OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS, a troupe of actors has toured America recreating the “inspiring story” of the life of Jackie Robinson, the first African American of the twentieth century to play in baseball’s major leagues. The opening scene of their play—the California Theatre Center’s *Most Valuable Player*—shows a young Robinson nestled up to a radio box crackling a broadcast of a major league all-star contest; his mother’s voice soon booms out from offstage, “Jackie, why do you insist on listening to that white man’s game?” Later, performers recount the seminal events of Robinson’s big-league inauguration, including enduring a bitter spring training in segregated Florida, persevering through spikings by players and taunting by fans, and, despite it all, excelling on the field and being named National League Rookie of the Year. At the play’s end, the joyous star peers skyward in ethereal connection to his mother, and then proclaims 1947 the year that baseball became “a black man’s game, too.” Robinson, here a harbinger of a new, more perfect era, broadened the gates of America anew.²

There is much truth, of course, to this familiar narrative. Robinson did break baseball’s color line, opening avenues of major league participation for America’s black ballplayers and harkening to the coming dissolution of segregation in many aspects of American life. Yet Robinson himself (Figure 1), a past participant in the Negro Leagues, would have recognized
baseball as “a black man’s game, too” well before 1947. Part of this paper’s aim is to reveal just how thoroughly black the national game was before Robinson’s debut. But this paper is not just about black Americans. It is instead a broader examination of baseball and race during the Jim Crow era, an exploration of commonalities between peoples of color—Native
Americans, African Americans, Japanese Americans, and Cubans—who played baseball in the United States from 1887 to 1947. In viewing this larger picture, this narrative explores aspects of several intriguing historical episodes involving the national pastime—professional and amateur, competitive and recreational—rather than detailing the total sport participation for any particular ethnic group. My intention is to broadly assess baseball’s dealings with race during this six-decade era in a relatively brief format valuable to non-specialists. In that light, this essay focuses on two significant themes: first, how the construction of baseball’s color line prompted the paradoxical trends of racial exclusion—keeping many peoples of color out—yet also of racial maneuvering—allowing players deemed “white enough” in; and second, how Americans of color, in myriad ways, strengthened their ethnic communities by embracing the national game.3

Fortunately, many capable scholars have raised the historical study of baseball in particular and of sport in general to a position of respectability within academia over the past several decades, mirroring the broader emergence of cultural history as a whole.4 Still, efforts to integrate sport history into pedagogical discussions have seen relatively little fruition: The History Teacher’s archives, for instance, contain only a small handful of articles even addressing sport and none published in the past twenty years.5 Analysis of race, however, the socio-cultural centerpiece in sports integration stories, has received considerable attention on the instructional front, with several articles in this journal’s past few years dedicated exclusively to the topic.6 The narrative to follow unites these themes of sport and race with a deliberate eye on potential young learners. Part of my continuing instructional hope is to challenge students with scholarly examinations they can not only digest, but might even enthusiastically approach. For some, that may mean discussing ballparks and shortstops alongside the more standard political fare of presidents, court decisions, and laws. Among sport history’s potential benefits for the contemporary classroom, it seems to me, perhaps none is as great as this: turning a topic of intense, if hagiographic, student interest—sport—into one of legitimate scholarly analysis. Consider this essay a tool to move instructors in that direction.

For teachers, my goals here are threefold. First, this narrative is designed to provide the introductory content knowledge needed to develop a colorful lecture, structure a spirited discussion, or create a student project on the topic. Second, the detailed endnotes accompanying the paper offer instructors a guide toward accessible recent scholarship penned on ethnic aspects of the sport; many of the sources listed there provide bountiful tangential information for the investigative reader. Third, the collection
of photographs featured alongside the narrative provides teachers with compelling visuals to utilize in the classroom—visuals that might enhance a lecture or capture students’ attentions in an anticipatory set. In all, I hope that this essay will challenge instructors to consider sports history—our national pastime’s history, in particular—as a ripe and engaging field for student intellectual inquiry, and will provide those teachers venturesome enough to try with the means necessary to incorporate a topic on baseball and race into their U.S. History curricula.

Foul Lines

And so our story opens a full sixty years before integration, in September 1888, when a young mulatto African American, Moses Fleetwood Walker (Figure 2), jogged out onto a major league diamond in Chicago. Suiting up as a catcher for Syracuse of the International Association, the primary rival to the decade-old National League, Walker had produced solid on-field performances the past season, hitting .264 with 67 hits in 69 games played. But even his presence on the diamond provoked a torrent of racial abuse, most notably from the vociferous Adrian “Cap” Anson, captain of the Chicago White Stockings and obstinate white supremacist. Anson, who in preceding years refused to be photographed with black teammates, now greeted Walker with the shout, “Get that nigger off the field!”, and then pulled his team from the playing grounds. With several other of the league’s best players already threatening to leave the circuit if African Americans remained rostered, International Association leaders soon met in secret to agree that no more contracts would be issued to colored players. Although temporarily lifted during the league’s reorganization the following two years, the approved color line excluding black players hardened rigidly following the 1889 season, the last in which African American players appeared in major professional baseball for fifty-eight years.7

Ironically and perhaps most shockingly, this black exodus necessarily eliminated a popular practice amongst big league clubs of the era: having young black boys serve as mascots. Indeed, as early as 1875, a costumed African American youth named Albert Pierce paraded the foul lines for the St. Louis Browns organization, and for several seasons ending in 1889, Clarence Duval did the same for the Chicago White Stockings. Their repertoires included bringing bats and gloves to on-field players, dancing and singing for spectators, and twirling batons and performing theatrics to band-played music, but perhaps the most significant responsibilities for mascots of the time was to perform “hoodoo,” the hexing of competing teams and the warding off of evil mysticism supposedly created by opponents. Historian James Brunson explains that late nineteenth-century
mascots were often seen as curious amalgamations of entertainers, buffoons, and bewitches, a role that many white Americans, increasingly convinced of their racial superiority, thought natural for black boys. Reality, however, proved the opposite true: when Duval was offered
lucrative theatrical opportunities in the world of blackface minstrelsy, for instance, he abandoned the White Stockings for the envisioned financial upsurge; Pierce never left the ballpark to reap his monetary rewards, betting heavily on Browns games and winning considerable dollars in the process. In this regard, these black performers likely proved savvier than white baseball audiences anticipated or perhaps ever recognized, transposing degrading circumstances to ensure future financial prosperity.\(^8\)

By 1900, blacks—both players and mascots—were banished from the major leagues, though the “foul lines” of the national game would not remain unchallenged. Indeed, a handful of integrated and all-black professional nines arose throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—including the Michigan State League’s Adrian club in 1895 and a Pennsylvania minor league’s Acme Colored Giants in 1898—although such squads almost always proved short-lived. Moreover, African Americans continued to appear on amateur rosters nationwide during this turn-of-the-century era, including on a 1910 town team in Honolulu, Hawaii; a 1914 YMCA ballclub in Buxton, Iowa; and on college squads at Harvard (1904) and at the University of Minnesota (1907). While undoubtedly dozens more instances of integrated play exist at the amateur level, even these brief examples demonstrate that racial demarcations ensconced upon the top major leagues proved more transgressable, though certainly still palpable, at lower competitive levels of the game. Clearly, integrated baseball existed across the country, albeit under much duress, a full half-century before Jackie Robinson—a fifty-year period, as we shall see, filled with implicit and overt challenges by other peoples of color on this newly imposed color barrier.\(^9\)

**Native Americans in Baseball**

One group to embrace baseball wholeheartedly at the turn of the century was Native Americans. Challenged with rapidly transforming ways of life wrought by the allotment of reservation lands into individually owned parcels and by the establishment of boarding schools nationwide dedicated to their assimilation, Native peoples increasingly sought new avenues for sustaining indigenous traditions. Intriguingly, Native peoples in both these circumstances—on reservations and at boarding schools—embraced baseball as an avenue of continuity amidst a changing world, demonstrating both their resilience and adaptability.\(^10\)

Take Indian boarding school baseball as a first case in point. Nationwide, twenty-five Indian schools fielded ballteams by the early twentieth century, including at Carlisle Institute, the nation’s first and largest boarding school, and at smaller institutions all across the American west. Many of these
Native clubs proved highly successful on the diamond, like Oregon’s Chemawa Indian School, champions of the amateur Willamette Valley Baseball Association in 1900; Michigan’s Mount Pleasant Indian School, whose 1906 ballclub “defeated all other school teams” of the region “with little difficulty”; and a Chamberlain, South Dakota school whose 1907 club went undefeated against regional semi-pro squads and was reportedly “the best amateur team in the state.” Individual athletes, too, distinguished themselves on the boarding school diamond: Hall-of-Famer Charles Bender, an Ojibwe from Minnesota, and the legendary Jim Thorpe, a Sac and Fox from Oklahoma, first plied their trade at Carlisle before heading to the major leagues, and one-time Philadelphia Phillies pitcher Charles Roy earned his stripes at Minnesota’s Morris Indian School. Surely these winning teams and accomplished individuals boosted Indian identity and Indian pride in both participants and in observers, as historian John Bloom contests, and perhaps even led Native ballplayers to revel in symbolic victory over their white cultural captors.¹¹

Boarding school athletics also served the significant if unexpected function of furthering American Indian cultural traditions. One Catholic-run institution at St. John’s University in central Minnesota, for instance, featured an 1889 baseball club named “Nin Songideeminanig,” an Anglicized jumbling of the Ojibwe words “nin” (meaning “we”), “zoongide’e” (meaning “brave”), and “ininiwag” (meaning “men”). The full translation—“We are Brave Men”—resonates with the long-held tribal value of bravery as signifying manhood and proves quite ironic given the stated federal goal of eliminating tribal languages through schools. Moreover, the indigenous youths at St. John’s were photographed and listed in the institution’s directory without conventional monastic supervisors, suggesting that Indian athletes may well have exercised considerable autonomy in organizing and leading their own ballclubs—a reality that contradicted boarding schools’ insistence on Indian subservience. At southwestern Minnesota’s Pipestone Indian School (Figure 3), administrators even employed two Native coaches—Pine Ridge Lakota Vincent Sears and Yankton Dakota James Irving—to teach indigenous athletes the game, turning on its head the boarding school mantra that Indians must learn “civilized” ways from paternalistic whites. Boarding school baseball, then, could further Native endurance by providing an avenue of independent recreation, out of the reach of white overseers—and by producing, in the words of historian John Bloom, “spaces, moments in time” when traditional language and Native mentors could once again emerge.¹²

Beyond the publicized Native involvement on boarding school teams, Indian peoples more quietly integrated the game into the very fabric of their reservation communities. In the southeastern United States, writer LeAnne
Howe noted that Chickasaw and Choctaw community teams played baseball against whites and against each other throughout Indian and Oklahoma Territories in 1891, and ethnomusicologist Thomas Vennum cited the rapid escalation of baseball’s popularity amongst Mississippi Choctaws following a state ban on gambling at indigenous lacrosse matches in 1898. Eighty years later, anthropologist Kendall Blanchard visited some of those same Choctaw reservations and discovered remarkable continuity: baseball games were still featured in weekend community celebrations, with a highly competitive hardball league having arisen amongst seven proximate Choctaw reservations in eastern Mississippi. Baseball, once likely seen by these southeastern Native peoples as a curious spectacle of the white man, had clearly become enmeshed in Indian cultural traditions.13

Similar athletic adopting also characterized many reservations in the northern half of the country. For example, historian Jeffrey Powers-Beck reported how MicMac peoples, part of the larger Wabanaki nation, formed competitive inter-tribal teams in Maine as early as the 1890s and had

**Figure 3:** Pipestone Indian Training School baseball team, circa 1915. Pipestone County Historical Society, Pipestone, Minnesota.
copies of the annual *Spalding’s Base Ball Rules* booklet printed in their own Algonquin language by 1912. Two decades later, ballplayers of the Passamaquoddy band—also members of the Wabanaki tribe—extended this use of tribal language to the diamond itself, with several valuable results. David Francis, one 1930s Indian ballplayer in rural Maine, remembered fondly:

> We all spoke Passamaquoddy, and it was an advantage for us as a baseball team. Whenever the manager wanted someone to bunt, he just hollered it out *contahan* in Passamaquoddy, meaning “you laid it down”. When we stole signs at second base, we would just holler out the pitch and the batter would rip it.

With such direct competitive benefits from mastering the indigenous tongue—at the time still targeted for extinction by federal agents pushing English as the new pan-Indian dialect—it is perhaps little wonder why by the early twentieth century, Native people began seeing baseball as an avenue of cultural continuance in a dramatically altered world. Moreover, Indian peoples also showed remarkable ingenuity in reworking the physical implements of the national pastime to square with tribal traditions: historian Patty Loew attested to children of northern Wisconsin’s Bad River Ojibwe band hurling batting practice with lacrosse sticks in the opening decades of the century. Embracing baseball both as an enjoyable sport of the future and as a medium of cultural continuity with a tribal past, then, reservation Indians nationwide were actively refashioning the national pastime into the new Native pastime. Coupled with the indigenous embrace of the game at boarding schools, it was clear that the first third of the twentieth century saw American Indians adopt, then adapt the sport of baseball to suit inherently indigenous goals.14

Cubans in Baseball

A second people of color that complicate baseball’s discrimination line are Cubans. Because Cuban-born players occupied “ambiguous racial positions” in United States society and sport, as historian Adrian Burgos has explained, they occasionally floated between the segregated spheres of American black and white, allowing some Cuban ballplayers entrée, though certainly not full acceptance, into these diametrically opposed worlds. Their presence in major league baseball during the Jim Crow era, moreover, produced several intriguing episodes revealing the complicated mentalities—and frequent absurdities—behind big league baseball’s “foul lines.”15

Engaged in baseball since the early 1870s, Cuban natives began a slow trickle into American professional leagues in the opening years of the
twentieth century—well after, it should be noted, efforts to distinguish some middle ground in America’s racial divide were already underway. In 1885, for instance, African American waiters employed at Long Island’s Argyle Hotel formed a ballclub called the “Cuban Giants” despite the fact that none of the team’s players were Cuban. By appropriating this ethnic moniker, however—and perhaps by speaking gibberish on the field to imitate Spanish, as one historian has attested team participants did—black organizers sought not only to sell their enterprise to a growing number of Cuban immigrants in Florida and in the Northeast, but also attempted to portray their African American players to professional ballclubs as foreign—and thereby as acceptable—athletes. In the same vein, 1880s major league managers desiring to retain talented black players Moses Fleetwood Walker and Bud Fowler on their rosters characterized the former, a mulatto, as a “Spanish beauty,” and the latter, whose parents were both American blacks, as “from Portugal.” Thirty years later, these ploys were still in use: after fawning over black pitcher John Donaldson in a 1915 exhibition game, New York Giants manager John McGraw told the ace to move to Cuba and learn Spanish so the big-league club could sign him. Ironically, then, the practice of vying for an ambiguous “Cuban” middle ground was well established virtually before any Cuban nationals challenged for the major leagues.\textsuperscript{16}

When the first wave of authentic Cuban players emerged in professional baseball in the 1910s, these well-rehearsed quips about pedigree were not only reinvoked, but expanded upon to occasionally ridiculous heights. A glimpse at a quadruplet of the earliest Cuban professionals—Rafael Almeida, Armando Marsans, Cristobal Torriente, and Roberto Estalella—should colorfully illuminate this trend.

The convoluted ethnic backgrounds of Almeida and Marsans have roused significant discussions by baseball historians for many years. Latin baseball scholar and Marsans biographer Peter Bjarkmann contests that Almeida and Marsans “clearly had some Afro-Cuban blood,” and Mike Shatzkin, in his authoritative biographical reference entitled \textit{The Ballplayers}, tantalizingly describes Marsans as “half-black, [but] light skinned enough to cross baseball’s color line... [He] could be considered the first black in 20th-century major league ball.” Scouts of the era, too, discerned indefinite racial characteristics in the two men: after watching Almeida perform in Cuba, one Cincinnati Reds scout described him as “a mulatto who speaks fair English,” while a second Reds observer claimed that Almeida was “not colored,” but also “not a white man.” Indeed, these hazy racial characterizations enabled Marsans and Almeida to gain entrance, remarkably, into teams on both sides of the color line, playing as a duo for the 1905 All Cubans, a barnstorming club in the black
baseball circuit, and three years later signing for the white New Britain Mountaineers in the professional Connecticut League. Ethnic uncertainties, it would seem, could have their advantages.\textsuperscript{17}

In appropriating Marsans and Almeida into pro baseball, however, white club owners veiled the players’ racial ambiguities with vociferous reports of their supposed ethnic purity. After signing with the Reds in 1911, Marsans was identified in the national baseball periodical \textit{Sporting Life} as “a pure Havana feller of Castilian parentage,” while Almeida was labeled a “direct descendant of a Portuguese marquis.” Further newspaper fabrications on the players’ backgrounds—including that Marsans attended an American university and learned baseball in New York’s Central Park and that one of Almeida’s uncles was a wealthy governor of a Cuban province—enmeshed assimilationist and elitist messages with stories of ethnic spotlessness in further efforts to differentiate the pair from the mongrel “mixed white and negro” race that contemporary Americans believed inhabited the Cuban island. Several years earlier, when Marsans and Almeida were breaking into the white professional leagues in Connecticut, team owner Billy Hanna, concerned that his league would consider the Cubans blacks and thus exclude them from participation, traveled to Cuba to acquire genealogical documentation (veracity, of course, questionable) of their white heritage. In the end, the ploys worked when, to the relief of the baseball establishment, Cincinnati sportswriters reversed an earlier panic that the “Reds signed two Cubans who may or may not be part Negro” by welcoming Marsans and Almeida to the club as, famously, “two of the purest bars of Castilian soap that ever floated to these shores.” When considering ballplayers of color, then, 1910s Americans held assuredness of a supposedly European racial lineage as a preeminent demarcator of professional belonging.\textsuperscript{18}

Not all Cuban-born ballplayers, of course, passed these stringent racial tests. One who did not make the cut into the white major leagues was Cristobal Torriente, a mulatto man from Cienfuegos, Cuba. Blessed with tremendous power at the plate and a capable arm as well, Torriente, often called the “Babe Ruth of Cuba,” barnstormed across the U.S. with the All Cubans club in 1913—the same team Marsans and Almeida played for a decade earlier. Contraditorily described as “black as the ace of spades,” as a “light skinned Spanish,” and as of “Indian color,” Torriente’s skin color, while likely more problematic than Marsans or Almeida, was apparently not dark enough to preclude his investigation from a major league club. As the story goes, a New York Giants scout witnessing a dominating Torriente performance during a 1920 barnstorming contest descended to the field to talk with the player. One of Torriente’s teammates present that day recalled how the scout tightened up at the sight of Torriente’s “kinky”
black locks; years later, the teammate mused that he “would have been all right if his hair had been better.” While after this slight, Torriente starred for the Negro National League’s Chicago American Giants for eight years, even famously out-homering Babe Ruth during a 1920 exhibition game in Cuba, he nonetheless encountered first-hand the arbitrary racial distinctions employed against players of African ancestry: even one’s hair might close the gates of organized baseball.19

Our final athlete of this analysis, Roberto Estalella (Figure 4), brings full-circle the ethnic incongruity Cuban players represented against the bifurcated racial spectrum of American baseball. Perhaps because of his “swarthy” appearance or his cocoa-colored skin, Estalella was immediately recognized as a man dangerously close to baseball’s color line when he debuted for the National League’s Washington Senators in 1935. Observers argued about his ambiguous racial background; sportswriter Burton Hawkins, for instance, said Estalella was “definitely black,” and Senators teammates, apparently in agreement, nicknamed him the “black snake.” But Latino opponent Rodolfo Fernandez described him as a “mulatto capirro,” a very light mulatto, and Senators owner Clark Griffith ignored any doubts and signed him to a contract. Estalella, who played alongside American blacks many times in the Cuban winter league, demonstrates again the fluidity some Cuban ballplayers exercised between the largely impenetrable racial barriers erected in Jim Crow America. As athletes white enough to play in organized professional leagues, yet black enough to play in the barnstorming and Negro Leagues, Cuban baseballers navigated a peculiar balance between spheres established without them in mind. Thus, in the words of historian Burgos, early Cuban ballplayers represented the “brown” in a world of black and white, carving out a place for themselves and for their Latin brethren wherever in America baseball was played and creating a formidable, if overlooked, challenge to baseball’s continuing foul lines.20

African Americans in Baseball

As the game entered the twentieth century’s third decade, African Americans, banished from the majors, continued their enthusiastic embrace of the national pastime. Long-time purveyors of the sport on barnstorming and on black college teams, notable black Americans—led by Andrew “Rube” Foster, a former barnstorming pitcher—established their own professional circuit, the Negro National League, in 1920. Coupled with the eventual rise of the Eastern Colored League and its successor, the Negro American League, black baseball’s foray into the world of professionalism
Figure 4: Roberto Estalella, with Washington Senators, c. 1939. National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, Cooperstown, New York.
proved an important milestone for the African American community: Negro citizens, intent on carving out their own respected athletic sphere, would organize, in the words of one black sportswriter, to “keep colored baseball from control of the whites.” Indeed, the formation of professional black baseball leagues would bolster black economies and ethnic cohesiveness for decades, and in so doing, would leave an indelible African American footprint upon the national game. 21

Foremost, Negro League baseball produced considerable financial benefits for black America. Several club owners, including Rube Foster in Chicago, Olivia Taylor in Indianapolis, and Cumberland Posey in Washington, were black, and their leadership of Negro teams distinguished a growing black business elite in many northern cities. And despite the uncomfortable fact that a number of these black magnates rose to wealth as gangsters or as leaders of local gambling rings, African American owners consistently channeled portions of their profits back into black communities. Benefit games, for example, were staged for the Negro National Business League in Kansas City, for the Booker T. Washington
Community Hospital in Newark, and for the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in New York. Several of these black ballclub owners even rose as prominent figures in the broader national struggle for civil rights: Indianapolis ABCs owner Olivia Taylor, for instance, was voted president of the city’s NAACP chapter in 1925, while Newark Eagles owner Effa Manley served as secretary of the New York-area Citizens League for Fair Play, which campaigned against Harlem businesses that refused to employ black workers. Black ownership of Negro ballteams, then, proved not only a point of ethnic pride, but also an economic engine for endeavors valued within the African American community—and largely ignored without.22

Scores of black-owned businesses also thrived from their association with Negro baseball. In Detroit, for example, Herman Stark’s clothing store encouraged fans to “get those pretty clothes” for the “opening day Fashion parade,” while in Kansas City, the Negro-only Elbon Movie Theatre flashed pictures of Monarchs players and advertisements of upcoming games before each of its summer feature films. In Memphis, Tennessee, black-owned restaurants like Nudie Butt’s and Labelle’s Cafés hosted teams and fans for post-game meals and drinks, while the black-owned Lorraine motel, one of the few in town serving African Americans and the solemn future site of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination, consistently housed visiting Negro League teams for over twenty years. Black newspapers, too, reaped considerable financial benefits from the game, as seen in the Philadelphia Tribune’s daily game reports and weekly columns on the local Hilldale Club and the Pittsburgh Courier’s extensive coverage of its Pittsburgh Crawfords ballclub (Figure 5) that garnered it the largest readership of any black newspaper in America by 1945. Even famous black musicians sought to capitalize on Negro baseball’s allure: the jazz-singing Mills Brothers, for instance, occasionally played catch with Crawford players before Pittsburgh home games, and blues legend B. B. King enjoyed performing near first base as fans arrived for Memphis Red Sox games at the town’s St. Martin’s Park. A myriad of black businesses, then, benefited directly from Negro baseball, bolstering their bottom lines while generating millions of dollars in profits for African American entrepreneurs nationwide.23

Besides engineering financial gain for their communities, Negro League ballplayers also re-fashioned the on-field game itself into a distinctive black expression. Comedic showmanship, for one, was widespread on the Negro diamond, melding into baseball the long tradition of minstrel comedy embedded in black folk culture. Many of these episodes have become legendary, like New Orleans Crescent Stars catcher Pepper Bassett receiving pitches in a rocking chair; Indianapolis Clowns first baseman
Goose Tatum fielding grounders with a glove on his foot; and, of course, premier athlete and showman extraordinaire Leroy “Satchel” Paige intentionally walking the bases loaded, calling in his outfielders, sometimes ordering his infielders to sit down, then hurling his baffling “hesitation pitch” to strike out batters on three pitches. Even umpires contributed to the festivities, as Bob Motley showed with airborne leaps while calling plays at first base and as Emmett Ashford displayed with his characteristic pre-game sprint from home plate to the center field wall culminating in a full backflip. Coupled with the Negro Leagues’ innovations of night games and of “shadowball”—a fast-paced pantomime by infielders without a ball that morphed into the modern “around the horn,” the common practice of throwing the ball between infielders after an out—black baseballers had melded theatrical and athletic performance in a new style of baseball highly entertaining to fans, yet with a uniquely African élan.24

The electricity visible to onlookers watching such colorful performances also emanated from the competitive play on the field. As historians Montye Fuse and Keith Miller describe, Negro ballplayers employed a vast repertoire of baseball skills long out of favor with white major leaguers enamored with the home run. Bunting, especially at unpredictable moments, became one favorite tactic of even powerful Negro League hitters. Gene Benson, a fine batter for the Philadelphia Stars, recalls one extra-inning game when his manager ordered him to bunt with a man on third, two strikes, and two outs; according to major league baseball’s protocol of the day, this maneuver may have gotten him demoted. Baserunning, too, illuminated the highly improvisational character of Negro baseball. James “Cool Papa” Bell, the speedy centerfielder for the St. Louis Stars, recalls strolling to first base after a walk, then sprinting to second to draw a throw allowing a runner at third to score. Other teams instructed runners on first base to advance to third on a bunt, pressuring the defense to make plays, but violating major league baseball’s mantra to stop at second in the same situation. Even the barrier-breaker Jackie Robinson himself, frequently lauded for his daring on the basepaths, is said by Bell to have picked up several of his aggressive baserunning techniques during his year with the Kansas City Monarchs. This penchant for athletic cleverness, then—“trickeration,” as one former Negro Leaguer has called it—highlights the depth of African American influence on the game; as with jazz music, black Americans did not simply duplicate prevailing modes when performing mainstream activities, but rather infused innovative methodologies and ethnically congruent expressions into dominant-world pastimes. Hence, the heart of black baseball, says historian Jules Tygiel, held not only sentiments of racial pride, desires for communal economic success, and proclivity for athletic inventiveness, but also contained an implicit challenge for white
society through its dramatic and suggestive inversion of many conventional aspects of the national pastime.\textsuperscript{25}

**Japanese Americans in Baseball**

One additional ethnic group will serve as a final example in this exploration of baseball and race in Jim Crow America: Japanese Americans. Immigrating to the United States in increasing numbers during the late nineteenth century, many Japanese transplants, already familiar with baseball from their days in Japan (where the game had been played since the 1880s), began establishing ballclubs shortly after their arrival. Thus, Japanese immigrant baseball teams competed in places like Sacramento, Los Angeles, Colorado, and Wyoming as early as 1910, and a decade later, multi-team leagues were formed in Seattle and in San Francisco. In Honolulu, Japanese Hawaiians competed for the Japanese Athletic Club and for the Asahis, a talented team in the Hawaiian Baseball League. At least one Japanese Hawaiian, Andy Yamashiro, appeared for the Hawaiian Travelers, a renowned Asian Pacific American barnstorming squad that competed as far east as Chicago and New York City in 1914. In the following two decades, Japanese immigrants and Americans of Japanese descent continued to enthusiastically embrace baseball as their sport of choice, but the sudden onset of World War II soon threatened these ethnic ballteams—along with other Japanese American cultural activities—with extinction. Forced to relocate to internment camps throughout the United States’ interior, Americans of Japanese descent now faced the daunting prospect of abandoning their livelihoods within American society only to attempt to re-create them in a restrictive, incarcerated world. In such circumstances, baseball quickly emerged as a powerful medium for expressing national loyalties, and, as Japanese American internees would also soon discover, as an important avenue for other culturally significant purposes.\textsuperscript{26}

For one, baseball brought a much-needed sense of normalcy and purpose to dramatically altered lives. In constructing ball diamonds at the Gila River camp in the Arizona desert, for instance, Kenichi Zenimura, a Japanese-born immigrant raised in Hawaii, recalled clearing away sagebrush with a shovel when passersby inquired what he was doing. Replying “building a ballpark,” Zenimura soon found himself joined by dozens of men with equipment eager to assist in construction and likely infused with a sense of purpose otherwise lacking within camp confines. As competitions began among the thirty-some teams at Gila River, thousands of spectators flocked to see each game. As historian Kerry Yo Nakagawa has written, because the alternative was living in a communal barracks without any privacy,
most internees chose the more comfortable—and more exciting—activity of watching a ballgame. Peggy Taniguchi Yoshimoto, one of the many women’s softball players at Colorado’s Amache internment camp, perhaps said it best while musing, unlike any other part of the camp environment, when at the ball diamond, “it was just like the old days.” Seen in this light, baseball improved morale by returning welcome routines and familiar pastimes into many internees’ disrupted lives.²⁷

In a world of round-the-clock surveillance, participation in baseball also garnered considerable freedoms for players and fans. Most ballfields, for example, lay outside the barbed wire fences that enclosed camp facilities, meaning that venturing to any baseball practice or game allowed internees to transgress, if not necessarily to escape, supposedly impregnable boundaries (Figure 6). Moreover, playing on a ballteam allowed athletes the extremely rare opportunity of leaving camp confines to compete against area teams and other internment camp clubs; these several-hundred-mile journeys for baseball, incredibly, eclipsed even births, marriages, and

Figure 6: Baseball game, Manzanar Relocation Center, California, 1943. Courtesy of the Ansel Adams collection, Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppprs-00369.
funerals as virtually the only permitted means of departing camp facilities for the first two years of the war. Women, too, found greater liberties in camps allowing for athletic involvement: as historian Samuel Regalado has noted, smaller family dwelling spaces and communal mess halls meant fewer household chores for women, who thus flocked in droves to play softball (twenty squads arose at Utah’s Topaz camp alone in summer 1944). Clearly, then, diamond play generated unsuspected freedoms for both male and female camp residents, increasing spheres of independence for Japanese Americans otherwise locked behind bars.28

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of cultural strengthening facilitated by internment camp baseball was the reinforcement of intergenerational ties within Japanese American families. As the twentieth century wore on and more Japanese immigrants, or Issei, raised American-born children, called Nisei, generational clefts began to arise: Issei parents, concerned with preserving Japanese heritage and language in their children while also wishing them to contribute to American society, frequently conveyed seemingly paradoxical messages to their children to be “good Japanese,” and then to be “good Americans.” Baseball, it seems, proved one of the few mediums able to balance these seemingly irreconcilable burdens. As Nisei internee Yosh Tsukamoto recalled in later years, he thought he was doing his family heritage proud when he attended a sumo wrestling clinic at his Florin, California assembly center, but upon returning to his parents, caught “holy hell” for going. “They didn’t want me to get hurt,” Tsukamoto explained, echoing sentiments apparently widespread amongst Issei at relocation sites, “[They wanted me to] stick to baseball.” Issei also flocked to relocation camp games in extraordinary numbers, both to congregate and to gamble with other Issei generation rooters—a culturally established activity—but also to watch with pride their Nisei offspring combine the Japanese “bushido spirit” with American sportsmanship on the diamond. In this way, historian Masako Notoji explains, baseball “contributed to promoting trans-generational continuity between the Issei and the Nisei,” forging that broadening chasm seemingly so hard to bridge. In this cultural binding, then, baseball seemed to hold an equilibrium that appealed to both generations of incarcerees, a rarely found ability to convey in a single activity both the duties of American citizenship and the “untiring spirit of the Japanese race.” Thus, by binding elder and younger generations together, resurrecting patterns of normalcy in disrupted lives, and increasing internment-era freedoms for participants, baseball served a significant, not just symbolic, role in the lives of American Japanese. The national pastime could and did provide Japanese American internees with enjoyment—even with joy—in the midst of the dreariest episode of their communal lives.29
Conclusion

At the end of this winding road, then, we return to our starting place—to 1947, the year of baseball’s seemingly well-known integration story. Our multi-threaded and multi-ethnic narrative culminates, in some ways, with a myth-busting re-assessment of baseball hero Jackie Robinson. Certainly a laudable carrier of the torch passed by generations of marginalized or forgotten peoples of color who called the national pastime their own, Robinson’s gallant deeds nonetheless look different after the context of this analysis. Did his entrance constitute the first colored presence in professional baseball? Moses Fleetwood Walker and Clarence Duval represent an emphatic “no.” Did his signing represent the original assault on an untested racial blockade? Rafael Almeida and Armando Marsans, among a host of other early Cuban players, prove otherwise. Did the major leagues’ “foul lines” cover all of baseball all the time? Clearly, American Indians and African Americans on integrated teams nationwide attest to the complex variations of that rule. Without belittling Robinson’s remarkable accomplishments or denying his profound socio-cultural significance, then, I instead wish to ask teachers—and through them, their students—to reassess the meaning of his deeds within the historical context of the game he played. In other words, why did baseball matter to ethnic peoples in Jim Crow America, and how do their answers reflect upon Robinson’s pioneering deeds?

I would like to suggest several points to ruminate upon. First is that the notion of athletic segregation—that whites and non-whites should play separately—permeated much of the baseball world well beyond its rigid application in two major leagues. Like in broader American society, ballplayers of color—American Indian players at Carlisle, coffee-toned Cubans in Connecticut, and pre-war Japanese Americans in California—played the game under a prevailing, if not always a spoken, ideology that racially mingled teams proved subconsciously disconcerting. While clearly integrated amateur clubs arose nationwide, the unwritten boundaries erected in major league business meetings and reinforced by overwhelming public support in some regions still diffused across many landscapes where baseball was played.

Second, the exclusion of any persons of color made all persons of color suspect. As we have seen, professional baseball’s sixty-year racial barrier—really a barricade against players of African descent, not players of color—prompted vociferous accusations that swirled around Cubans Almeida, Marsans, Torriente, and Estalella, and around black American Moses Fleetwood Walker for many years. Thus, any racial barrier stigmatized all colored “others” as possibly African, a tenuous racial
position likely never fully erased from an observer’s mind. And this ethnic delineator held consequences for white ballplayers, too, who now, deemed not African, were ensconced as assurances of purity. Though historian Adrian Burgos has termed color categories of early baseball as “white,” “black,” and “brown,” perhaps these foul lines might also be conceptualized as related states of mind: “certainly black,” “certainly not black,” and “possibly black.” An overwhelming suspicion of ethnic peoples, then, proved another crucial repercussion of baseball’s color line.

Finally, despite the arbitrary and callous sting of segregation, Americans of color still found in baseball a way to strengthen their ethnic communities. Serving as a place of self-teaching and success at Indian boarding schools; as a vehicle into major-league pay and publicity for Cuban peoples; as an economic engine and an outlet of cultural expression for black Americans; and as an inter-generational glue and general morale-booster for Japanese American internees, baseball eclipsed simple “play” to prove an integral and important aspect in the lives of peoples of color. Seen in this light, the national game became a malleable game, flexible enough to embody different values for different people. Ironically, then, Americans of color likely saw baseball less as a game of damning racism and more as a pastime of cultural expression, a unique medium for melding their ethnic traditions with excellence in mainstream sport. Truly, these stories reveal the diverse multicultural meanings in this quintessentially American pastime.

As for Jackie Robinson, then, his affirmative legacy remains. While a detailed study of the man and his experience is best left to the myriad writings on the topic, acknowledging him as a barrier-breaker and as the central player of baseball’s integration drama is an undisputed fact. Yet this narrative should reveal the intense pride—and implicit challenges—earlier ethnic peoples displayed while pursuing baseball dreams. Segregation, while atrocious, also facilitated the strengthening of ethnic communities in the form of language preservation, cultural artistic expression, and economic independence. Along these lines, perhaps 1940s black sportswriter Sam Lacy articulated perspectives of many ethnic peoples when considering an integrated society. “Integration would have a devastating effect on black baseball,” Lacy wrote in 1942, “Negro league…monies are coming into Negro pockets. You can rest assured that we’d get none of [that] in the [major] leagues.” Baseball’s broken color line, then, while wholeheartedly embraced by Americans of all races then as now, was not without its ambiguity: lessened, rather than strengthened, ethnic ties remain one of its legacies. In this regard, the notion that integration opened the door for athletes of all colors to enjoy the national pastime, that Robinson made baseball “a black man’s game, too,” rings bittersweet. In truth, by 1947, those days had already been.
Notes

1. My sincere thanks to Robert Galler and to Samuel Regalado for their thoughtful critiques of this essay.


7. David Zang, *Fleet Walker’s Divided Heart: The Life of Baseball’s First Black Major Leaguer* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 55; Jules Tygiel,
8. James E. Brunson III, unpublished article on black mascots conveyed to author at the 17th annual conference of NINE: A Journal of Baseball History and Culture, Phoenix, AZ, March 2010. Unfortunately, no published writings on the historical origins of sports mascots were uncovered in this research.


11. Jeffrey Powers-Beck, The American Indian Integration of Baseball (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 31-50; David J. Laliberte, Indian Summers: Baseball at Native American Boarding Schools in Minnesota (M.A. thesis, St. Cloud [MN] State University, 2008), 13n; Harold Seymour and Dorothy Seymour Mills, Baseball: The People’s Game (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 383, 385-387. The Seymour’s three-volume history of the national pastime (Baseball: The Early Years; Baseball: The Golden Age; and Baseball: The People’s Game), is the most comprehensive history of the sport ever assembled. Their chapter on Indian baseball (The People’s Game, 379-395), which argues that boarding school leaders employed the game to assimilate Native peoples, illuminates a myriad of previously unexamined materials describing Indian school baseball, but unfortunately, the Seymours included neither footnotes nor citations to the exact sources they consulted, making their work difficult to retrace.


29. Masako Notoji, “From Graveyard to Baseball: The Quest for Ethnic Identity in the Prewar Japanese Immigrant Community in the Yakima Valley,” *Japanese Journal of American Studies*, no. 3 (1989): 29-63; Jay Feldman, “Baseball Behind Barbed Wire,” *The National Pastime: A Review of Baseball History*, no. 12 (Cleveland: Society for American Baseball Research, 1992), 37-41; Regalado, “Incarcerated Sport,” 432, 435. Unfortunately, sloppy scholarship taints two of the most detailed articles on internment camp baseball. Feldman’s “Baseball Behind Barbed Wire” and Nakagawa’s *Through a Diamond* contain no notes or citations (Nakagawa does include a works cited appendix), and considerable stretches of Nakagawa’s chapter on internment baseball appear to be directly copied from Feldman’s work (see, for example, Nakagawa pages 79, 83 and Feldman page 38). Thus, a scholarly and comprehensive treatment of this important episode in baseball history remains wanting.

30. Tygiel, “Unreconciled Strivings,” 86. The heartwarming idea of Robinson making baseball “a black man’s game, too,” is a prominent theme in many popular histories of his historic major league debut, including Jonathan Eig’s *Opening Day: The Story of Jackie Robinson’s First Season* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007). Nearly thirty years after its original publication, however, Jules Tygiel’s *Baseball’s Great Experiment*, which argues that pervasive discrimination gripped baseball before, during and even long after Robinson’s debut, remains the definitive scholarly work on the game’s integration.
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