kahn stresses Robinson's inability to play baseball like other players, but Kahn's descriptions of Robinson, common and at times stuck in rhetoric, may belie the unique perspective and personal interaction Kahn believes he has with this focal point of the Dodgers. Kahn characterizes Robinson's play as intensely self-conscious and driven by the symbolism which both whites and blacks have invested in him. In Robinson, Kahn states, the forces of black hope and white hatred converged. Robinson, it seems, is unable to find in baseball an escape, a kind of mindless play (which goes a long way to explain his short career, his premature greying, and his death of heart failure in his early fifties). In language stuck in

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[27]Alfred E. Green (Director), The Jackie Robinson Story (1950).

hard-boiled phrasing, Kahn explains to his father that Robinson '"is under assault every minute of every game, and he has to fight for every breath'" (115). Kahn evinces no unique view of Robinson with this over-used wording.

Understandably, Kahn sees the racial implications in all that Robinson does. When Robinson wins awards or receives censure, Kahn wonders whether Robinson's race is the cause. When the team gets along and wins together, Kahn explains that the white players, even those from racist backgrounds, accept Robinson as a friend and a leader. When a large number of black fans attend a game, Kahn checks with Robinson for a response. Kahn relates how it was impossible not to recognize Robinson's deep ebony skin color, which was shocking in itself. Every person in major league baseball before Robinson, every player, manager, coach, umpire, and batboy had been white. The field had always been green, the dirt brown, and, like the ball, the players white. "Suddenly in Ebbets Field," Kahn writes, "under a white home uniform, two muscled arms extended like hawsers. Black. Like the arms of a janitor. The new color jolted the consciousness in a profound and not quite definable way. 'Amid twenty snowy mountains, the only moving thing was the eye of a blackbird'" (xix). Even in Kahn's mind, blackness is something he associates with janitors, not ballplayers.

What is of even more interest is how Kahn maintains an idyllic sense of what baseball represents at the same time that he presents a baseball story full of intolerance, exclusion, and the jarring blackness of Jackie Robinson. A discourse surrounding Robinson occurs separately from a larger baseball discourse (in which Robinson also has

a part) because Robinson symbolizes something more than the game and because, as a black man and marker of change, his presence would problematize a discourse full of romantic reverie and reference to American ideals. Both narratives are given ample attention, but, for the most part, the issues surrounding Robinson are kept separate and do not alter or confuse Kahn's perception and depiction of baseball and all that it symbolizes. Kahn repeatedly switches gears as he moves between writing about the team as a whole and, then, about racial issues and Robinson. His tone, language, and identity alter as he moves from the fraternal banter and support of the pressroom and locker room, to, for instance, the southern states through which the team travelled during their spring training--"the horror all about" of white racism.

The result of Kahn's linguistic demarcation is that he can find in both baseball and the racial issues swirling around Robinson a usable identity, a heroic self-definition. Through discussion of Robinson, Kahn creates a role for himself as activist and fighter against racism and injustice. Kahn highlights his own part in an event which helped define the Civil Rights movement. The confusing effect Kahn's "race-man" identity might have on all else he sees and loves in baseball and the Brooklyn Dodgers is simply not addressed. His portrayal of himself as a man actively battling for Robinson's cause, of being "down" with the struggle against racism, gives him both a noble persona and an enviable role as a writer. In a dramatized conversation with Robinson, Kahn makes his position clear:

> Kahn: I'm sure it doesn't mean a damn, Jack, but I just want you to know I think that racist shit is a disgrace.

J.R.: Then write it.
Kahn: I will.
J.R.: You'll be the first.
Kahn: This must be hell (109).

Kahn fought alongside Robinson and "strived to get beyond the ballgames and get the real story in the papers." Again, through the trite language of war novels and adventure serials, Kahn establishes a heroic role for himself through his own writing.

Kahn is able to move cleanly between this "real story" of racism and a story of baseball devoid of issues of blackness; neither story contradicts or discredits the other. He documents, among other things, the racist remarks by players, the conditions black ballplayers suffer throughout the South, and the racial tensions which continually surround Robinson. When Kahn is told by his newspaper to write baseball--balls and strikes, not race-relations and "sociology"--he returns to the drama of the pennant race. However, Kahn overhears a conversation between two Dodgers which inhibits his ability to move easily between these discourses and brings the contradictions between them into dramatic relief.

After third baseman Billy Cox loses his starting position to an African American rookie during the 1953 season, he and pitcher Preacher Roe utter racist remarks in Kahn's presence. Cox and Roe complain about "niggers taking jobs from whites." Suddenly, Kahn's writing is unable to keep his two heroic roles distinct from one another. Unwittingly, he has to juggle his affection for a team and its players with the undeniably racist views of two of its members. Not only is the vision of the team Kahn has conveyed called into question, the contradictions implicit in his dual identity as "one of the boys" and

as part of the racial struggle alongside Robinson become more evident.

Upon questioning from Kahn, Roe and Cox reveal that, in their minds, Jackie Robinson no longer is a "nigger." Like Roland Barthes's explanation of how the "other" is understood, Robinson is accepted when he is made same. It becomes clear that there is no paradigm shift in the racial thinking of these men, in spite of their interactions with Robinson: Robinson is not integrated on his own terms, as an African American, but is assimilated into a white baseball landscape, which means they view him, when need be, as "white." Mike Dressen, the manager of the team, expresses a similar sentiment when he states: "Now on this team there's guys, they don't like Robi'son or none of 'em. But that don't mean shit because when we're gonna win the pennant and when they see it's Robi'son getting them World Series money, he's gonna look awful white awful fast" (112). This "baseball-talk" Dressen uses to describe his second baseman and the racial issues surrounding him, again, assimilates Robinson at the same time that it obscures real issues and any real understanding of Robinson's identity. As Ralph Ellison's invisible man decries: "they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination--indeed, everything and anything except me."[28] Kahn laments: "what infinitely barren ending for the Robinson experience if Dodgers called other Dodgers 'niggers'" (174).

In Malamud's The Natural, Iris Lemon says to Roy Hobbs that heroes function as exemplars that others strive to emulate; "it is a [hero's] function to be the best and for the rest of us to understand what they

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[28]Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (New York: 1989) 3.

represent and guide ourselves accordingly" (Malamud, 140). Kahn faces the awkward dilemma of actually knowing personally the men he sees as heroes. When Cox and Roe utter racial epithets, it becomes unclear what exactly Kahn's heroes on the Dodgers represent to him. Cox and Roe are not only far from baseball's ideals at this moment, they also are antithetical to the ideal Robinson represents to Kahn. Robinson, the biggest hero on the Dodgers, is made "white" by his teammates. To Kahn, Robinson is both one of the beloved Dodgers (made "same"), and a "race-man" (an "other") who gives Kahn a link to bigger issues of social change in America. Kahn demonstrates that as useful as Barthes's distinction between "same" and "other" can be as an analytic device, it fails to capture the complications involved in the fluid process of identity formation.

After he hears Dodgers call other Dodgers "nigger," Kahn seems even more consciously to segregate these two discourses. At this moment when an understanding of baseball's myths and African Americans clash within Kahn's own person, it appears that Kahn decides not fully to align himself with Robinson, a union which in itself might be impossible. If Kahn, for example, wrote only "race and sociology, not balls and strikes," he would not be able to share in baseball's ideals without being reminded of the game's injustices; as with Robinson, baseball would not provide Kahn with a liberating and self-defining escape. However, Kahn can enter and leave a racial discourse in his writing, possibly because he does not feel entirely defined by his race or the race of those he admires. He maintains the idealized space of baseball because he can, and also because without it he would lose much

of the substantive identity he has acquired and developed throughout his life and the pages of his book. Kahn realizes that the Dodgers, like baseball as a whole, are flawed, but a few racist remarks do not change their meaning or the meaning of the game: the amazing stops of line-drives made by Billy Cox at third; the movement on one of Preacher Roe's famed spit-balls; the way a community was united behind the Dodgers; and the bond baseball provided between Kahn and his father. Kahn accepts the racist views of Cox and Roe as a part of their character which can be pushed to the background. The maintenance of separate discourses enables Kahn to establish the identities he gleans from baseball: he remains involved in an all-important and just struggle while still connecting to his past, sharing in the beauty of baseball, and retaining his status as one of "the boys of summer."

III

THE WHITE PROTAGONIST AND THE BLACK BASEBALL PERSPECTIVE

Around the time Roger Kahn published The Boys of Summer in 1972, many other books about black baseball began to appear as well. From the 1970s to the mid-1980s there was a dramatic influx of literature not only about Jackie Robinson, but also about the then defunct Negro Leagues--black baseball before Jackie Robinson.[29] Histories of the Negro League, interviews with its former stars, and fictionalized accounts of Negro League life and play became a hot topic because black players were now an established component of mainstream baseball and because the Negro Leagues, extinct and mostly undocumented, seemed in jeopardy of being forgotten forever. The collection of scholarship about black baseball and black baseball players at this time can also be attributed to a more far-reaching trend to revise codified white American history through the examination of African American history and multi-culturalism. At this moment in United States history, at the end of the racially-turbulent 1960s, issues involving African Americans were at the fore of many American minds.

This literature about the Negro Leagues explores from a new

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[29]On the Negro Leagues, see: Robert Peterson, Only the Ball Was White (New York: 1984); Donn Rogosin, Invisible Men: Life in the Negro Baseball Leagues (New York: 1983); William Brashler, Josh Gibson: A Life in the Negro Leagues (New York: 1978). On Jackie Robinson in particular, see: Jules Tygeil, Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy (New York: 1983); Art Rust, Jr., Get That Nigger Off the Field (New York: 1976).

perspective baseball's long-standing literary and symbolic conventions. Images of baseball as a symbol for "melting pot" assimilation, idealized rural origins, and a general American identity seemed contradictory and erroneous when contrasted with baseball's relationship with African Americans and the Negro Leagues. Books about the Negro Leagues confront the relationship of "black" and "white" baseball in a few general ways: these books analyze and debunk Major League baseball's myths, depict the plight of black ballplayers, and celebrate Negro League play, often presenting black baseball as more representative of the game's professed ideals.

The exclusion of black players from equal participation in the game, mainstream acclaim, and financial rewards is a blight on baseball's history. For baseball aficionados, fanatics about statistics and making comparisons between players and teams of any era, the segregation of black stars of now immeasurable ability was not only unjust and contrary to the game's preached doctrine, it also left baseball's history forever incomplete. This exclusion of black athletes is also what attracts fans and scholars to the study of the Negro Leagues. The undocumented play, pieced together by word of mouth, made it the stuff of tall-tale, hyperbole, and instant reverie; for many writers, falling in love with and celebrating these seemingly undiscovered phenomena have been hard to resist. These writers, unabashedly biased fans, lavish praise on black baseball and see it (in many ways justifiably so) as a more true representation of baseball's conventions. Much more frequently than their white counterparts, African American players actually grew up in rural areas, particularly

in the South. For these black athletes, baseball was one of the only means by which they had a chance to gain a degree of upward mobility and a piece of the "American pie." To many writers, black baseball teams epitomized the allegedly American combination of hard work and creative enterprise. These teams struggled to make a living, played one or more games almost every day of the year, and travelled ceaselessly--to America's biggest cities and smallest towns, and internationally throughout the Americas, the Caribbean, and any warmer climates where a game could be played during winter months. They competed against other black teams, white barnstorming teams, and local, small-town teams against whom they had to play below their real level of skill and perform tricks in order to keep games close and to entertain crowds.

In his study of the Negro Leagues, Only the Ball Was White, Robert Peterson stresses the fact that barnstorming by black teams brought baseball to the most backwoods, out-of-the-way towns, often to places where no African Americans resided. In an age before television, these black teams carried with them a holiday atmosphere, likened to the coming of a circus, and a respite from the grind of daily routine. They also played in northern cities to both black and white crowds, with attendance sometimes outnumbering that at white baseball games. In many respects, black players were true populist harbingers of the game, encouraging its play and spreading the knowledge of both its rules and its mythic doctrines throughout America. Yet, in all of these texts about Negro League baseball, issues of race and racism remain ever-present, and often authors praise black baseball more

lavishly for all that its players suffered. Barnstorming in these small towns, despite what it may have done for the game, remained "grueling labor mixed with constant threat--and often reality--of insult, rebuff, and discrimination."[30]

Fiction employs the Negro Leagues in a variety of ways. Unlike non-fictional studies which make black baseball their central focus, much baseball fiction includes only references to and aspects of the Negro Leagues. Often, authors exploit selected features of black baseball to add to a text which is primarily about white baseball and a white protagonist. In some of these stories, the move from mainstream, white baseball to black baseball is like the leap from realism to magic realism; authors see the oral history of the Negro Leagues as the license to include the super-natural, the superheroic, time travel, and other fantastic situations as they develop a narrative about white players. Other baseball texts, like the two which will be discussed in this chapter, connect a white protagonist with black players in order to bolster the white athlete's sense of identity: the white character benefits from a "black" style of play, outsider perspective, and struggle with oppressive conditions.

In her Playing in the Dark, Toni Morrison explores the different ways African American figures have affected and been imagined in literature written by white Americans. Morrison discusses how an "Africanist presence" is essential to a novel like Willa Cather's Sapphira and the Slave Girl, and how the black characters in this novel and in others are not depicted in order to be understood more

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[30]Peterson, Only the Ball Was White 157.

profoundly or developed more fully; these black figures service white characters within the novel and the white author herself, all of whom gain a greater sense of identity through their contact, relationship, and personal understanding of African American personas. In Cather's novel, Morrison argues, a white slave mistress employs "surrogate, serviceable black bodies for her own purposes of power without risk," and, likewise, Cather herself "employs them in behalf of her own desire for a safe participation in loss, in love, in chaos, in justice."[31] Black characters are valuable to Cather's novel, as they are to others, because they supply a full range of observable emotions and actions, including the implication of what it means to be a slave, and these traits can be borrowed, tried on, and discarded with relatively little ill-effect to character or plot.

Morrison's thesis and its application are relevant to John Craig's Chappie and Me: An Autobiographical Novel (1979) and Jay Neugeboren's Sam's Legacy. Both of these novels develop narratives centering around a literary exploration of Negro League baseball. Craig and Neugeboren move into this story of black baseball for a reason: through contact with pre-Jackie Robinson, black baseball players, their white protagonists develop a sense of self-knowledge and belonging. As central as black characters are to each text, Negro League players serve the function of helping white characters define what it means to recreate one's identity, to live the American dream, to be a man, and to know what it means to be white. That the story of black baseball dominates these novels seems less a plan of each author than a

[31]Morrison, Playing 28.

testament to the imaginative power and capacity of this African American presence.

Chappie and Me is a novel which seems very unaware of its own means of representation, but it is interesting for the unique way the main character in the novel utilizes black characters for his own gain. Like much of the fiction about the Negro Leagues, Craig's book focuses on and is narrated by a white protagonist, Joe Giffen, who gains a fuller sense of himself as he joins a team of black barnstormers called the Colored All-Stars. The novel both tells the story of a black barnstorming team as it fits many of the game's literary conventions and challenges this standard narrative of baseball by identifying the sport with previously excluded players. Joe forges himself a usable identity by playing the game itself and by learning from the images, stories, and perspectives of his African American teammates.

The novel gives a fictionalized account of Negro League life like those found in the works of non-fiction about black baseball. The novel opens with Joe Giffen, a young boy, living in a small, rural town just across the Canadian border--just the kind of place black barnstormers frequently toured. The annual visit each summer of a travelling black baseball is a highlight of the town and young Joe's year. This team, the Colored All-Stars, brings with them a festive atmosphere which Joe likens to the "opening of the deer-hunting season, Christmas, the local agricultural exhibit" (1). These black barnstormers are remarkably skilled, but include with their play professional clowning, self-promotion, and tricks known as "reams." The team is managed brilliantly by a wily former Negro League player

named Chappie Johnson who knows each town and "keeps that flea-bit operation goin'" (27).

The town has no first-hand knowledge of baseball or African Americans apart from the Colored All-Stars, but, importantly, the people of Joe's town somehow possess an understanding of the myths and received ideas surrounding both the game and black males. Joe's town, it seems, maintains an understanding of black males through popular representations of African Americans like Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom, church minstrel shows, the radio personalities Amos n' Andy, and the film character Step'n Fetchit. Racial epithets are a natural part of the town's language, apparently used without malicious intent, and the people in the town somehow know that black men are supposed to behave accommodatingly and unassertively around whites.

As in other baseball stories, the game is also a link Joe shares with his father. Joe learns the game from this father, who himself learns about it through the yearly visits of the Colored All-Stars; within the novel, baseball is the only medium through which Joe and his father are seen connecting. Chappie Johnson, the Colored All Star's manager whom Joe describes as being "as black as a ton of coal," also becomes a baseball father-figure to Joe. During one visit to Joe's town, Chappie gives Joe an unsolicited lesson on how to play first base. Joe describes baseball as a noble occupation, a meaningful activity which helps its participants interpret the rest of the world, a rite of manhood, and Chappie Johnson is the one who inspires Joe to pursue a career in baseball .

The novel jumps six years ahead, into the Depression years, and

Joe is jobless, homeless, and "riding the freights" from town to town. At this moment when Joe is without a viable identity--his father is dead, he can not find a job, and he was unsuccessful in even the lowest level of minor league baseball--Chappie Johnson reenters the story to offer Joe's life a new meaning. A remarkable coincidence has Chappie's team short one player, a first baseman, at just the moment Joe introduces himself to the All-Star's manager as the boy he once tutored. Suddenly, Joe is in blackface, playing with the Colored All-Stars. White fans, Chappie tells Joe, can not tell blacks apart; they notice nothing. Joe begins barnstorming with the team around Canada and the United States.

Behind a black facade, Joe claims that he becomes a part of the black baseball experience. He states at various points in the "autobiographical novel" that he gains an insight into and an understanding of the black men who were excluded from mainstream baseball. Joe's story is reminiscent of the non-fictional account of a white journalist who passed himself off as an African American for a year. In John Howard Griffin's Black Like Me, however, the purpose was to investigate black culture, and Griffin spends a great deal of his narrative exploring what the implications of his "experiment" were like once he took his "mask" off and became white again. While Chappie and Me also hinges on race and how black and white Americans are perceived (in this case, in the context of baseball), the purpose of the novel is not to explore black culture and a black experience; rather, Joe Giffen's racial transformation is a solution, of some sort, to this white protagonist's problems. Part of the novel's inability to examine

the intersection of baseball's myths and African Americans in a more profound way relates to its lack of self-humor and narrative distance; Joe narrates the account of his experiences without commenting upon the racial and baseball myths which shape his actions and reactions and in which he is immersed. The novel claims to be a factual autobiography, and it remains a white character's search for identity through an adventure he has in black culture.

Initially, Joe goes through the trope of being shocked by the change in his skin color and how it makes him "go native"--a black facade transforms everything about him (as also occurs in Griffin's <u>Black Like Me</u>). Joe sees his face covered in black shoe polish and sees someone alien and menacing.

> It was that of some black ballplayer I'd never seen before. In its strangeness, it seemed to me an ugly face. A primitive, African face. The lips were thicker than mine and pinker, the cheek bones more prominent, the nostrils more flared, the eyes as bright as two half moons shining through the clouds of a night sky (36).

On one level, Joe can be seen as taking in an image of himself through the hateful eyes of racism; he sees a black face, albeit his own, as unrecognizable, scary, and ugly because he internalizes an understanding of how African Americans are perceived and treated. Yet the novel does not address these issues of race and racism so analytically. More often, the novel supplies situations which suggests that race is a social construct--that obsessions about "blackness" are, in effect, only skin deep. Joe observes that he "turned into a nigger so easily; there should be a far greater difference" (35). At one point, after Joe's baseball cap falls off during a game and his stringy, brown hair becomes visible, he is arrested for "impersonating

a nigger." The judge who tries him, however, dismisses the case on the grounds that "black" is only a color. Joe is thus able to reach the conclusion that skin color is the one barrier which keeps the skilled athletes who make up the Colored All-Stars from entering the Major Leagues; color signifies nothing other than the bizarre obsessions around "race" which control how people are defined.

As a black ballplayer, Joe experiences the effects of racism first-hand. Joe finds that he can not eat with his teammates in restaurants because he is "white," and that he is relegated to backdoors of eateries when he is "black." As he wanders the streets of one small town without blackface the night before a game, Joe meets and falls for a local white woman; in his black persona from first base the next day, he sees the woman amidst other whites spewing racial epithets at him and his teammates. Joe also describes the endless travelling of barnstorming, the close quarters of busses and dugouts, and the struggles with racism and rejection from restaurants, hotels, and even some ballfields. Through his insider perspective, he feels that he gains insight into black life and its complexities. He describes the laughter of black men as a private, "subtle, usually ironic, often bitter...defense against injustice and indignities they had to endure every day of their lives" (148). His teammates, Joe observes, harbor the seeds of violence and rage deep within their psyches because they have been cheated of a real chance to succeed.

Joe is able to learn about "black life" not only because he wears black face, in effect becomes "black," and travels with the team, but also because the Colored All-Stars prove to be far more accepting of

others than any whites Joe has known. Like other narratives about the Negro Leagues, Chappie and Me depicts a romantic contrast between Chappie's All-Stars and the rest of white baseball: unlike the racist and excluding Major Leagues, these black players do not see baseball as a function of race. The All-Stars welcome Joe onto their team and into the details of their lives as an equal and a confidant, regardless of his skin color. The players tell him that as long as there is someone to throw to at first base, the color of his skin does not matter. The team includes Joe so fully that he is actually given his own "ream," his own personal gag, and even a nickname which the player's only call one another amongst themselves.

Joe also reflects upon the distinct way that black men play baseball. He describes in racially-weighted terms the loose, easy movements of the All-Stars, a style of play so full of laughter and athleticism. Most of all, Joe thinks, these men love to play baseball, "are itching to play, will play at any level". From their bus, the team sees a group of youths playing a pickup-game, and many of them have to be appeased like children in a candy store by allowing them get off the bus and play for a little while. Joe depicts them as "natural men," like unreflective children, all body and no mind; these athletes express themselves and find a release through the playing of baseball. Joe says that the All-Stars were impatient to get back on to the field because "it was the one place where they really felt at home" (7). The release these men experience through baseball is also their escape from the mistreatment and racism they encounter everywhere they go. Chappie and Me does not comment upon how tragically ironic it is that this

release occurs in the very act which signifies their exclusion from real acceptance in America. Joe tries to imitate the innocent and carefree way his black teammates play baseball. Behind a black mask, Joe gains the freedom to express himself in new ways. Like minstrel singers who applied shoe polish to their white faces, Joe is released from the restrictions of his white identity and can be more entertaining, more physical, and more successful as an athlete. He plays the best baseball of his life; he entertains and clowns; he even carries out his dangerous and impressive ream to the delight of fans and his team. Like his black teammates, baseball becomes Joe's escape from reality. When the team is verbally attacked or chased out of a town, Joe too tries to escape to the simple parameters of baseball: the diamond, the ball, the game; "there was a little reassurance in that," he says (162).

When Joe shares in the experiences of his African American teammates, he feels he belongs somewhere and learns how better to deal with his own life. Joe, of course, retains the option of washing his face, neck, and hands, stepping out of this black life, and leaving behind the kind of racism and exclusion his teammates can not abandon. Unlike Robinson or Tunis's fictional Jewish rookie, Joe acquires the new identity of Colored All-Star without having to discard his original one. Joe's unique example of reverse racial assimilation occurs without the negative side-effects of feeling that he has "sold-out" his white identity, cut himself off from his past, or confused his sense of self. Joe does not lose an identity in this marriage of white and black, he gains an option. He is also a perpetual outsider to the

lives and style of play of his black teammates because he is the protagonist and narrator of the novel; Joe can never truly be the kind of "natural man" he judges his teammates to be. Black ballplayers can immerse themselves entirely in physical acts; Joe is the one observing these racial attributes and pondering his own identity. Like Kahn who creates heroic identities for himself through the act of writing about baseball and Jackie Robinson, Joe is the individual whose life these Negro Leaguers affect, and he remains the "thinking man" among "natural men."

Neither can Joe escape the fact that he is a lousy baseball player in relation to his teammates. He did not possess the skills to hit big-league pitchers at the age of nineteen and he never will. It is only a matter of time, therefore, before he has to leave his new-found family of All-Stars. Being on the team and being "black" gives Joe a second start at life; he is, he says, "reborn." The players on the Colored All-Stars will play out their careers in ignominious small towns and in frustration; Joe uses his Negro League "adventure" to start anew. The white protagonist is able to "play" on with a reaffirmed sense of self while the African American men who helped redefine that identity are abandoned by the narrative and left to their own fates. As World War II begins, Joe considers adopting the equally manly identity of soldier and patriot. He meets a woman and contemplates the prospects of a life with her. This woman is one-quarter black but can pass for all-white. John Craig seems to imply that she and Joe share a unique perspective of the world, as they have each experienced it from both a "white" and a "black" vantage point.

Craig supplies them with an easy ending: they can live in mainstream American society with the knowledge and fullness they take from black life.

What exactly this "black" vantage point provides for a white protagonist is not explored further in Chappie and Me. Roger Kahn could choose to step away from Jackie Robinson's experiences at a crucial moment and maintain a mythic vision of baseball and a viable identity for himself. Joe Giffen, like Jackie Robinson, supposedly lives the racism in baseball first-hand. Now that Joe has been made aware of his own "whiteness," it becomes unclear what he will do with this knowledge or how he will function in American society. He can not live amongst African Americans without a black veneer, and it would seem that he might not be able to operate amongst the conventions of racism which pervade white America. The novel suggests that Joe and his wife can share a kind of private understanding from their dual lives. But what sort of public manifestations will this understanding have when Joe looks to the military and other institutions to define his identity and finds racism there? Joe may feel compelled, like Kahn, to separate the black and white sides to his life in order to operate productively in mainstream society; possibly, his travels with the Colored All-Stars are just a neat summer experience. Unlike Kahn's predicament when faced with racist Dodgers, however, there is not even a moment in this novel where Joe seems forced to make a choice.

Neugeboren's novel Sam's Legacy (1973) intertwines the story of an alienated, Jewish gambler with the memoirs of a fictionalized ex-Negro League player. As the Negro League player's autobiography unfolds within the larger narrative of the novel, several of the imaginative ways white authors use black baseball are put on display. Like other accounts of Negro League baseball, this novel presents the all-black Leagues as the unrecognized and unappreciated counterpart to Major League, white baseball. Moreover, Neugeboren uses issues of race and sexuality to debunk baseball's myths in a playful and powerful fashion; the same conventions which appear in other baseball literature gain entirely different meaning here when applied to a black ballplayer. In Sam's Legacy, stories of baseball, race, and black athletes define both a white protagonist and a Negro League player, and supply both characters with a range of possible identities. Like Chappie and Me and the examples explored by Toni Morrison, this novel's primary focus is the white protagonist and how he uses the narrative of a black character to gain a more viable sense of himself. Nevertheless, the story of Negro League baseball and the black experience overshadow that of the white, Jewish protagonist and dominate the novel.

The few works of critical scholarship on Sam's Legacy look at the white, Jewish angst of the main character, Sam Berman, and how this character uses a baseball narrative to his own benefit. These reviews do not examine the complex process by which the protagonist comes to a greater understanding of himself through the intersection of this character's experiences and racially-weighted views with images of

African Americans, baseball, and sexuality.[32] One fresh way to look at the novel is to link the main character, Sam Berman, to Norman Mailer's "hipster" in the 1957 essay "The White Negro." Mailer here describes "the white existentialist," a man who carves out for himself a position of alienation from which to survive a totalitarian, numbing, almost ineffable present. Similarly, Neugeboren's Sam Berman is a self-imposed outsider and loner whose personal creed is to "look out for number one." Sam is disconnected from his father and Judaism, he can not remain intimate with friends or lovers, and, as a gambler, he roams anonymously in circles where this kind of namelessness is the norm. More significantly, both Sam Berman and Mailer's "white negro" define their outsider identities through appropriatable, objectified images of African Americans.

Mailer creates his "white negro" through a kind of "romantic racism" in which reified African American male images are appropriated for the usable identity they help one construct. Mailer's character steps into the identity of an imaginary black male who, Mailer explains, is unreflective--a primitive "natural man"--and an outsider. According to Mailer's perception, African American males possess a survival technique from living "on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy for two centuries" and a kind of animalism from "following the needs of his body where he could" and by "relinquishing the pleasure of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body." The power of blackness, as Toni Morrison might explain, helps

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[32]See Eric Solomon, "Counter Ethnicity and the Jewish-Black Baseball Novel" Modern Fiction Studies, 1987; Messenger, Sport and the Spirit of Play.

Mailer to define a forceful and effective vantage point for his character and for himself. While Mailer romanticizes this African American image, steps into its skin, borrows useful scraps of its perceived identity, and achieves an imagined insider's perspective of "blackness," he can still remain separate, white, and removed from the complexities of actually living the "black life" he so admires.[33]

In his own mind, Sam Berman imagines befriending black men, and he studies the habits of black hoodlums. In Sam's Brooklyn neighborhood, black life surrounds him. Like the "white negro," Sam moves through these streets with one hand on the knife in his pocket, his senses keen and discerning, his muscles (legs, stomach, arms, upper-body) strong and taut and ready to respond to danger or to an athletic challenge at any instant. Most tellingly, Sam enacts a kind of romantic racism in the way he perceives black athletes--their images and superficial narratives--and uses these black figures to help form his identity. At the start of the novel, Sam is enthralled by the "comeback story" of a black basketball player on the New York Knicks, Dave Stallworth. The attraction Sam has for Stallworth's drama--returning to stardom after

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[33]Referring to himself in the third-person, Mailer writes in The Fight (Boston: 1975), his book-long account of the 1972 heavy-weight boxing match between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman, about "his old love for blacks--as if the deepest ideas that ever entered his mind were there because blacks existed (41). Muhammad Ali's famed "rope-a-dope" style of boxing (the "against the rope strategy--the danger on the edge--what for others a weakness, to him a strength") becomes an emblem for Mailer in this book, closely related in its imaginative empowerment to the peripheral black vantage point utilized in the formation of the "white negro." Contemporaries of Mailer celebrated the same romanticized images of blackness for the usable identity it offered whites, who in comparison seemed blank and without an identity. See, for instance, Jack Kerouac, On the Road.

two years of inactivity due to a heart condition--identifies a lack Sam sees in himself. Sam feels that a black athlete like Stallworth possesses an unmistakable presence: not only is his story known by thousands of fans, but his size and the blackness of his skin make him, in Sam's estimation, impossible to overlook. Sam thinks himself empty and absent in comparison: he lacks defining characteristics.

In Sam's understanding of Dave Stallworth's narrative, the basketball player perseveres over immense obstacles and creates himself anew. Significantly, he does this without his wife, who leaves him when he is incapacitated, thus marking women as first faithless and then extraneous (Sam also recalls how Roy Campanella, a black Brooklyn Dodger and teammate of Jackie Robinson, was left by his wife when he was paralyzed in a car accident). Stallworth's return from physical and sexual inaction to the action of sports symbolizes, in part, a resurgent (black) male sexual potency that appeals to white spectators who might feel, as Sam does, a kind of impotence of identity. Sam feels that Stallworth's story is something which men share with other men, something which unites them. Like baseball for Kahn in The Boys of Summer, Stallworth provides Sam with a temporary identity as part of a community of men. When in attendance at a game, Sam looks around the stadium after Stallworth enters the contest and sees other men like himself with tears in their eyes, looking, as well, at the men around them. This, Sam repeats to himself, "is what it is all about."

Dave Stallworth's blackness, however, is what Sam notices first, and it is what makes Stallworth such an appealing figure. Sam repeatedly takes note of Stallworth's strikingly "black" features: his

dark skin along with his sheer size, his afro, wide lips, even a gold cap with a five-point star on one of Stallworth's teeth. Sam wants to interact with this man.

> He wanted to reach out, to put his hand on Stallworth's brown arm, to tell him, how happy he was for him, that he understood; and he had a feeling that, if they could get together for a few drinks, a few hands of poker--Sam would go easy on him there if Stallworth would go easy on him in some one-on-one in the schoolyard--they would get on together (6).

Sam thinks about combining his own skill, gambling, with Stallworth's slick basketball playing. He hopes to infuse a sense of himself with this black man who possesses the grace and ease of the nimblest of athletes, who has overcome years of suffering and betrayal by a faithless woman, and who has such a visibly present identity. Although he imagines this friendship with Stallworth, Sam never seeks out more information about Stallworth than what he gets from the sanitized rendition of his life in magazines and news stories. Sam does not want to know Stallworth as a real person, full of contradictions and messiness. A fully defined Stallworth would no longer fit the picture Sam holds and uses to bolster his own self-image.

These "lacks" themselves define Sam as the outsider he wants to be: he is free of socializing constraints and successful in a gambling world where he need only look out for himself. However, after Sam can no longer find a poker game and his bookie refuses to accept bets on the Knicks, Sam is without an athletic escape or a world of gambling to off-set this solitude. Without an arena in which to define his identity and manhood, he is just alone.

As Sam struggles with thoughts about his identity, the fair-skinned janitor of his building, Mason Tidewater, approaches Sam and

forces a manuscript upon him. Tidewater, a close friend of Sam's father, turns out to be a former Negro League pitcher; his manuscript is an autobiographical account of his playing career which he titles, "My Life and Death in the Negro American Baseball League: A Slave Narrative." Tidewater believes Sam can use his narrative, and Sam can and does. In fact, the "Slave Narrative" at the heart of Sam's Legacy helps to reveal both Sam and Tidewater's character; it demonstrates ways in which another story about a black, male athlete affects and informs the identity of a white man, Sam. But Tidewater's narrative comes to dominate Sam's Legacy. This story of Negro League baseball plays with the baseball conventions of upward mobility, male bonding, and it centers around racial obsession.

A pitcher of extraordinary skill, Tidewater recounts how as a black man (albeit very fair-skinned) in 1923 he was allowed only to play baseball in black leagues, with little national recognition and virtually no cross-over fame. Baseball still remained Tidewater's expressive medium and provided him with fleeting moments of transcendent release from the rest of the world: "My broodings concerning my color," he writes, "these were gone, not in any ecstacy, but in the simple act of playing" (74). When "the ball was in motion, the world was timeless, and my body moved, with strength and grace, of its own accord" (80). These moments of truly losing himself in the act of playing baseball are rare for Tidewater; more often, he is hyper-conscious on the ballfield, deliberately setting out to achieve excellence in order to prove the worth of African Americans. He writes,

> What I dreamt of, then, was that I might someday have the best of both worlds: to be the champion of my own people, loved and honored as one of them (as the best of them)--and, at the same time, to have my abilities (and thus, the abilities of all my brothers) acknowledged as superior by those whose skin color I possessed (76).

As with the contradictions faced by Robinson, Tidewater can not be a "race-man" and a "natural man" simultaneously; he can not prove the equality of the races through his baseball prowess and find, at the same time, a liberating escape in the game. His desire to prove the worth of African Americans drives him to strive for the impossible: to throw the ball faster and faster, until it disappears, to get out every single batter, to pitch "perfect game" after "perfect game."

Tidewater's intense striving makes him, by the age of nineteen, a baseball phenomenon recognized by both blacks and whites. In Tidewater's narrative, John McGraw, the manager of the white New York Giants, proposes that Tidewater, because of his amazing potential as a pitcher and because of his light skin color, "pass" for white and play in the Major Leagues. "Passing" fo white, Tidewater learns, would be neither difficult nor unprecedented--at least three players already in the Baseball Hall of Fame were really black men under assumed white identities. Tidewater rejects McGraw's offer, saying simply, "'I am a colored boy.'" As a result of this decision, Tidewater is forced to combat numerous layers of confused racial identity. His lack of skin pigment already makes him feel alienated from those he loves and lives amongst: his family, teammates, and black fans. He laments, "My environment is black and me its white victim" (72). The unequivocal refusal Tidewater gives McGraw makes him a life-long outsider with little sense of identity: the Negro Leagues in which he will now play

out his career are not the "real" Major Leagues, and, within this secondary league, Tidewater can not even claim an identity as a "real" black man.

Tidewater comes to hate the black men amongst whom he is condemned to play, more so than whites in fact, since he knows that his teammates are superior athletes but can simply do nothing to prove it. He chooses a life which restricts the identity his abilities can produce; because he must prove himself black, it is a life he will not leave. The shame and self-hatred in his diminished accomplishments and confounding predicament drive Tidewater to even greater feats on the ballfield as he strives to outdo and defeat his black opponents.

Tidewater's story of exclusion is representative of the circumstances faced by many Negro League players. After Sam has read the "slave narrative," Tidewater tells him, "I wanted to see in the conditions of my own life, marked forever by my face, the conditions of those whose lives were also marked by things outward" (343). As with the Colored All-Stars in Chappie and Me, the very act which gives Tidewater momentary release and which was meant to give him pride and fame offers, instead, internal turmoil, defeat, and a fixation on race. A game which acts as a symbol for assimilation, democratic ideals, and the American dream represents for Tidewater "the dream which I knew could never be realized" (80) and presents him with no inclusive identity. In The Boys of Summer, the narratives emanating from baseball and the Brooklyn Dodgers offer Roger Kahn the tools to construct a usable identity; Joe Giffen in Chappie and Me acquires a sense of self through the narratives of Major League baseball and his

experiences with Negro League baseball. Tidewater's story, on the other hand, reveals how he and the Negro Leagues are cut off from the tradition and symbols of baseball. Sam's Legacy plays with these ideas of cultural and personal homelessness (an image applied to white baseball players in Kinsella's Shoeless Joe) even further. Tidewater is doubly-isolated and oppressed: he feels cut off from a tradition of black baseball as well, and he doubts what sort of identity, if any, he is left with. Moreover, the narrative of how Tidewater can not obtain an identity through baseball serves the purpose of supplying a white character with a new-found, viable identity. The appropriatable use of a black baseball player's alienation is so evident in this novel because Tidewater's story takes up half of the text and because his narrative is so much more memorable.

Like white characters of baseball fiction, Tidewater too establishes the dichotomy between himself as the thinking protagonist of his narrative and his black teammates as unreflective men of action and emotion. Tidewater begins to objectify his African American teammates in a way similar to Sam Berman. Tidewater looks at the black men around him and wishes he could join what he imagines to be the mindless chatter and easy interaction they share with one another. He wished he could switch places with any one of these men, just so he could have known the ordinary release "grown men seem to feel when they have fought together and won" (194). After Tidewater helps his team win the Negro League World Series, he feels "the black bodies and black skin" of teammates and fans all around him, in jubilation, thanking him, congratulating him; yet Tidewater can not share in the festivities

and is certain that he never knew his teammates as they knew one another. However, from the retrospective gaze of this narrative, Tidewater is also highly self-conscious of the way he romanticizes African American athletes. The care-free interaction he sees between other black men, he realizes, ignores the full-spectrum of their personalities. "To envy them," Tidewater states, "was only, once again, to treat them as beings apart--to envy in them those things which have always been used to master them" (194).

Two other baseball players affect Tidewater profoundly. Brick Johnson loses to Tidewater his status as the team's star pitcher, but he is also Tidewater's polar opposite: he is cruel and vindictive, uneducated, old and at the end of his career, and he thinks of baseball as only a business and does not ruminate about its significance. Most of all, Brick Johnson is the team's darkest-skinned individual. Johnson does not acknowledge Tidewater's skills, though he is the one from whom Tidewater most desires recognition. When Johnson spitefully informs Tidewater that the famous Babe Ruth is a black man "passing" for white, and, thus, receiving the accolades and adoration of a country because he made the choice Tidewater could not, Tidewater also becomes obsessed with Ruth. Tidewater says of Babe Ruth:

> I must have wanted the adulation of that world which had made him the most beloved man of his time, and so I felt sick in my heart to realize that I deserved, by my talents, that adulation, but that I could, had I not made my initial decision, have had it (310).

Tidewater, therefore, is not only defined by his status as a Negro League player, an identity which marks him as second-class and excluded, he is also defined by the images and narratives of white

baseball which are intertwined with an understanding of his black league: "I let [my teammates] remarks about Ruth, their debates, flow through me and around me."

At this point in the novel, Tidewater becomes, in many respects, "the black Babe Ruth:" the best pitcher who goes on to become the best homerun hitter. With "Ruth's smiling face" locked in his mind, Tidewater unleashes the power to smash homeruns as he releases the anger and frustration within him. As part of a tradition in which Negro League players were named after white players who exhibited similar skills, Tidewater is actually dubbed with the title. Ironically, Tidewater's newly found baseball prowess does not supply him with more recognition or identity; as "the Black Babe Ruth," his feats turn him into the nominally diminutive replica of another player who has succeeded by taking the white persona Tidewater could not adopt himself, and who is putatively just as black, if not more so, as his "black" namesake.

Tidewater dreams of confronting Ruth during winter barnstorming in Latin America. When the two players finally meet, Tidewater strikes Ruth out and hits a longer homerun: feats, Tidewater realizes, which mean nothing, since Ruth had been bettered on many days and struck out by both black and white pitchers. Ruth merely recognizes Tidewater's skill joyously, declares Tidewater one of the best pitchers he has ever seen, and invites him out for a drink. Neugeboren has fun with the mythic character of Babe Ruth, both debunking Ruth's status and exploiting his excesses for imaginative effect. Ruth is a character in the novel who bullies teammates, reporters and women; indulges in

excessive eating and drinking; and is obsessed with his own inflated image. But he also displays weaknesses and insecurities: he admits his own stupidity, means well but gets carried away, and craves the love of others. Ruth sincerely tells Tidewater over and over about the success Tidewater could have had if he had just decided to "pass" for white and joined the Majors: "'They might've named me after you, if ya think about it...you could've had it all, just like me'" (311).

By the end of the evening Tidewater finds himself in Ruth's room and, after Ruth literally kicks a woman out of his bed, Ruth and Tidewater are left alone. Ruth unbuckles Tidewater's belt, pulls Tidewater's face to his own, whispers, "'My skin's darker than yours,'" and then the two men have sex. Their sexual attraction to one another stems from their obsessions with race in an all-male sphere, as well as with the fact that they are alter-egos: they both possess one another's best attributes and desire to be more like the other. In Ruth's eyes, Tidewater is young, educated, and seemingly self-assured. For Tide-water, Ruth is the most celebrated of American heroes because he dons a white identity, yet he also possesses the defining black features Tidewater craves--"the moon face, the broad flat nose and wide nostrils, the almond-shaped eyes that turned down at the outside corners, the heavy lower lip." Tidewater writes, "I needed to support my body upon his, to have that moon face tell me that everything would be all right" (182). Ruth has everything Tidewater wants: like many lovers before me, Tidewater states, "it was the image of my love which I desired."

Tidewater learns that baseball's myths are bedrock and

unalterable. Not only is Babe Ruth excessive in his cruelty, eating, and drinking, he is also an African American "passing" for white and bisexual. "I wanted to laugh at the sheer clownishness of the situation," Tidewater says; "the great hero of America lying in bed, locked in that most absurd of positions with a fair-skinned nigger" (309). Nevertheless, Ruth's image remains unaffected by less appealing aspects of his identity because narratives develop around him which do not rely on an original referent. Nothing Tidewater could do could alter the fact that, at best, he was the unauthentic replica of this vulgar man.

On Tidewater's finest and last day in baseball, he nears the perfection he had strived for when he first started playing. During a game in Cuba against Babe Ruth's 1927 Yankees, often labeled the best team of all-time, Tidewater gets every single batter out through eight innings and scores the only run of the game himself when he hits one of the longest homeruns ever witnessed. As much as Tidewater has resigned himself to a life of solitude and frustration, he realizes that defeating this Yankees team with a perfect game would give him a renowned place in baseball history and would assert something undeniable about the skills of black baseball players. Tidewater's teammates sense the importance of the day as well and, for the first time, Tidewater feels part of his team. In an ironic reversal of roles, the Cuban crowds call Tidewater "Gringo" and chant, "Grin-go! Grin-go! Better than Bam-bi-no!"; and, as Ruth gets more frustrated each time he strikes out, Tidewater's infielders razz Ruth: "'You can't see that ball, nigger man--our man blows it by you. Oh but you just a

poor nigger man, standin' there doin' nothin'.'" (326)

Only one out away from completing the perfect game, Tidewater forces a batter to hit a harmless fly ball to the outfield, a sure out. Brick Johnson, however, lets the ball drop for a hit. Tidewater is stunned, but momentarily collects himself and ends the game. After all but he and Ruth leave the field, Ruth calls Tidewater "a make-believe nigger," asserting that Tidewater is not actually black and denying him the identity for which he has sacrificed wide-spread fame. Johnson, inconspicuously standing nearby, adds to Ruth's insult, calling Tidewater "just plain make believe." This statement carries some painful truth: not only is Tidewater's fate linked to the anonymity of the Negro Leagues, a league in which his lack of skin pigment makes him feel an outsider, his one chance for acclaim and a defining identity in baseball is also shattered when Johnson drops the pop-fly and keeps Tidewater from "making history." At this moment, Tidewater strangles Johnson to death; he writes, I felt "his blackness seeping into my fingertips." Thus, Tidewater brings about his own death in baseball: he runs away, changes his name to Mason Tidewater, and never plays the game again.

When Tidewater produces his own narrative years later, he finally establishes his life as more than "make-believe"--the narrative makes his life substantial, distinct. Like Roger Kahn, Tidewater creates an identity for himself through a narrative which lives on after the game and supplants that which did not fully include him. Tidewater documents his playing career and gives his story the capacity to affect others. The "Slave Narrative" is forced upon Sam Berman, and Sam

realizes that it does remarkably relate to his own life. Sam and Tidewater's stories both revolve around characters who are fixated on race and who feel disconnected from the people, traditions, and institutions in their lives.

Tidewater's narrative affects Sam in at least three ways. First, the story forces Sam to interact with people. Initially, Sam has to deal with the details of Tidewater's life and then with Tidewater's real presence when the ex-Negro Leaguer wants to hear Sam's reactions to the text. Tidewater's story also makes Sam reconsider his relationships with other people. In Tidewater's autobiography, Sam sees a reflection of himself which he finds unappealing, and a fate of solitude which he does not want to replicate. After reading this story, Sam seeks out companionship from others and begins to dismantle his loner persona. He achieves what Tidewater could not and what Dave Stallworth could: Sam recreates himself successfully without losing an integral part of himself.

Second, Tidewater's story makes Sam see the way in which he appropriated black images to develop a sense of identity. Sam is forced to face his own brand of "romantic racism," in part, because Tidewater so openly exposes his own objectification of black figures. Tidewater revealingly writes about the way he sees his teammates: "I reduce their lives to images which please my own mind" (297). But Tidewater's three-dimensional, tangible presence also accompanies his text about a black athlete. When Sam says to Tidewater that black people now dominate their neighborhood, "Tidewater had puffed his pigeon chest, risen to full height [a disconcerting inch taller than

Sam], and glared down at Sam, declaring that he was one of them, a black man himself" (30). It is impossible for Sam to just pull certain features out of the "Slave Narrative" and glorify them selectively in the way he does with, say, Stallworth's story. Sam is forced to contend with the realities of Tidewater: his baseball feats, his failures, and his elderly, African American, day-to-day existence in the present.

Third, Sam is confronted with the presence of a man who describes his sexual relationships with other men. Sam learns that his own fixations on race involve homo-erotic views of African American athletes. After reading a story in which two black athletes obsessed with race become homosexual lovers, Sam has visions of liaisons between himself and Tidewater and himself and Stallworth. At one point, while Sam stands next to Tidewater in the janitor's basement-apartment, he imagines himself in his girlfriend's room, about to touch her, and then feels dizzy. When he is with his girlfriend he sees an image of Dave Stallworth; later, as he kisses her, "he was certain that he had, a second before, if only for an instant, as her mouth had opened to him, been seeing Mason Tidewater's face, and tasting his sweet tongue" (265). Sam admits these thoughts to his girlfriend and, luckily, she finds them amusing and not disconcerting.

That Tidewater's portion of the novel is the most compelling and clever does not seem to be an intention of the author. It is Sam Berman, the white protagonist, whom the entire story affects and benefits. White, Jewish angst in Sam's Legacy is assuaged by the black experience. Tidewater's story is written down, but this self-narrative

does not provide Tidewater with the ability to confound time and gain a reaffirmed sense of the heroic, the baseball trope of timelessness which Roger Kahn achieves through writing. Tidewater commits suicide at novel's end, and his narrative is consumed and seemingly exhausted by Sam who benefits from it; the black character's story is relegated to the status of a lesson, a piece of instruction which belongs to the white character. Like Joe Giffen, Sam is only just beginning an adventure at novel's end--an adventure outside of baseball, but one made possible by the sport and its black players.

Sam takes even more possession of Tidewater's narrative. Because Tidewater's story gives Sam the means to redefine himself, Sam wants to revise the details of Tidewater's life and give it a more fulfilling ending--Sam also wants to keep the third out at bay in Tidewater's life. Sam envisions a scene in which a group of elderly black men come to the door of his apartment building and say, "that, for some time, they had been looking for a man whom they believed had once been their teammate" (370). In Sam's imagination, then, Tidewater is finally connected to a tradition from which the ex-Negro League pitcher felt severed; by visualizing a group of men who actually call Tidewater their teammate, Sam provides Tidewater with the identity Tidewater was never sure he possessed.

This happy ending in which Tidewater finds inclusion and reaffirmed identity is not unlike other writing about Negro League baseball--both fiction and non-fiction--which attempts (although well after the fact) to give black baseball the recognition and homage it deserved. More importantly, this cozy ending ignores the relevance of

Tidewater's narrative and provides an easy way out for both Sam and for Neugeboren, the novel's author. Neatly, Sam's Legacy closes with Sam Berman gaining a new identity and the events of Tidewater's life gaining a positive spin. The move from "slave narrative" to revising the story and focussing on how it affects a white protagonist is a way not to examine the black baseball experience. Sam goes on with his life and the novel does not consider how Tidewater's tragedy lives on and continues to affect and define baseball and the lives of other African Americans. The power of Tidewater's portion of the novel does not make a reader crave some revisionist happy ending; Tidewater's narrative raises questions about the future of black baseball players and their pursuit of viable adult, male identities within the sport, as well as the dynamics of a white appropriation of African American characters and their stories within baseball fiction.

IV

THE AMERICAN DREAM

AND THE NIGHTMARE OF EXCLUSION

In his essay on the 1972 novel Runner Mack titled "The Black Man as Fictional Athlete," Wiley Lee Umphelt says Runner Mack is "the first American novel by a black to draw on sports experience as a means of organizing fictional meaning and purpose."[34] Umphelt's statement suggests that African American authors have not considered baseball a serious enough subject to carry the weight of a novel's narrative and ideas. If it takes a certain amount of love and respect for the game to take the imaginative leap to write critically about the game and its metaphors, then it is both sensible and a little surprising that African Americans have done this to a much lesser extent than white authors. Baseball played a strong role in northern, urban, African American communities from the 1920 through the 1940s; during this time, Negro League baseball was arguably the most popular spectator sport amongst black Americans. Baseball has also provided an area of achievement in which African Americans have gained social, economic, even political power in numbers beyond the proportions of their population.[35] To the extent that baseball excluded black athletes and had such a messy and public integration, it is more surprising that the

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[34]Wiley Lee Umphelt, "The Black Man as Fictional Athlete: Runner Mack, the Sporting Myth, and the Failure of the American Dream" Modern Fiction Studies, 1987: 73.

[35]See Early, "Baseball and African American Life," (New York: 1994) and "Blacks in Sports" Ebony, (1992).

game has not become a frequently tapped source for African American fiction and drama, especially considering that baseball fiction has typically used its own conventions to critique American society and the falseness of many of its professed ideals. It would seem only a logical progression, then, to include in this critique the glaring contradictions baseball and its myths reveal about the inclusion and wider acceptance of blacks in America.

It is not particularly surprising that black authors have not written baseball essays, a genre which usually includes a combination of a love for baseball, nostalgic reverie as enacted through personal memories of the game, and a close analysis of one or several of the sport's features. Today, baseball is one of the least popular of major American spectator sports amongst African Americans. If baseball is the symbolically quintessential American game, then it is also resoundingly white, and both the game and the country it represents seem closed to African Americans. As Toni Morrison writes, "American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen."[36] To struggle with the excluding implications of baseball may simply not be worth the effort; to remember a black past in baseball is to recall exclusion before 1947, the harsh treatment Robinson and other African American players suffered after integration, or to recall no tradition at all.[37] Even though black players have reached the pinnacle of

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[36]Morrison, 47.

[37]In "The Black Player Revisited," Sports Illustrated (5 August 1991), William Oscar Johnson recounts how some African American baseball players today, when interviewed, knew nothing

success in baseball, the game's connection with whiteness makes it less attractive than, say, football and basketball, both of which signify images (the military and inner-city life) which include African Americans.

Without many alternatives, it was not difficult to settle on the three texts by African American authors which will be examined in the rest of this paper. Barry Beckham is possibly the first African American to exploit baseball for a fictional critique of American society; August Wilson's Fences is a masterful play about a former Negro League player's battle with the American dream. No other writers (let alone African American ones) have examined the imaginative clashes between baseball and race as Gerald Early has. Each of the authors discussed here explores baseball and its metaphors in a particularly interesting way and offers a different, and corroborating, slant on the myths of baseball and America. Still, these texts do not offer any definitive or authentic glimpse at how African Americans operate within or see a baseball discourse. What Runner Mack, Fences, and the works of Gerald Early do well is function as a counter to baseball literature by white authors which either do not include black characters, incorporate black figures as stereotyped, partial representations, or present black figures only to demonstrate how they reflect upon a white protagonist. Black characters, narrators, and protagonists in this literature by black authors become the ones who contemplate the baseball world around them, and they are the ones whom other narratives, characters, and images affect. If aspects of black characters and

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of the Negro Leagues or Jackie Robinson.

black life are still romanticized and appropriated in these texts, then it is revealing to look at the different ways and possible reasons these images are used in that manner.

It is neither interesting nor accurate simply to demonstrate that the American dream, as it is envisioned through baseball, becomes spurious as soon as black characters are inserted into the equation. Through a baseball medium which includes a history of exclusion as well as inclusion, some authors have attempted to understand and explore the complexities and contradictions which are revealed when baseball and its myths intersects with African Americans. The authors discussed in the second half of this paper all look at the dynamics of this convergence of baseball and African Americans to see what it reveals about blacks in America as a whole. This discussion of a few texts by African American authors will attempt to examine several aspects of a baseball literary discourse: how the conventions and tropes of this discourse appear in baseball writing by black authors; what these narratives attempt to show about African American life within mainstream, white culture; and how issues of maleness and a conception of a female "other" play themselves out in the male world of baseball. The juxtaposition of black and white baseball writing in this paper places texts in opposition to one another; at best, a dialogue between these multiple texts will develop which both highlights the moments where they speak to one another in unison and the moments where their voices clash.

Barry Beckham's Runner Mack (1972) uses the conventions of

baseball literature to criticize American society and its treatment of blacks. In a style awkwardly modeled after Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, Beckham portrays an absurdly paranoid image of the United States and the American dream, which remains confusing and inaccessible to his African American protagonist, a baseball player named Henry Adams. In the novel, baseball and America operate interchangeably to exclude and debase Henry Adams. Although, as Umphelt notes, Runner Mack may be one of the first critiques of this kind to be taken from an African American perspective, the novel is not particularly successful in its combination of cynicism, comedy, and anger; too often, images miss their mark, seem excessive, and forced. Beckham's novel is most valuable to this essay in the way Henry Adam's story presents one African American variation on baseball and American myths, and the conventions of the genre which celebrate rural roots, upward mobility, and male bonding.

Henry Adams is a Mississippi-born baseball player for whom one of Major League Baseball's current advertisement slogans seems applicable: "Baseball Is Life." Baseball is the interpretive tool by which Henry makes sense of the world. He assesses people's movements by comparing them to graceful or faulty power-hitters; when he inadvertently utters his thoughts, it is like dropping a short fly ball; and sex, of course, is like being up to bat, trying to pick up signals from the other team, hitting a homerun. Baseball is also the means by which Henry has gained opportunities, upward mobility, and some local recognition. He was able to join all-white Mississippi Little League teams because he was such a skilled player, and, later, he plays in the southern Minor

Leagues where he compiles an extraordinary batting average, smashes numerous homeruns, and excels defensively in the outfield. Everyone in Henry's community calls him "Slugger" and treats him with respect. Even Beatrice, a light-skinned, church-going woman, takes notice of him because she has heard all the talk about his baseball prowess and the possibility of his joining a big league team.

These details of Henry's relationship to baseball and the rest of society do not distinguish him from white baseball protagonists; at this point his character is only a slight variation on characters like Roy Hobbs, Lardner's baseball rube, or Joe Giffen. Furthermore, Henry is from rural roots, he is simple and innocent, and he sees the world and his opportunities for success only through the scope of his expressive medium, baseball. Like other baseball literary figures, Henry is a kind of "natural man." He is instinctively good at baseball and associates the simplicity and natural expression of the game with his home in rural Mississippi. When Henry tries to actualize the baseball myth and, thus, live the American dream, problems arise.

Although presented clumsily, Runner Mack offers an African American alternative to the conventionalized narrative of an athlete's transition from rural origins to urban existence, a trope present in baseball literature from Lardner through Malamud. Henry marries Beatrice and moves to a New York-like, northern city where Henry has been promised a try-out with the city's Major League team, the Stars (Henry follows the natural progression to becoming a baseball "star"). Like his literary predecessors, Henry discovers that the city is impe-rsonal, confusing, and loaded with systematic restrictions. Henry

thinks longingly of baseball, which, like his natural world of Mississippi, is straightforward, uncomplicated and tangible. He recalls how it feels to hold a bat, to hit a ball, to run on a field. However, the idealized image of Mississippi which visits Henry during troubled times in the big city is not so uncomplicated and picturesque.

Baseball fiction employs the details of the game and the country's mythic rural origins in order to present its heroes as "natural men," born and bred on cornfields and farms, and to critique the stultifying effects the city has on these athletes. Henry's reveries of a better rural past in which he was close to nature diverge from this simple dichotomy of country: good and city: bad. The dichotomy in Runner Mack may be more along the lines of country: bad and city: bad, or much worse. For Henry, memories of Mississippi call forth hardships of his Jim Crow life there, a life particularly hard for black men and women. The trauma of Henry's new city life triggers nostalgic thoughts about his home-town; but, as he thinks of Mississippi, he also recalls the poverty, injustice, and powerlessness blacks suffered in relation to whites. He thinks about specific instances where his father had to accept the abuse he received from whites; Henry cannot escape an image of defeat on his father's face or the picture of the supplicating obeisance his father had to display around whites.

The father-son relationship in Runner Mack also strays from the baseball literary norm. Henry's father knows close to nothing about baseball, and he does not teach the game to his son, nor talk about it with him. The father does send his son northward with his blessing, to find a good job "up there," when Henry wants to follow his dream. Like

other characters in this novel, Henry's father somehow knows enough about baseball to speak the clichés from within the sport's mythic discourse: in baseball, he sees a place where the promise of the American dream, democracy, and a fair chance for his son reside. Both Henry and his father seem to associate their sense of baseball and America's democratic ideals with the North, where there are mythic Major League teams, because neither of them has seen a black person living the American dream in rural Mississippi.

The northern city, Henry finds, is worse. As Henry awaits his try-out with the Stars, his inability to navigate the big city, the oppression and confusion he feels just walking down the street or trying to find an apartment, completely unnerve him. To excess, he is bombarded with things antithetical to the athlete and natural man's existence: the streets, concrete and covered with snow, are far from the sunny and grassy sanctuary of the ballfield; people impersonally bump him, knock him down, and take no notice.

More than being a country bumpkin, Henry's mistreatment in this story is a result of his blackness. Henry seeks a job to hold him over until he begins his baseball career, and he enters a world over-done in its attempts to be like that of Ellison's Invisible Man: events become surreal, stifling, and part of some unknowable, insidious power-structure. At a company where Henry has an interview, a series of white men check his teeth, gums, and body, as if he were on an auction-block. The men ask Henry questions concerning his honesty, whether he has stolen before, and whether he will "run away." When Henry gets the job, he works in a cubicle amongst hundreds of other cubicles, and his

only responsibility consists of connecting a series of pieces together over and over. He has no idea how his task relates to that of the workers in neighboring cubicles, nor, for that matter, what the final product is that his company produces. Henry asks his white supervisor, also a powerless cog in a larger bureaucracy, "What are we doing and what does it mean?" But it becomes clear that this man neither has a clue nor is willing to ask questions himself. Beckham's paranoid vision of the city continues. Henry overhears other supervisors talking about spreading the black workers around to make them seem more numerous, and these men say that they consider Henry dangerous because he has been asking questions.

Apart from the city, his workplace, and the wounds from racism, Henry is also oppressed by the fact that he is married and tied down to one woman. As in other texts, a "natural man" and athlete envisions a wife as the restrictive chain to the home, the symbol of socialization and that the action of his life has come to a conclusion--that he can no longer "play." Beatrice talks to Henry about children and being together forever; she makes Henry promise before they have sex that afterwards he will tell her all about himself--she wants him to engage in words, not actions. As much as Henry loves, or tells himself he loves Beatrice, he can not stop thinking about other women. The combination of not being able to express himself through baseball and suffering the disempowering humiliation of racism gives Henry a feeling of emasculation; he tries to counter this lack by proving himself more of a man sexually. He struggles with a sense that women in the big city are "loose, venturesome, unreserved" and with the endless images

of sexuality which appear all around him. Thoughts of extra-marital encounters seem to be the "play" and adventure Henry hopes to use to redefine his manhood and heroic self-image; imagined liaisons with other women are the sexual equivalents of his tests of manhood on the ballfield.[38] Like other baseball texts, Henry Adams's female counterpart, Beatrice, remains imagined only partially and only in light of the restrictions she represents.

Also absent from Henry's life is the fraternal interaction of men with men, the male identity which baseball usually provides. Roger Kahn becomes a part of two male societies, a group of newspapermen and the Brooklyn Dodgers; Joe Giffen is made one of the Colored All-Stars despite his racial difference; Mason Tidewater could not find a sense of community with the black men on his team, so he turned to the manly arms of Babe Ruth. Henry Adams is without a team and without teammates. The white men whom Henry turns to for male support either dismiss him or see him as an exotic black "other." On multiple occasions, white men reveal to Henry their deviant sexual desires because, to them, Henry's blackness equates into a kind of increased sexuality.

Although everything in Henry's life is confounding and oppressive, he inexplicably holds to a simple belief in baseball and what it represents. To Henry, baseball may seem his only hope. To Beatrice,

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[38]In Malamud's The Natural, Roy Hobbs follows one sexually promiscuous woman to her hotel room when he first arrives in the city and is shot; years later, he is attracted to another loose woman and ruins his career a second time. The alternative to these women is Iris Lemon, who, to Roy Hobbs's terror, is a grandmother--the quintessential figure of a socializing woman and the end of "play."

he repeats trite expressions concerning baseball's ideals:

> 'These are the Stars, the American baseball team, Beatrice... Look, this is the American pastime, they've got to be fair with me. They've got plenty of black ballplayers on teams, don't they. It can't be what you're thinking. They have to judge me on my ability only. That's all' (86-87).

This simple restatement of baseball and the country's promise set up a predictable moment where the game, like every other institution in the novel, denies Henry a fair opportunity.

When Henry is finally granted a try-out with the Stars, he finds that baseball is immersed in the cruel and inexplicable culture of the city. The Stars' stadium is a plastic-covered dome which features the largest American flag Henry has ever seen. Inside the stadium there is fake grass, an artificial sun, and an assortment of other electronic gadgetry; the seats are red, white and blue plastic, and, before the try-out, a button is pressed and the national anthem blares throughout the empty dome. Not only is baseball taken from its mythical pastoral setting, it is placed in an exaggeratedly artificial environment: plastic, covered, draped and saturated with its own symbols. The dynamics of the try-out, conducted by the Stars' midget manager, Stumpy, and other players, reminds Henry of the slave-block-like interview he had with the white men at his work-place. For no apparent reason, Henry momentarily calls Stumpy "Mister Rickey," thus calling forth an image of Branch Rickey who hired Jackie Robinson with the stipulation that Robinson stifle his emotions and endure the insults and assaults of other players in silence. When Henry corrects himself and calls the manager "Mister Stumpy," this title evokes the picture of Willie Mays calling his manager, Leo Durocher, "Mister Leo." In two

lines, Beckham tries to associate his protagonist with all the baggage of the contradictions of Robinson's integration and the image of the accommodating black male that Mays, for many, embodied.[39]

The try-out gets off to an inauspicious start, but Henry goes on to display his phenomenal natural abilities. He succeeds in every possible way. He hits an exaggerated homerun that blasts a hole through the back wall of the dome, he catches what seems a sure homerun when he scurries up and balances himself on the outfield wall, and he fights off the artificial sun, moved around in order to blind him, and grabs a difficult fly-ball. Clearly, Stumpy and his players are trying to make Henry fail. When they witness Henry's undeniable skills, they play a practical joke on Henry reminiscent of "The Battle Royal" scene in Invisible Man: they make Henry catch an electrified baseball. This moment reveals that Henry will never be given a chance to play professional baseball; it also exemplifies the flaws in Beckham's critique of baseball and America's myths. Beckham may be aware of the comic-absurdity in his over-the-top paranoid vision of America, but the images and actions which characterize this commentary, for the most part, miss their mark, fall flat, and are not carried through to become something more profound and meaningful (like, for example, Ellison's episode mentioned above).

The American dream which Henry believed he could achieve through baseball instead becomes a nightmare of exclusion and failure. He is denied a chance to succeed solely because he is black. Whites in

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[39]See, for example, Early, "House of Ruth, House of Robinson," 241-249.

Runner Mack are powerless and unquestioning automatons in a society operated by some unseeable, conspiratorial power; as an African American, Henry can hardly even gain the status of automaton, and baseball, even in a post-Jackie Robinson era, offers no possibilities for inclusion. As Henry is pushed farther from the simple sanctity of the ballfield, the city streets begin to dominate him, his work becomes terrifying and nonsensical in its departmentalization, the restrictions he identifies with marriage confuse his feelings for his wife, and he lacks the comfort of bonding with other men. The novel ends with Henry taking part in a failed revolution.

While Beckham's overdrawn narrative begins by wending its way through many common baseball literary conventions, this novel radically differs from those of white authors examined in this paper. In both content and style, Runner Mack's world is drunk with pessimism. Roger Kahn, Joe Giffen, Sam Berman, and even Mason Tidewater all work through possible male identities and understanding of society offered to them by baseball. Baseball provides Henry no space in which he can choose between useful identities or alternative careers. Although Henry receives early acclaim for his baseball prowess, the game only steers him through a story of insult, rebuff and confusion. Intermingled thoughts of baseball and a rural past lead to painful memories of the mistreatment of blacks in the south and his father's disempowerment; the northern city and its Major League baseball team ridicule Henry and make him fail; the symbols of baseball are turned into grossly exaggerated and intrusive icons, mechanized gadgets of self-promotion; and allusions to Jackie Robinson and other black baseball stars seems

to suggest that no real racial inclusion has occurred in baseball or anywhere else. Henry lacks the resources to create a viable male self which baseball literary conventions usually provide: his father is weak and oppressed; he has no teammates; there is no field on which he can prove himself heroic; and the men Henry might see as role models, other black baseball stars, are absent or referred to disparagingly. The city frustrates Henry in every way; baseball merely sets him up for a final knock-out blow which proves his existence entirely futile. There are no literal or figurative ninth inning heroics which enable Henry to achieve as a baseball star or as a successful person. Unlike his white counterparts already discussed in the paper, Henry is not starting out on an adventure at novel's end; he has already failed and his story is over.

V

CROOKEDS WITH THE STRAIGHTS: CONTRADICTIONS OF BLACK MANHOOD IN AUGUST WILSON'S FENCES

Among the few works of literature examining the relationship between the history of African American life and the history of baseball, August Wilson's 1986 play Fences may be the most compelling and nuanced. The African American lives presented in Fences are infused with contradictions and complexities. Wilson's play focuses on the life of a former Negro League baseball star and the numerous narratives which affect him; it explores the way these contradictions in African American life confuse a sense of male identity and the mythic self-images open to black males. One of the play's defining narratives is the ever-present counter-story to African American life: the story of the American dream and the way it was experienced by so many white immigrants who worked hard, helped build up the country, and were rewarded with an American identity. Baseball is a part of this counter-story; it signifies the ideals of American opportunity and "melting pot" assimilation, and it offers usable lessons and identities to its fans. In Fences, however, baseball involves mixed signals, messages with multiple interpretations and unclear origins. The year of the play's opening events, 1957, is significant: it is a time when the racial tensions of the sixties are not yet present, although their rumbles--in events like the desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas--are beginning to make themselves heard. It is

the year after Jackie Robinson's retirement, a time when a second generation of African Americans in the Major Leagues are gaining fame, and, like Henry Aaron, winning World Series.[40]

Troy Maxson, the play's protagonist and a former Negro League star, is fifty-three and long past his playing days at the start of _Fences_. He is large and powerful, like the legendary city after which he is named. When Troy "walked through the house," his wife Rose relates, "he was so big he filled it up" (105). It is Troy's size, along with his blackness, which guide his thinking and choices; baseball shapes his understanding of the world as well. Baseball and the Negro Leagues are Troy's pride and his indelible shame. He thinks about all that his thick, heavy hands and power could have accomplished when wrapped around a baseball bat, and he can not accept or completely understand his exclusion from the Major Leagues and the American dream. Put simply, Troy worked hard and had extraordinary skill, yet, unlike so many white American immigrants, he was not given a chance to win fame and fortune--to create and recreate an identity for himself. Troy represents a bitter reworking of the African American legend of John Henry, the steel-driving man who left a past of slavery and used his awesome hammering abilities to help build the country through its railroads. Troy was neither given a chance to prove his abilities, and thus enter popular lore, nor could he forget the past in which he was denied opportunity.

It is not enough that Troy had prestige with the black men and fans amongst whom he played, that his localized stardom made him attra-

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[40]Early, "Baseball" 416.

ctive to women like Rose. Apart from that local recognition, Troy can only be told that he was "just born too early," that players like him paved the way for players like Jackie Robinson, an idea which infuriates him. He can neither move forward and accept that wrongs were actually righted--"There ought not never have been no time called too early!"--nor can he accept his own life as some objectified piece of history, as if he is not the main character of his personal narrative and the recipient of his own rewards. In frustration, Troy repeats his simple take on what the American dream should have been in regards to baseball: "If you could play ball then they ought to have let you play" (12).

In a departure from most other baseball literature, Troy sees almost no romanticism in baseball; the game continually frustrates his sense of manhood and his sense of self. Lawrence Levine writes in Black Culture and Black Consciousness that "life for African Americans is too complex for nostalgia."[41] Troy clings to his idealized baseball memories, not out of nostalgia, but out of bitterness and loss: he laments a past which appears to have added up to nothing, which now seems barely to exist; he curses a present which is the product of those ignored baseball achievements, in which he continues to struggle. Troy does brag that his skills and those of his Negro League contemporaries far exceeded those of both white players and the crop of black players now in the Major Leagues. He talks about the six homeruns he hit off of the best Negro League and possibly all-around

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[41]Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness (New York: 1978) 419.

pitcher ever, Satchel Paige, an unequivocal, tangible feat comparable to that of Josh Gibson, the Negro League's best power-hitter. But Troy also repeats the name "Selkirk" over and over in disgust, as he must have done for at least the last eighteen years; Selkirk, the "white ethnic" name of the New York Yankees' right fielder during Troy's playing days, only hit .269, a mediocre average, especially compared to the .432 Troy was hitting in the same years. At one point in the play Troy shouts:

> I saw Josh Gibson's daughter yesterday. She walking around with raggedy shoes on her feet. Now I bet you Selkirk's daughter ain't walking around with raggedy shoes on her feet! I bet you that! (11).

The exclusion of Negro League players from stardom and heroic stature is related in Troy's mind to the future inability of these black ballplayers to provide for their families, another manly role which is now denied them.

Even in Troy's present in the 1950s, he believes that black players have to be twice as good as white players to make a team, an observation about baseball which points to flaws in integration and affirmative action in general. Troy also belittles the achievements of these same black players in order to avoid feeling that their feats and place in Major League baseball are completely erasing his Negro League accomplishments. He tells people that Jackie Robinson would not have even made some of the teams on which he played and that Henry Aaron "ain't nobody. That's what you supposed to do ... What I did" (38). Although many baseball stories revolve around the interactions of men with men (as, say, The Boys of Summer does), Troy feels it is necessary to cut himself off from a legacy of baseball and from other African

American athletes.

Troy sits on the steps of his front-porch after work on Friday nights, drinks gin, expresses his views, and tells the stories of his life, many of which vary with each telling. "You got some Uncle Remus in your blood. You got more stories than the devil got sinners," Jim Bono, Troy's Friday-night drinking partner and friend of over twenty years, tells him. These narratives involving baseball, as well as the rest of Troy's life, offer contradictory lessons, ambiguous models, and confused morals. Troy's father, for example, was a sharecropper in Alabama who could have run off, as did other men in his situation, yet his father stayed and took care of the entire family. Troy learned from this man to take the same responsibility for his family; but he also learned that he needed to own land, unlike his uneducated and trapped father, who worked all year as a tenant farmer and only fell deeper into debt. Furthermore, Troy's father was selfish and mean: he made his children pick cotton on their assigned forty-two acres as soon as they could walk; he fulfilled his familial obligations without love or affection. A series of wives left him, including Troy's mother, and, at the age of fourteen, Troy ran away as well, after his father beat him and tried to rape the girl with whom Troy was "fooling around" instead of working. <u>Fences</u> provides an African American baseball narrative in which the father-son relationship is dysfunctional and vexing. It is this father that Troy tries both to forget and to emulate, and who continues to define him.

Troy explains that he walked the two hundred miles from his father's farm to Mobile and eventually hitched a ride to where he lives

now (in what seems like industrial Pittsburgh). He migrated north in search of work and fair living and found only segregation and exclusion.

> Got up here and found out...not only couldn't you get a job...you couldn't find no place to live. I thought I was in freedom. Shhh (58).

Troy is denied access to an image of hard-working manhood, to a sense of contributing to the country's growth, and to the tools necessary for building a secure family of his own. He explains that he began stealing because it was his only way to get food. Eventually he met a woman and had a child, his oldest son Lyons, since he was "anxious to be a man"; then, he had to steal twice as much. Troy ended up in the penitentiary, locked away for fifteen years. But the penitentiary "cured him of that robbing stuff"; it is also where he learned to play baseball.

When Troy is released from prison, he joins a Negro League team. Baseball puts a bat into his thick hands and gives him the sense that he is trying to bang out a manly identity for himself. Troy not only finds a vocation in baseball, he becomes a black baseball star. But the persona baseball provides Troy is riddled with contradictions as well. Baseball is tied to his life in prison and to the lack of opportunity which put him there. It is also, he discovers, not so different from the world he knew fifteen years before: it is segregated by race, inequitable, and unable to offer him a real opportunity.

Troy's memories of baseball diverge powerfully from the standard baseball literary conventions. Troy's rural upbringing and his experience of being "close to nature," for example--precisely the kind

of pastoral romanticism connected with baseball's mythic origins--are of sharecropping in the south with his father, who picked cotton his whole life and remained in debilitating debt. Like Henry Adams in Runner Mack, Troy can not romanticize real African American rural roots in the sharecropping South, roots full of Jim Crow segregation and ties to slavery. Furthermore, Troy does not learn baseball from his father as part of a familial and national legacy passed down through generations. Baseball does not provide Troy--as it did Roger Kahn--with memories of something shared, either physically or communicatively, with his father. Troy's baseball education came in prison, a startling contrast. When he is released from prison, baseball is the one skill he has picked up by which he can make a meager living, in segregated play. Baseball in Fences represents frustrated upward mobility, not bonding with fathers, other men, or a reassuring past.

When his baseball career comes to an end, Troy seeks to define his manhood in other ways. In some respects he succeeds and becomes a role-model for his sons and friends; but, like that offered by Troy's own father, the example Troy provides is ambiguous and uneven. He tries to establish a life for himself: he marries Rose and has another son, Cory; he works as a garbage-man, along with his friend Bono; he owns a small, ancient brick house; and he takes care of his brother, Gabriel, who received a serious head-injury while fighting in World War II and is now demented. Despite Troy's frustrating exclusion from the Major Leagues, he still believes in hard work and honesty. In fact, other than his physical prowess, these qualities are what define Troy's male identity and make him seem attractive and strong. Bono explains

that he realized shortly after they left the penitentiary together that Troy had sense and was someone worth following:

> I done learned a whole heap of things about life watching you. I done learned how to tell where the shit lies. How to tell it from the alfalfa. You done learned me a lot of things. You showed me how to not make the same mistakes...to take life as it comes and keep putting one foot in front of the other (68).

At the moment when Bono admits following in Troy's foot-steps, Bono is actually trying to steer Troy away from spending time with another woman; Bono's warning indicates that Troy is wrecking what family-life he has achieved and, thus, the very image which Bono has come to emulate. Other details of the male identity Troy constructed after prison are equally contradictory. It is painful that Troy's brother Gabriel fought and sacrificed for a country which does not treat him as a complete man once he returns from war and which, in the same years that he served, did not recognize the achievements of his brother. It is even more troubling that after a past of baseball exploits and years of laboring, Troy still "wouldn't have a pot to piss in," nor, for that matter, a house, if he were not appropriating most of Gabriel's disability checks. Troy also tells the humiliating and humorous story of how he was denied credit at a furniture store when he first bought his house. After he returned home empty handed, Troy explains, the "devil" suddenly appeared at his door--a white man with a clipboard who offered credit with exorbitant interest rates. Troy says that he is still making payments to this day, fifteen years later, not out of debt, but out of fear. "Anything you can't understand," Rose tells him, "you want to call it the devil" (16).

Troy's belief in hard work and its rewards compels him to fight

for equal treatment. His employer at the sanitation department is a more tangible, immediate foe than the unknown "devil" who denied him entry into the Major Leagues. Troy complains to his boss that all the garbage-truck drivers are white, and that all those who handle the less prestigious task of hauling garbage cans are black. Instead of being fired, as many of his friends fear he will be, Troy is made the "first colored driver"--a breakthrough indicative of the differences between the era when Troy played baseball and the present in which changes regarding African Americans have begun to materialize. Nevertheless, Troy is unable to see his promotion as part of a collective, black struggle; he does not even join the union. Troy sees his promotion as something just and fair for himself. Like the conflicting role of the baseball star who is an individual performer within the collective of a team, Troy often thinks only of himself.

More contradictory, however, is the painful fact that Troy's promotion to driver has left him unfulfilled and even less happy. Troy complains that he now works only with white men, and, separated from his friends and from other black workers, he is lonely. Troy and Bono almost never see one another anymore and even discontinue their Friday-evening ritual. This experience of being one of the first African Americans integrated into an all-white arena recalls the career of Jackie Robinson and the integration Troy was never allowed to experience. It also illuminates the problematic dynamics of integration as a whole, when a black man, even as powerful a man as Troy, is incorporated individually into an already established white environment.

Similar to many other baseball stories, Fences also concentrates

on the relationships between fathers and sons and the models of maleness passed between generations. Lyons, a jazz musician of little success, describes one of the lessons he was able to garner from his father's life: "You got to take the crookeds with the straights. That's what Papa used to say...I seen him strike out three times in a row...and the next time up he hit the ball over the grandstand" (101). But Lyons adds that his father never felt sated after finally hitting a mere homerun. "He want to hit it over everything!" Lyons shouts. It is as if Troy hopes he can blot out a sense of failure and prove his manhood with colossal homeruns--homeruns massive enough to transcend the fences of Negro League ballparks, fences which encircle an arena of pride and of shame. Troy offers the same kind of exaggerated proof of his manhood when he depicts an image of sex with Rose: "I fall down on you and try to blast a hole to forever" (44). His desire to hit redefining-homeruns is not unlike Mason Tidewater's aspiration in Sam's Legacy to pitch the perfect game: to pitch a ball which moves so fast it disappears; nor, as literary critic Gerald Early indicates, is it unrelated to the fact that numerous Negro League clubs took to naming their teams the "Giants." For, Early explains,

> in a country and culture where black men were belittled, called 'boy,' dismissed as menials or comics, adopting a kind of outsize mythology of masculinity and athleticism was, naturally, attractive, even obligatory.[42]

It remains unclear what Troy's son Lyons gleans, or even can glean, from the paradoxical example of his father. Lyons cares only about playing music; it is his reason "to get out of bed in the

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[42]Early, "Baseball," 416.

morning." At the same time, he rejects his father's ideal of hard work and, although he is in his mid-thirties, does not even hold a job. When Troy rebukes him for his laziness, Lyons parries: "You got your way of dealing with the world ... I got mine. The only thing that matters to me is the music" (20). Lyons shares Troy's need for an expressive medium, an interpretive tool, something self-defining. Lyons's music, unlike Troy's baseball, seems personal and unaffected by outside forces; he is not plagued by a desire to prove his own worth. Nevertheless, music does not fill Lyons's life with all that he needs. After cashing other people's pay-checks he ends up, by play's end, where his father had been for so many years before: in prison. And, like his father, Lyons spends his time in prison practicing his craft: he continues to play music in a band.

More central to Fences is the difficult relationship Troy has with his younger son Cory. Cory is a skilled athlete with colleges willing to offer him scholarships; he is the closer descendent of Troy, and Troy's lessons and self-narratives affect Cory more directly. Troy says of Cory: "I don't want him to be like me! ... I decided seventeen years ago that boy wasn't getting involved in no sports. Not after what they did to me in the sport" (43). Afraid that some unknown "they," some "devil," will cheat his son, Troy demands that Cory learn a trade, that he work a job at which there can be no argument about remuneration for his labor and skill. Trapped within the contradictions of his own past and a nebulous identity, Troy wants to protect his son and secure for him a better life. But when Troy oppresses Cory, Troy seems also to be ensuring that his own ambiguous

accomplishments will still surpass those of his son. Troy forces Cory to take a job in a supermarket, forbids him from going to football practice, and finally ruins his chances at a college scholarship. Cory confronts his father and correctly identifies half of the reason Troy does what he does. He yells at Troy, "Just cause you didn't have a chance! You just scared I'm gonna be better than you, that's all" (62). Troy can not bond with Cory through the medium of baseball--in its play or discourse--in the same way that he cannot acknowledge his black baseball off-spring, the current crop of African American Major League players.

Troy's treatment and mistreatment of Cory derives in part from the legacy of his own father, whose sins Troy seems tragically fated to repeat. Although it becomes heartbreakingly clear that Troy really does love his children, he can not escape a facade, a fence, of sternness and an image of himself as "boss" in regard to them. Like his own father, Troy acts as if his duties to his family are a difficult task undertaken without love, a compulsory responsibility. Troy compares his familial obligations to the agreement he maintains at his job in which he is paid for hauling rubbish, not out of kindness or friendship, but because his boss owes him. When Cory gets up the courage to ask why Troy never liked him, Troy explains with irritation that the food, clothing, and shelter he supplies for Cory have nothing to do with "like."

> Like you? I go out of here every morning ... bust my butt ... putting up with them crackers every day ... cause I like you? You the biggest fool I ever saw. It's my job. It's my responsibility...You my flesh and blood. Not 'cause I like you! (42)

Even when Cory marshals the courage to breach the subject, he and Troy do not discuss their relationship.

Similarly, Cory is forced to speak to his father with "yessirs" and to demonstrate unflinching respect at all times. When Cory finally questions Troy's authority and disrespects his father, Troy speaks to his son through the imagery of baseball: metaphors, not of union, but ones which reassert the subordinate role Troy wants his son to maintain. Troy likens himself to a pitcher and Cory to a batter who has stepped into the batter's box and entered an arena of confrontation with the pitcher. Troy makes it clear that he feels Cory has challenged him, that Cory is swinging the bat and missing; Troy warns him: "don't strike out."

Troy goes on to commit acts which others not only avoid emulating, they find them despicable. Troy ruins Cory's chances to attend college, he fathers a child by another woman, and, finally, he institutionalizes his brother Gabriel in a state mental hospital and begins collecting Gabriel's full disability check. Troy's actions here are reminiscent of his father's attempted rape of Troy's girlfriend in Alabama; his behavior has the corresponding effect of making a son leave home. At this point, Cory physically pushes his father out of his way and tells him, "You don't matter around here anymore." This is Cory's third strike. Picking up a baseball bat which lies in the yard, Cory truly has his chance in the "batter's box," as Troy has put it. Cory swings at his father but fearfully avoids hitting him; Cory, still weaker than Troy, has the bat wrestled from his hands. Defeated and humiliated, Cory leaves his father's home, the fenced and junk-

cluttered backyard which is also their field of confrontation, and does not return until after his father's death.

As in many baseball stories, Troy views his tie to his family, even to Rose, as stifling and repressive. After a life of instability and years spent in the penitentiary, Troy finds in a wife and children an anchor and an identity. When he first meets Rose, he tells her, "'Baby, it's you and baseball all what count to me...Ain't no doubt it's baseball [comes first], but you stick and get old with me and we'll both outlive this baseball'" (59). But eighteen years after his baseball days are over, he begins to feel, as Henry Adams did with Beatrice, that his family is like a fence which holds him in--a stifling limitation. Troy is a sports hero who wants to define himself through manly acts of heroism; his sports exploits, however, have left him with a confused sense of manhood. Troy yearns to "play" once again, to have another chance at defining himself in an unfettered field of competition. He creates this opportunity for redefinition when he spends time with another woman--when he becomes a "player", a womanizer.

Moments after Troy uses the baseball imagery of "striking out" to warn Cory to keep himself in check, he employs the same image to explain to Rose how he felt unfulfilled and restricted in his role with her--his explanation for adultery and for fathering an illegitimate daughter. Troy uses the same baseball language from his past to oppress his son and to define the repressed life he feels he has been forced to live. Similar to the way "baseball talk" kept real understanding at bay in <u>The Boys of Summer</u>, Troy's baseball imagery

serves as a catch-all explanations for his distancing of both a son and a wife.

Troy says that life makes one defensive and lowers one's expectations.

> You born with two strikes on you before you come to the plate. You got to guard it closely ... always looking for the curve-ball on the inside corner. You can't afford to let none get past you. You can't afford a call strike. If you going down ... you going down swinging (76).

Rose interjects and tells Troy that they are not talking about baseball, that they're talking about him lying with another woman and bringing it home. But Troy replies that baseball is how he talks about life: it is "the best I can do to explain it." He continues:

> I fooled them, Rose. I bunted. When I found you and Cory and a halfway decent job ... I was safe...I wasn't going to strike out no more...I was safe. Had me a family. A job. I wasn't gonna get that last strike. I was on first looking for one of them boys to knock me in. To get me home (76).

Troy explains that life with Rose assuaged his fears of failure, but that their existence together feels too small to erase the confounding thoughts he has about baseball, Selkirk, homeruns, and what "could have been." Troy's mistress, on the other hand, gives him a feeling that he is finally swinging away, aggressively stealing extra-bases, at last really "playing." "I stood on first base for eighteen years and I thought ... well, goddamm it ... go for it!" With this woman Troy does not feel burdened by the obligations he has towards a wife, children, and a job, and he is free to laugh and see a different aspect of himself. He is not only playing once again, back in the batter's box and swinging away, his playing now feels recognized, successful, without contradictions.

Troy's desire for a double-life is racked with contradiction. He wants both the stability of a home and the excitement of another woman. As he finally musters the courage to change his present life and to counter the frustrations of his past, Troy disregards one of the few lessons he has been able to use, and he ruins his family. In addition, Troy is incapable of stepping into Rose's shoes and accepting that she, too, has settled for a life and for a man that are far from perfect. Unlike female characters in the other texts examined in this paper, Rose voices her views. She points out that her decision to marry Troy had its origins in past failures and the fear of lesser alternatives as well, and that their union closed the door on an infinite number of other men and other lives that could have been her's. In contrast to Troy's use of baseball imagery, she describes planting her hopes, dreams, and her self inside of Troy and waiting for it to blossom--"and it didn't take me no eighteen years to find out the soil was hard and rocky and it wasn't never gonna bloom" (77). The "fence" for Rose is also a limiting constraint; however, she seeks to maintain the life she has chosen and to keep Troy within the enclosure of her house and bed. As Bono informs Troy: "Some people build fences to keep people out ... and other people build fences to keep people in. Rose wants to hold on to you all. She loves you." (67)

The "fence" of the play's title, then, takes on several meanings. A fence is, first, the enclosure surrounding a baseball park: it both protects the pristine image of some conservatively white and mythical game and obstructs the entrance of black athletes. When Troy proceeds to build a fence intermittently throughout the play, it becomes the

self-imposed enclosure which restricts him from adapting to change and which prolongs his feelings of alienation.[43] Troy hopes to preserve an image of his past baseball exploits which he fears might be trivialized as change (integration) occurs; he also wants to protect the life he has managed to piece together--although he does this with bitterness and shame at its paucity and injustice. His paradoxical recollection of baseball--thoughts of his greatest accomplishments as well as scarring memories of exclusion and prejudice--makes Troy reject the achievements of a new generation of black ballplayers, squelch opportunities for his own son, and dismiss evolving ideas about African Americans and political activism as the events of the play move into the 1960s. Even in the late 1950s, when the entire country is swept away by the phenomenon of television, Troy refuses to buy one. Rose tells him, "Times have changed from when you were young, Troy. People change. The world's changing around you and you can't even see it" (44).

The half-built fence which surrounds Troy's yard and frames all of the play's events is also like a sieve through which the intersecting and informing narratives of Troy's life, experiences in baseball, and vision of the American dream must pass. These communicated messages, in the words of Roland Barthes, are "broken, refracted, caught up in a system of interferences,"[44] and they remain disconnected and confusing. The complexities of Troy's life can not be ironed out into a neat, happy ending, as they are in Jay Neugeboren's Sam's Legacy when Sam en-

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[43]Early, "Baseball," 415.

[44]Roland Barthes, S/Z (New York: 1974) 132.

visions that Mason Tidewater's frustrations from Negro League-life are reconciled in an imagined reunion between Tidewater and his former teammates. The baseball narrative for Neugeboren's characters, as it is for Roger Kahn, is another chance, even for a man past his playing days, to define oneself--this creative act is a further extension of baseball's timeless appeal in which the game continues and anything can occur as long as there is no third out.

This "second chance" does not exist for the African American protagonist of Fences. There are tragedy and failure at the end of Fences, as there are in Runner Mack. Troy remains a tragically flawed hero who can not gain a satisfactory identity after he has lived through the vexation of a life which denied him equal opportunity and real success, and which offered only contradictory lessons. The male identities of son, hard worker, baseball hero, husband, father, womanizer, and American are so full of confounding contradictions that Troy is compelled to search for more. When Troy finally decides to redefine himself, he upsets the delicate balance of the life he has created in which everything about him emanated from the frustrated exploits of his past. Like other aspects of Troy's story, the end of the play also diverges significantly from standard baseball literary conventions. By play's end, Troy loses the respect of his family and friend, and the woman with whom he has fathered a child out of wedlock dies while giving birth. Troy dies, as well, in his fenced-in yard, alone, with a baseball bat in hand.

VI

BASEBALL'S DOUBLE-CONSCIOUSNESS: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS OF GERALD EARLY

In several essays and one book-long autobiographical account, African American literary critic Gerald Early examines what baseball, both its history and its mythically weighted discourse, means to African Americans.[45] Early incorporates personal narratives into his texts, casting himself as an autobiographical character in order to emphasize his arguments, problematize issues, and provide himself with a unique and "authenticated" slant on the topics he discusses.[46] Early presents an image of his personal origins in baseball, the relevance he found in the game, and how and why he came to write about the sport. That Early is an African American essayist and fan of baseball who concentrates on the game's personal and collective significance makes him a powerful counterpart to the numerous white essayists of this genre and, specifically for this paper, to Roger Kahn, whose approach to baseball in The Boys of Summer is similar in significant ways to Early's. Like Kahn, Early presents narratives involving baseball as part of his personal history; these narratives become his tool to excavate the deeper meanings embedded in his own identity and his scope to look at larger issues involving African American identity. Because

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[45]Early's two essays are "House of Ruth, House of Robinson" and "Baseball and African American Life." Early's book is Daughters (Reading, MA: 1994).

[46]Gerald Early, "Introduction," Tuxedo Junction (New York: 1989) xvi.

he is one of the few (and perhaps the preeminent) authorities on the convergence of baseball, African Americans, and American identity, and because he explores this topic through personal narratives, Early plays the dual role of being both an invaluable resource for this study and one of its most intriguing and up-to-date subjects.

The personal stories of Early's interaction with baseball summon up a number of intertwining and informing narratives. Early includes a variety of things among these narratives: details from baseball's history; baseball's myths and association with a national identity; what baseball's myths signify for African Americans; stories of his own family history, and personal recollections of his own experiences with baseball. The autobiographical image which Early continually reestablishes in these texts revolves around the roots of his attachment to baseball and what the implications of this attachment are. These narratives are immersed in baseball literary conventions. They reveal the theme that Early finds located in the intersection of baseball and "blackness," a theme developed in Fences as well: that African American history and existence center around "negotiating contradictions."

Early's affinity for baseball stems from a number of sources. When describing his various impressions of the game, Early sometimes uses language, imagery, and nostalgia reminiscent of writing about baseball by white males. He talks about the even-keeled, leisurely role baseball plays in a fan's life every summer, and how, come autumn, this daily activity becomes a more frenzied obsession as a handful of teams attempt to win a spot in post-season play and as the baseball season as a whole nears its conclusion. "Suddenly there is the ferocious

realization," Early writes, "that not only will it end but it must end--what might be called, to borrow a term from a famous musician, a ferocious longing to come to its own resolution at last."[47] Early also talks about baseball as a thing of riveting aesthetic beauty and ingenious design. Baseball, along with the Constitution and jazz music, he argues, are the three things America will be known for well into the future: "They're the three most beautifully designed things this culture has ever produced".[48] As a serious fan of the game, Early also slips into reveries of a childhood and baseball past in which he saw some of the best players of all time, both black and white.

Only rarely, however, does Early keep these somewhat typical discussions of baseball's significance in pristine isolation from its more troublesome aspects. Early's accounts of baseball are almost always part of a larger racial discourse, and he continually reminds the reader that it is an African American who is expressing this love for such a mythically white pastime. Early is wildly dissimilar from someone like Roger Kahn, for example, because he does not separate discourses of baseball into, on the one hand, a mythically weighted and personally endearing reverie, and, on the other, a topic which involves problematic issues concerning African Americans, exclusion, and confused identities. Early says of the way white writers are able to lose themselves within a baseball discourse:

Baseball is a sport that tends toward an intense nostalgia

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[47]Early, Daughters 222.

[48]Quoted in Ward and Burns, 463.

> among its most rabid male fans; it is, for every white intellectual who has an ounce of poetry in his soul and who followed baseball as a boy, the Wordsworthian Tintern Abbey of remembrance once he is grown (Tuxedo Junction, 208).

Here, Early (both an intellectual and a published poet who has used baseball as a subject for his poems) distinguishes himself from the legion of white male baseball writers.

After reporting, in Daughters, that his own passion for baseball is the only thing which induces his daughters to attend even a few ballgames with him, Early recounts a scene in which his younger daughter asks him why he likes baseball so much. He recalls for her the "terribly hot summer days" of his youth in South Philadelphia in which he and other African American boys would play pick-up baseball and stickball games. Before every game, just as they had seen in the Major Leagues, they all sang the national anthem. He and these other boys, Early explains, not only didn't like the national anthem, they simply hated to sing. Additionally, Early recalls that the boys with whom he played as a child liked baseball vastly less than other games and dismissed it as a "white boy's game"--especially after losing to teams of white boys who liked it more and, one assumes, practiced it more, too. Nevertheless, this "bunch of raggedy black boys" sang the national anthem, and that, Early says, is when "I really loved baseball most of all because it made me feel like an American. I felt like I was part of the country."[49] The sense of inclusion in American culture that baseball has provided for Early is exactly what European

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[49]The story of the national anthem appears in Early, Daughter 225-229; he mentions the antipathy these same childhood friends felt towards baseball in Early, "Baseball," 416.

immigrants to the United States found in the game.

Early adds another reason why he loves baseball. His father died before his birth and Early was raised by his mother and his older sisters. Early says that he fantasized about knowing his father, about the two of them being together, as either an adult and a child or as two children playing together. And as he watched men playing baseball, he imagined one of them to be his father or brother; thus, Early writes, baseball, "made me feel less lonely." Like others', then, Early's baseball ruminations involve the imagined bond between fathers and sons; he sees baseball as a tie to a personal and a collective conception of an adult male identity. However, Early's bond with his father, like in baseball writing by other African Americans, is dysfunctional: flawed or absent.

In these two explanations, Early is informed by baseball's traditions, which in turn connect the game with a vision of the country and with the personal absence of a father which baseball in some ways helped assuage. That African American boys sing the national anthem because that is the baseball tradition they have learned from real games leads Early to feel that he too belongs to the country. Early also seems to conflate the longing for a personal male legacy with a national one: he associates the desire to feel connected with the father he never had with a game which professes its long-standing tradition in America as a heritage passed between fathers and sons. Like August Wilson in Fences, Early presents another slant on the trope in baseball literature of a father-figure introducing his child to the game. Early is not haunted by a father's contradictions in the way

that Troy Maxson is, nor is he an athlete who strives to play baseball professionally. Instead, Early is without a father altogether, and he becomes a fan of baseball to counteract this absence. The inability of a father to pass a heritage on to a son, Early asserts, makes it difficult for African Americans fully to enter American culture. Early recalls words spoken by the African American actor Sidney Poitier which are as applicable to Fences as they are to Early's own experiences: "'So much of what we as black people are has to do directly with the fact that our forefathers were not able to pass on the good life to us'" (Daughters, 58). Like other texts in this study, Early's is a story of establishing a viable, at best heroic, adult male identity.

Early comes back to the desire for father-figures and male role-models when he describes different versions of his introduction to baseball. Each story of his baseball origins reflects a further longing, on Early's part, to connect himself with a tradition, as it relates to both a national and to an African American identity. Early tells his daughters that he learned baseball from their aunt, Early's sister--not how to play baseball, but how to be a fan and to follow the sport. But this account of his education in the game, absent in other renderings, may be offered only to sell the game to his daughters and to get a desired reaction from them: "'You learned about baseball from a girl?!'"

The men who sat around the barbershop and discussed baseball and other sports in Early's Philadelphia neighborhood when he was a child also supply him with roots, if not in playing baseball, then at least in its discussion. As he stood within ear-shot of these men, Early

heard their endless conversations about sports: "around and around the talk went, swirls and eddies, torrents and streams" ("House of Ruth," 223). Early learns from these black men how people talk sports: that it takes on meaning, not in its play, but in the way it becomes discourse. He writes,

> The far-reaching varieties of discourse about sports signify not only our commitment to athletics but also our commitment to language as metaexperience; once the athletic event has ended, the discourse about it displaces the event. The event becomes the shadow ("House of Ruth," 221).

Early's writing, as it invests physical acts with meaning, becomes part of this discourse.

The barbershop "oldheads," as Early calls these men, talk about the "race-side" of sports: how it relates to and involves African Americans. This "race-side" is, of course, a viewpoint for Early which differentiates him from white baseball writers and gives him an African American perspective on a "white boy's game." Even Early's sense of inclusion in America through baseball takes on different meaning than, say, the depiction of this same dynamic in writing by immigrants from Europe: African Americans were brought to this country against their will, they did not share in a collective immigrant experience, and they were the last American men to be accepted as baseball players. While this slant on baseball justifies Early's interest in the game, it also explains why other African Americans do not follow the sport. Early relates how one of these men at the barbershop said he didn't go to baseball games because he saw a baseball bat as "a big authority symbol for a white man." What for Troy Maxson was a John-Henry-like hammer, the tool of the only trade he knew, is for this man at the barbershop a

symbol that white men "got something on their minds other than hitting a baseball" ("Baseball," 416).

The barbershop discourse constitutes an all-male environment in which Early can reside; these black men are the father-figures Early does not have at home. When regarding these men who relate to one another through sports, Early struggles with his own conception of how to be a man: "in the company of men," Early writes, "I am not truly myself but always someone who is looking at himself trying to act as a man should when he is with other men" (Daughters, 206). This setting where men talk amongst themselves about other men contrasts sharply with the picture of Early's sister (in his daughter's words, "a girl!") teaching him how to follow baseball.

Early recalls a day when one of the men at the barbershop became fed up with all the talk about sports and demanded that his friends talk about something "natural" that men are supposed to talk about with other men: liquor, women, social injustices. This outburst is interesting for a number of reasons. First, this man fails to consider the way sports brings men like himself and his friends together and provides them with a bond which is easily enacted. The men share an insider's status in sports, either as former or current players of the game, and maybe even more so as fans who share a well of easily tapped memories; sport is a medium through which they can connect with one another. Furthermore, he seems to identify that the talk about sports is not about something "real" or tangible, but rather about the discourse which builds up around the actual playing of games; he dismisses this talk, therefore, as fluff, empty words. However, sports

is a mediated discourse behind which these men can hide their feelings and avoid serious issues, as well as a "bridge" between these men. As the character Troy explains in Fences, baseball might be the best way for some people to talk about more serious issues. Certainly for Early, as he demonstrates repeatedly, the discussions of sports *are* talk of women, social issues, male bonding, and identity.

Early relates another beginning in baseball. Amidst Early's essay "House of Ruth, House of Robinson," a study full of baseball "tableaus" about how the game is portrayed and employed in autobiographies, Early includes an account of how his own grandfather took him to Philadelphia Phillies games every summer and introduced him to baseball. This grandfather, Early relates, was an ardent fan of baseball and the Phillies. An immigrant from the Bahamas, Early's grandfather may have liked the game and this particular team because they seem to provide him easy access to a national and a local identity. In this particular essay, Early explains that he, unlike his grandfather, hated the Phillies as a boy, like almost every other black person he knew, mostly because the team treated Jackie Robinson so roughly in 1947 and 1948 and because the Phillies were the last National League team to be integrated. Nevertheless, Early loved going to games with his grandfather, and he lists many of the players and events of renown they saw together on summer days--despite the fact that they sat together at these games in silence. In fact, Early mentions that he does not remember ever having a conversation with his grandfather. Baseball might be the medium through which Early and his grandfather spend time together, but, unlike the men at the barbershop, and unlike Roger Kahn

and his father, it does not provide the means through which they can engage one another. The "father-son" relationship in this black baseball story is dysfunctional.

The only way Early knew anything about this silent grandfather was through the narratives told by female family members about him. Most notably, Early hears that his grandfather was a follower of Marcus Garvey and that, during the Depression, he stole food out of desperation to feed his large family and was embarrassedly caught by a white grocer. This identity of Early's grandfather as revealed in these stories, then, is tied to the "race-side" of issues--a Garveyite, the interactions of poor blacks and whites. Regardless, Early can not locate even a hint of the politics or racial pride in this man whom he sat with at ballgames and who, in fact, seemed particularly accommodating to whites.

The story of Early's grandfather does not only reveal Early's origins in baseball, it reveals his personal and familial origins as well. Early delves into a story of his grandfather to flesh out one of his first memories of baseball, but it is also through memories of baseball that Early relates to a moment in his past and to the cryptic figure of his grandfather--his closest male ancestor. Early tells the story of his introduction to a sport which makes him feel connected to father-figures and to a country; however, this father-figure, like the discourse around sports, is known less though his actual presence than through the narratives which build around him. Both of these intertwining narratives inform Early's identity, and both exist and become meaningful, not in their original referent, but as they interact

with other stories and become discourse.

While Early first encountered the discourse of sports when he hung around the men at the barbershop, he also connects his introduction to baseball narratives to a story about his grandfather. During one of their trips to the ballpark, Early's grandfather buys him a Phillies yearbook. The book itself is never read and might display a further lack of communication between the two males, considering the fact that Early "hated" the Phillies (like Kahn's mother buying Kahn the uniform of the wrong team); but Early does value it because it came from his grandfather. He also uses the gift of this book to turn to what he likes almost more than the game itself, books about baseball.

The specific lessons Early extracts from baseball literature as a boy revolve around issues of male identity and adult role models. Like Hollywood films about baseball, literary baseball biographies and so-called autobiographies reduced every athlete's story to the same "paradigmatic lesson" that hard-work and clean-living pay off. The repetition of this same narrative in every player's life, Early says, supplied him with "the story of how a man became an athlete" and, therefore, how a boy became a man. Similar to the way Roger Kahn found heroic, male role-models in the Brooklyn Dodgers (whom he associated with his father), Early found "a very usable mythology of male heroism" in these stories, as well as a way to relate to the world which he would live in as a man. While integration may have changed the landscape of baseball, these sanitized biographies made it seem that the game had not changed at all; the lives of black and white athletes offered the same moral lessons. Early asserts that if

> with the coming of social integration of the races in the 1950s (or at least an official government policy so stating), baseball could no longer be the same sentimental, childish locus of white conservatism, it did not become something much different. The black player was absorbed, albeit uneasily, into the myth and the tradition ("House of Ruth," 240-241).

Thus, black athletes were made "same", with anaestethized narratives that reduced racism or blackness to one of the number of barriers a baseball hero could overcome on his journey to success.[50]

The previously-mentioned Hollywood film The Jackie Robinson Story (1950) provides a fitting example of how African American baseball players were incorporated into baseball's myths. As in the baseball biographies which Early cites, Robinson's life-story in this movie is simplified to illustrate the elementary morals centering around hard-work, overcoming obstacles, and marrying your college sweetheart, as well as pledging allegiance to God, the country, your mother, team, and manager (although not necessarily in that order). Roger Kahn saw racism in Jackie Robinson's experience, yet still he tried to keep the less enchanting and the more romantic aspects of baseball separate from one another. A film like The Jackie Robinson Story, on the other hand, combines Robinson's exclusion along the lines of race with a patriotic understanding of baseball; it attempts to show that the game carries no taint from its treatment of blacks, and that baseball is ultimately a true democratic institution.

The obstacle which Robinson must overcome in this film is racism--the same barrier which makes his brother a streetsweeper despite his education and athletic prowess. Yet racism in this film is an entity

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[50]See Early, "House of Ruth," 226-228.

which emanates from some unknown, insidious source. The barrier of racism does not have its roots in the smiling white faces that wish Robinson well, in fiery Branch Rickey who makes the "experiment" of integration possible, nor in the players and fans who feel uncertain about this black man initially, but who soon admire him for his ability and professionalism. Nor does the racism and exclusion Robinson faces come from baseball or from the country itself. America, in the form of the army, is the only establishment which gives Robinson a "job," as soldier, when he encounters rejection everywhere else. The image of baseball is presented as interchangeable with this image of America; the fight against the cloud of racism, which seems momentarily to confuse its victims, begins from within the white ranks of the game. Democratic principles motivate Rickey, convince other players to accept Robinson, and frame the entire event. The film begins and ends with an almost identical scene. Jackie Robinson as a boy walks down a rural street as a white male's voice sonorously explains: "This is a story of a boy. But it is more than that: it is a story of an American boy and a dream that is truly American."

In Early's stories, his own introduction to baseball through a grandfather and men at the barbershop is the origin, not only of a love for the game, but, more importantly, of a literary, intellectual, and race-conscious self. Like the similar identities Roger Kahn creates for himself, Early's persona develops out of a narrative about his interaction with baseball and is enacted by focussing on baseball. In Early's essays about baseball, he looks at the same two most racially-charged aspects of the game's history which have been a part of every

text discussed so far in this paper: the Negro Leagues and Jackie Robinson. The fact that baseball excluded blacks for generations while professing American ideals of melting pot assimilation and representing an American identity, is something Early, like the other authors in this study, contemplates in order to consider how the game can then speak to African Americans. Unlike some other examinations of the Negro Leagues which romanticize the institution, Early's discussion of black baseball points out how this league symbolizes African American history as a process of "negotiating contradictions." For Early, the Negro Leagues represents the same thing it did for Troy Maxson and Mason Tidewater: that African Americans were not fully American. Early also explores the pride African Americans took in this all-black institution. The Negro Leagues were like the Harlem Renaissance, Early points out, in that both phenomena reached their peaks of success in the 1920s and 1930s, and they both suffered from similar flaws. In ways similar to the Harlem Renaissance, the Negro Leagues were underfinanced, controlled by white booking agents, damaged by poor record-taking, and marked by oppressive, relentless barnstorming.

The greatest contradiction surrounding the Negro Leagues remains the fact that not only did its very existence signify that black baseball players (like Troy Maxson) were excluded from "real" baseball and the cross-over fame which a main-stream baseball career could bring, but also that when black players were accepted on white teams and did "cross-over," black baseball was brought to an end, stripped of its most talented players. Jackie Robinson, of course, was the first to go--an end and a beginning. The race dilemma of today, Early

argues, can be best understood through an examination of Robinson's integration of baseball. According to Early, affirmative action was first dramatized in the "experiment" of Robinson: white players, as Kahn shows, felt that unqualified blacks were taking their jobs; black players felt they had to prove themselves in ways above and beyond those which were demanded of whites. The dynamics of Robinson's integration also defined a process of inclusion in which individual blacks had to prove their worth to whites and, in effect, depict themselves as not "black."

Early also looks at two of black baseball's most prominent figures: Jackie Robinson and his contemporary on the New York Giants, Willie Mays. These men were the first two African American baseball players to be immortalized in the Baseball Hall of Fame solely on the basis of their play in the Majors rather than in the Negro Leagues. As symbols of black manhood, Early asserts that Robinson and Mays offer equally (though differently) contradictory images. Robinson was both "an outsized rebel and a symbol of capitulation." Like Pap Finn in <u>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</u>, Early imagines, Robinson was tormented by his marginality and inability to gain status. On the other hand, Early writes that Mays's "huge and formidable myth" involved an image of him as "the exuberant Negro man-child, the Nigger Jim of American culture who went cruising with the white American male across the green flat, archingly mystical expanse of center field" ("House of Ruth," 241). Mays "reminded whites that being a Negro was, in truth, quite a bit of wholesome and boyish fun" (ibid, 243). Early recalls seeing a promotional picture of Mays on a bottle of sweet-tasting syrup he used

to have with biscuits when he was a child. This breakfast of biscuits and syrup, Early recalls, was one he longed for as a child and remembered fondly for years. As a young adult, however, Early was told by a friend that his nostalgic breakfast was "the breakfast of sharecroppers": inexpensive and devoid of nutrition. Since then, the mere thought of the syrup or of Mays has made Early nauseous. Early's recollection of Mays and of his own childhood, like Troy's thoughts of rural origins in Fences, recalls the social and political injustices felt by black Americans.

In analyzing the autobiographies of Robinson and Mays, Early finds Mays significantly less appealing. Like Early himself, Robinson grew up without a father. Robinson's life-story, I Never Had it Made, is as much about how a fatherless man struggles with the identity of "father" himself (as is Early's Daughters) as it is about playing baseball. Robinson also looks to baseball, as Early did, to find father-figures (for Robinson, that figure is found in the team's general manager Branch Rickey). For Early, Robinson's story must be added to the list of African American baseball narratives which revolve around what Sidney Poitier identifies as the failure of fathers to provide for sons. Mays' experiences (like Mays himself) are much closer to the conventional account of father and son relations which flourish in a baseball context. Early points out that Mays was introduced to and taught baseball by his father, himself a former Negro League player. Mays' autobiography also makes it clear that Robinson, who made it to the Major Leagues before Mays and was a hero and role-model for numerous African Americans, was not Mays' idol; Mays' idol was his own fathe

Early repeatedly depicts scenarios in which his affinity for baseball is juxtaposed with the aversion other African Americans feel for the game. Early, therefore, constructs an image of himself as a baseball fan in isolation: separate from both other blacks who dislike the game and from other fans who are white. As a boy, Early says he walked fifty dangerous blocks (in language reminiscent of Abraham Lincoln stories) through rough, gang-infested neighborhoods to see professional baseball games. His friends, who already think baseball a "white boy's game," tease him and call him foolish: "'Y'all niggers walked to Connie Mack Stadium to watch the Phillies?! Y'all must be crazy. I wouldn't go see no ball game, especially the Phillies, if they paid me'" ("Baseball," 416). As a young adult, Early reminisces about his fond memories of Phillies games just as a black colleague reveals his wish that black crowds had burned down Connie Mack Stadium during the 1964 race riots "and stopped them ballgames." "That stadium has a history," Early's colleague says, "that tells me I'm nothing but a nigger" ("Baseball," 417). Early insists that the apathy and resentment he finds among African Americans in regard to baseball is not something applicable only to black Philadelphians and the Phillies. To his knowledge, he is one of only a handful of black fans who now attend St. Louis Cardinals games and part of a smaller contingent of African Americans who hold season tickets.

Early constructs an insider-outsider persona for himself: he identifies with baseball, which in turn makes him an insider in the game but an outsider to African Americans. Furthermore, he examines the "race-side" of the game and remains an outsider to the world of

baseball, to some degree, because he is black; if his African American identity does not exclude him from baseball's myths entirely, then he at least analyzes the implications of his uneven inclusion. In Daughters, Early identifies this same sort of identity crisis when he presents himself in other American territory which seems symbolically white: being middle-class, living in the suburbs, having a career as an academic. In this regard, Early is like the baseball players who have had to deal with a "cross-over" status. He wonders to what extent he is cut off from an African American community (especially the impoverished one in which he grew up) when he tries to join institutions (historically and predominantly white) which make him feel more American. While his insider-outsider persona gives him a strategic vantage point from which to investigate these various fields and how they relate to African Americans, it also confuses his sense of self and problematizes his two identities of African American and American.

Early's interaction with baseball in some ways reflects a DuBoisian "double consciousness." Baseball, for Early, involves the intersection of two conflicting narratives which both serve to inform his identity--in DuBois's words: "an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body."[51] Baseball, because of its mythic discourse, makes Early feel more American. Yet this same game excluded blacks for decades, included them only problematically, and remains a symbol for ideals

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[51]W.E. B. DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk IN W.E.B. DuBois: Writings (New York: 1986) 366-367.

which relate to the African American experience only with great difficulty. Roger Kahn is able to separate these two conflicting narratives of baseball and use them both to bolster an image of himself, rather than confuse it. Baseball is Kahn's link to his past and his community, and it is an aesthetically beautiful art-form; it also signifies his part in a struggle against racial injustice. Something rings false in Kahn's failure to address how this second baseball narrative might affect the first.

It is in precisely the ambiguities and contradictions which arise when these two narratives collide that Early finds his own identity through baseball. Early is like the model of Jackie Robinson: always hyper-conscious about his racial significance on the baseball field. Early can not lose himself entirely in baseball reverie because he does not want to ignore (or can not ignore) the second narrative of baseball's exclusion and problematic inclusion of blacks. The addition of Early's personal anecdotes in his essays dramatizes the confusion which arises when the desire to view baseball as an unmitigated link to the United States is met with the feeling that this inclusion in America entails sloughing one's social conscience and racial identity as well. Put another way by an African American journalist who covered the Negro Leagues in the 1940s: "The folks came to see a ballgame, forget what race they belonged to, and here it was like being dashed into your face like a pail of ice water."[52]

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[52]J.M. Reisler, Black Writers/Black Baseball (Jefferson, NC: 1994) 63.

The six texts examined in this essay reveal different ways in which baseball and its myths are presented when African American characters are part of a baseball landscape. This literature, like other modern baseball writing which occludes an African American presence, uses the sport and its conventions to critique society and as a means for its characters to seek out meaning in their lives. In baseball writing by white authors, black athletes and the Negro Leagues become tools for white protagonists to define their own identities. Both Chappie and Me and Sam's Legacy enter stories of black baseball to develop the identities of white characters; each novel identifies the injustice of a sport which excludes African Americans and symbolically resonates for whites only; but even this outsider role black players are forced to play becomes a vantage point which the white character can appropriate and use successfully. While these two novels step away from real understanding of the African American experience, Roger Kahn's The Boys of Summer studies the struggle of Jackie Robinson more acutely. Kahn admires and reveres Robinson; but Robinson's story competes with a romanticized image of baseball which remains mythically white. Furthermore, Kahn uses Robinson's struggle to develop a greater sense of his own heroic, male identity.

In the hands of African American authors, many of baseball's literary conventions vary significantly. While black baseball players were often from southern, rural roots, these rural origins were not easily romanticized, pastoral ideals. In Runner Mack and Fences memories of a rural past are memories of sharecropping and of the Jim Crow South. Similarly, the standard baseball trope of fathers and sons

bonding through the game and of males figuring out their adult identities are more problematic in baseball fiction by African Americans. Father and son relationships in these texts are dysfunctional and are not mediated powerfully through the playing and discussing of baseball. As black baseball players and writers move through a baseball narrative, they are left with confused, contradictory images of manhood. Finally, there seems to be so little writing about and by African Americans in which black writers and characters express a deep love for the game. Often, baseball, like other sports, is seen as a means for upward mobility in a purely opportunistic sense; it is a less cherished "ticket out of the ghetto" than basketball or football.

The desire to keep the mythic space of baseball alive is something which varies in baseball writing by black and white authors. Both Roger Kahn and Gerald Early express their love for the game and its myths, but Early's relationship to the game differs greatly from Kahn's. An example of Early's "double-consciousness" in baseball, an event during a recent St. Louis Cardinals game, may best reflect these differences. Although Early is aware that he is one of the few black fans at the ballpark, he recounts that upon leaving one game, moving in step with the flow of the crowd, he felt a bond with the mass of people (all of them white) with whom he had shared an experience and an identity. Early then explains how he passed three African American teenagers who were walking against the crowd and who had clearly not come from the same place. "'So, how was the game, brother?'" one of the boys asks him. Suddenly, Early feels disquieted, thrust into

existential crisis. He writes,

> I wanted, then, desperately, to show the boys I was, after all, one of them, that I was utterly untouched and unconscious of my surroundings. But how could I be untouched by that of which I had partaken? What was the meaning of my memory I shared with both the white fans leaving the game we had just witnessed and the young black men who could guess at what sharing memories with whites might mean for me or for them ... At that moment, to be there among the whites, facing these black boys, somehow seemed, in its absurdity, all too rich and all too much. 'I don't know,' I lied, 'I wasn't at the game. I don't follow baseball' ("Baseball" 417).

The contradictions which are thrown into dramatic relief at this moment are closely related to Kahn's encounter with Dodgers calling other Dodgers "niggers." Both Early and Kahn slow their narratives down and reflect upon the significance their respective encounters have for their baseball narrative and their identities. Both writers are faced with a decision, and they both decide upon a kind of lie. Kahn temporarily occludes aspects of the Dodger team in order to maintain his love of baseball and all that the game represents in his life. Early, on the other hand, temporarily breaks his bond with baseball and its white fans in order to identify with the three black youths who, like every other African American Early portrays, do not and can not understand baseball in the way that he does. Kahn and Early retreat to the safety of their respective races.

Early, however, also self-consciously uses his insider-outsider status, his "two-ness", in baseball to display a theme of "negotiating contradictions." Kahn, on the other hand, appears confused and uncomfortable with Roe and Cox's comments even twenty years after the fact. That Early tells his account of double-consciousness in an essay dedicated to the mixed symbolic messages baseball offers to African

Americans reveals the very identity he wants to project: this insider-outsider status. Early is also the only African American writer who contributes an essay to Ken Burns's book version of his eighteen-hour documentary, Baseball. Like other writers in the collection, Early combines personal anecdote and nostalgia with analysis and insider's knowledge of the sport. Early's insights include, as well, a view of the African American experience in regards to the game. Early's writing seems highly conscious of its place within a white context; as Toni Morrison says, black authors are "at some level always conscious of representing one's own race to, or in spite of, a race of readers that understands itself to be "universal" or race-free."[53] Early's picture of baseball, therefore, remains linked to race and is full of contradictions--yet these contradictions are what constitute the history of African Americans in baseball, a baseball discourse, and, through its symbolic significance, the country.

Because baseball represents a variation of the same myths to black and white readers and authors, baseball novels by African American authors seem much more pessimistic than those by white authors. This difference in tone can be seen in the endings of the texts looked at in this paper. In each of the books by white authors, an image of baseball's timelessness is developed in which self-aware, white characters are just beginning a new adventure at book's end. In Chappie and Me and Sam's Legacy, the white protagonists leave the game after gaining valuable insight from it in order to live the rest of their lives; Sam Berman and Joe Giffen leave a life of "playing" to

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[53]Morrison, Playing xii.

find adult, male identities in other realms, possibly in the role of family-man. Roger Kahn still "plays" successfully through his writing. On the other hand, the stories of both Troy Maxson in Fences and Henry Adams in Runner Mack reach tragic endings; neither African American man is able to find a viable identity through baseball and its conventions.

Gerald Early, a writer and not a player, finds his identity in family. At the end of Daughters, Early actually returns to the common baseball theme of fathers. He relates that the absence of a father figure which made him look to baseball in the first place actually becomes his own usable adult-male identity. Early writes,

> It was in the very restrictions of marriage and of family life that I had gained the greatest sense of freedom and the highest form of liberation. For it was through being bound to others that I found that I could lose myself, escape the entrapment of solipsism, cease the restless search for the fulfillment of myself simply through acts of absorption (229).

Early finds his identity in the bonds of a wife and, more specifically (as the title of his book implies), his daughters. His discovery of his adult-self in the restrictions of family recalls Nathaniel Hawthorne's nineteenth-century observation that "We are not endowed with life till the heart is touched. That touch creates us--thereby we begin to be--thereby we are beings of reality."[54] Early's bond with his daughters supplies an alternative to the father-son tradition, especially considering that his daughters seem the least likely candidates in Early's writing to become baseball fans: they possess the doubly-excluding identities of being both black and female.

In other texts examined in this papers, white and black

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[54]Nathaniel Hawthorne, Correspondences (Ohio: 1987) 282.

ballplayers, authors, and characters have tried to define their sense of manhood in opposition to women, a family, and the entrapments of society. Kahn depicts the all-male worlds of writers and athletes, both of which provide him with a sense of self; Chappie and Me and Sam's Legacy include minor female characters who might provide each novel's protagonist with one piece of their future self. For black athletes in fiction, like Troy Maxson, Henry Adams and Mason Tidewater, exclusion from baseball--the very institution for which they reject their homes and families--leaves them empty, alone, and confused; they find solace neither in a game which barred their entrance nor in its alternative: the bonds of family. Early escapes this fate. Perhaps the identity Early finds in fatherhood can be connected to many of the Hollywood baseball movies and baseball books with happy endings which return to a similar theme: the idea of "coming home," the ultimate goal of the game and the one which, when applied to a literal home, indicates the end of playing it. Early's writing remains optimistic because, by being able to step outside the confines of the game, he resolves for himself some of the confounding contradictions which plague black baseball writers and players.

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