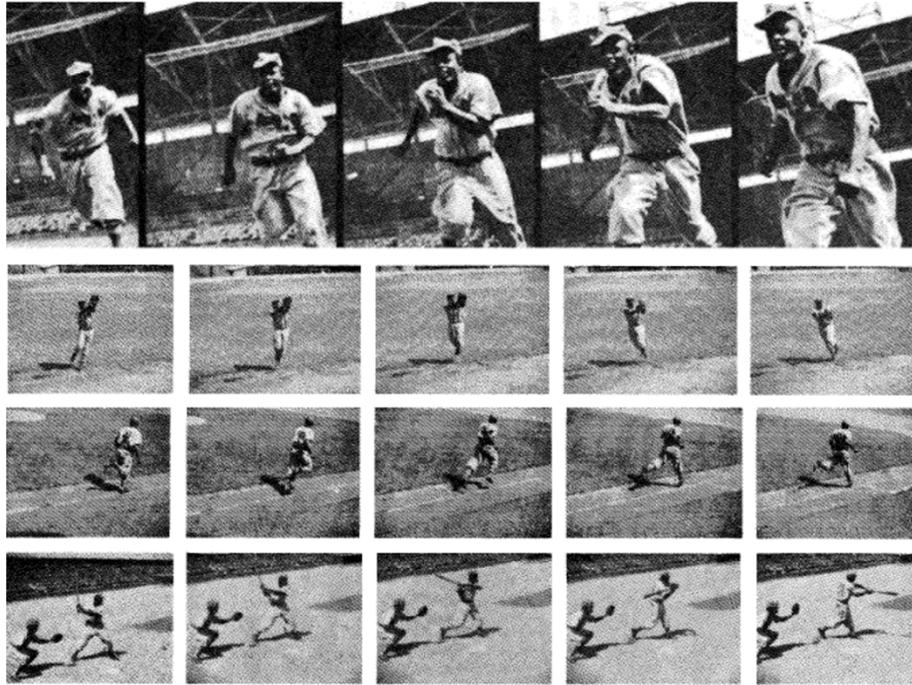


**“A Black Man in a White World”  
The Duality of Jackie Robinson**



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### **A note on racial terminology**

This paper deals with sensitive subjects of prejudice and racial stereotyping and the language we use to talk about these. It is incumbent on the writer to make choices for reasons of clarity and consistency and to explain those choices. Currently, there is no scholarly consensus on the preferred use of the terms “African-American,” “Black,” “White,” “black,” and “white.” For the purposes of this paper, I have chosen to use “black” and “white,” imprecise though they may be. They are broad generalities with the understood meaning that they represent those of primarily (or visually) African descent and those of primarily (or visually) European descent. Because this paper also deals with Afro-Caribbean and Latin American persons of color, African-American is not sufficiently broad to encompass them.

In this paper, I also use the highly-contested term “slaves.” I am fully aware that current scholarship prefers the use of “enslaved persons” in order to properly place the agency with the enslaver and not the enslaved. I chose to use “slaves” for two reasons. One, I believe that there is a certain shock value in the term “slave” which centers the brutality inflicted and the denial of humanity which I find crucial to this paper. Two, I employ the terms “house slave” and “field slave” as they have been used in general and scholarly discourse and adding those adjectives makes “enslaved person” an unwieldy construction as part of a clear discussion.

Finally, this paper uses both “Negro” and “nigger” as a part of quotes from the late 1940s. At that time, “Negro” was the preferred and respectful term used for blacks in the United States and of course “Negro Leagues” was, and continues to be, the proper usage for the segregated baseball teams created in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. I transcribe “nigger” when, and only when historical actors use this term. I do not, by any means, intend to reproduce the harm this term has historically produced. At the same time, with forewarning, I believe it is

fair and appropriate for the reader to experience its full impact when navigating the story of Jack Robinson.

## Acknowledgments

Though Commencement will be here soon, this paper really represents a culmination. In many ways, it is the sum of what I have done at Columbia and as such, it draws from many of my classes and professors along the way. Jazz and baseball have been recurring themes in my college experience, I hope that I have successfully brought them together here. I want to thank Professor Margo Jefferson and Professor Phillip Lopate for the many ways in which they have helped me improve my writing. Professor James Shapiro and Professor Ross Posnock for helping me think about literature in a more incisive and critical way. Professor Robert O'Meally for his guidance in relation to jazz, Professor Ann Douglas for opening my eyes to the meaning of 1947 and Professor Brent Hayes Edwards who turned epistrophe into epiphany. Professor David Helfand and Professor Jill Shapiro for helping me think in a more analytical manner. And two professors from NYU, Professor Ben Ratliff for introducing me to Guy DeBord, for his jazz expertise and much more and Professor Jeffrey Sammons for being a sounding board and a contrarian on many issues relating to this paper. In terms of the actual writing, both my Thesis Advisor, Professor Mae Ngai and my Second Reader, Professor Frank Guridy have been the best possible support, lending their expertise and demanding intellectual rigor. I also owe huge thanks to the members of Professor Ngai's thesis class for their great and helpful comments, particularly Adam, Libby and Sam. Professor Elizabeth Blackmar, my Major Advisor, offered both insight and food for thought. In addition, I offer my deepest gratitude to Professor Krin Gabbard, always there for any questions from dumb to profound and an incredible source of knowledge on so many subjects. I want to also thank my wonderful son for not laughing at me

too much as I've navigated college at this late date. Finally, I have to thank my greatest cheerleader and proofreader, my dear, sweet, funny, smart, baseball-and-music-loving husband.

## Introduction

*The Bat and the Ball don't know if Players Black or White*  
*"Cool Papa" Bell<sup>1</sup>*

It is the afternoon of September 28<sup>th</sup> in the chiaroscuro 1955 of television. Jack Roosevelt Robinson shuffle steps a dance down the third base line of Yankee Stadium. The third base coach for the Brooklyn Dodgers stands, a spectator in the box containing him from the field. He neither urges Jackie nor warns him. Whitey Ford, known as "The Chairman of the Board," is on the mound for the Yankees. He pitches to pinch hitter Frank Kellert, in for first baseman Gil Hodges. As Ford winds up and throws, Robinson takes off for the plate. What happens next is what is commonly referred to as a "bang-bang play." The Yankees catcher, Yogi Berra, is behind the plate. The pitch and Robinson are on a collision course.

The umpire, Bill Summers, leans in to make the call. "Safe." He both says it and indicates it with broad sweeps of his arms. Safe at home. Jackie Robinson has stolen home. This is the first time anyone has ever stolen home in a World Series game. This is Game One of the 1955 World Series. It will go the full seven games and the Brooklyn Dodgers will win their first and only world championship. This is perhaps the second most famous moment in Robinson's career. The first was April 15, 1947. That was the day he took his position at first base in a Brooklyn Dodgers uniform and changed baseball and America.

There is no need to re-tell the story of how Jack Robinson broke the color barrier in baseball. Thousands and thousands of pages of history, biography and autobiography are readily available. There are children's books like Bette Bao Lord's charming *In the Year of the Boar*

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<sup>1</sup> James Thomas "Cool Papa" Bell Letter to Steve Cooper June 21, 1980 Baseball Hall of Fame Archives

*and Jackie Robinson.* There are minute-by-minute accounts like Jonathan Eig's *Opening Day: The Story of Jackie Robinson's First Season.* There is the film *The Jackie Robinson Story* starring Jackie Robinson as Jackie Robinson. Inevitably, Ken Burns, pious chronicler of the American experience, has produced a four hour documentary about Robinson. The unmistakably reverent tone of the narration tells viewers how to feel about Robinson, the beleaguered pioneer, entering the Promised Land of Major League ballparks.

The Jackie Robinson story has escaped the person Jack Robinson to become larger than life. The breaking of the color line has metamorphosed from a moment in history to a "Day" commemorated and repeated every year on April 15<sup>th</sup>. On Jackie Robinson Day, every player, coach, manager and umpire in Major League Baseball wears Robinson's number 42. In fact that is the only time anyone wears number 42 on the professional baseball diamond. Robinson's number was officially retired by every team in baseball in 1997. Jack Robinson is the only player to have received that honor or, for that matter, to have his own day in any American professional sport. Baseball gestures to the shamefulness of its past while celebrating the self-granted "racial enlightenment" of its present. And of course Jackie Robinson Day is an opportunity for unabashed merchandising with the MLB Shop selling everything from jerseys and hats to documentary DVDs and something called a "Jackie Robinson Reaction Figure."<sup>2</sup> We can only guess what Robinson's reaction would be. All of it is a chance to monetize baseball's racism and its purported triumph over it.

The truth is, baseball isn't really celebrating Jackie Robinson. Baseball is celebrating itself. It is celebrating the decisions made in 1947 by Ford Frick, Commissioner of the National League and Branch Rickey, President of the Brooklyn Dodgers to, at long last, integrate baseball.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mlbshop.com/jackie-robinson/a-69622543+z-889959-1316817324>

This was a perilous moment. By integrating the Major Leagues, baseball might embarrass itself and put the lie to its many excuses to remain segregated. What would be the explanation when players from the Negro Leagues out-played their white counterparts? The best of the Major Leagues had already played against Negro Leaguers in exhibition barnstorming games. During the off-season, the most popular Major Leaguers would form all-star teams that played against each other and against Negro League teams. It was here that a young Joe DiMaggio conceded that he would know he was ready for the Major Leagues when he could get a hit off of Negro Leagues pitching ace, Satchel Paige.<sup>3</sup> What if players from the Negro Leagues were brought into the Majors and their play on the field put the lie to all of the “not ready” and “inferior” pronouncements that had kept so-called “Organized Baseball” lily white for more than sixty years?

The institution of Major League Baseball was slow to recognize the accomplishments of the Negro Leagues, perpetuating the idea that the Negro Leagues were neither “Major” nor “Organized.” But in 1971, Negro League players were, for the first time, inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame and in 2020, Major League Baseball agreed to recognize Negro League statistics. MLB’s press release is instructive on that subject. Beginning with the reflexive, if disingenuous, pat on the back that “Major League Baseball has long celebrated the legacy of the Negro Leagues,” the release goes on to say that Baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred “bestowed Major League status upon several professional Negro Leagues...”<sup>4</sup> “Bestowed?” The tone of this pronouncement is so condescending that it puts the lie to any honor Major League Baseball might intend. The sarcastic but appropriate retort “Mighty white of you.” comes to mind.

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<sup>3</sup> Donald Spivey “*If You Were Only White*” *The Life of Leroy “Satchel” Paige* p.xxii

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.mlb.com/news/negro-leagues-given-major-league-status-for-baseball-records-stats>

How then to enter this well-developed conversation from a scholarly perspective? Aside from the popular works on the subject mentioned above, academic writing about Jack Robinson is a well-worn path. In fact, as my research has progressed, I came to realize that more than a path, Robinson scholarship is a road that has been paved, torn up, repaved and turned into a superhighway. The stories built up around Robinson, his breaking of the color barrier in baseball and its impact on racism in the United States constitute the stories we tell ourselves as a society that ultimately define who Robinson was and more importantly, what he means to us and to our interactions. When these narratives -- many of them false -- are repeated time and again, they become accepted truth and the past is warped to suit the present. My goal is to examine and strip away some of these fantasies. Not by dissecting what happened or even why or how it happened. Rather, my purpose is to examine the dichotomies and contradictions embodied in how the person Jack Robinson was detached from the constructed image "Jackie Robinson" and what cultural objectives were served by the creation of this identity. To do this, I will offer some speculation regarding Robinson's name, myths surrounding his person, the interpretation of his meaning and the meaning of breaking the color line in baseball. I will employ contemporaneous journalism as well as the writings of Amiri Baraka, Ralph Ellison and the autobiography of Robinson himself among others in order to re-enter 1947.

I will also build on existing scholarship, for example "Jazzing the Basepaths – Jackie Robinson and African-American Aesthetics" by Keith Miller and Montye Fuse and "The jazz-sport analogue: Passing notes on gender and sexuality" by Jayne Caudwell to situate Robinson within the culture of his time. I will foreground "Cool Pose: Black Masculinity and Sports" by Richard Majors focusing on black self-presentation as it relates to the strictures imposed on

Robinson in his first years in the Majors and the on-going interpretation of players of color and their actions on the baseball field.

I intend to use Jack Robinson's story and the dualities embodied in it as a proxy for how sports has been and continues to be one way that our society attempts to reconcile inequality and how that fits into a larger pattern that diminishes black masculinity while rewarding the marginalization of personal expression and the enforcement of white, middle-class norms

## **Chapter 1 Jack and Jackie**

*Well did you see Jackie Robinson hit that ball?  
Did he hit it? Yeah and that ain't all.  
He stole home  
Yes, yes Jackie's real gone  
Jackie's a real gone guy*

*Did you see Jackie Robinson Hit That Ball  
Count Basie and his Orchestra*

Even though it seems like everything about Jackie Robinson has been examined and dissected, there are some omissions. Let's start with his name. Jackie Robinson was born Jack Roosevelt Robinson on January 31, 1919 in Cairo, Georgia. Throughout his life and after his death, his wife, Rachel Robinson consistently called him Jack. In an interview, writer Jonathan Eig noted, "...she always called him Jack..."<sup>5</sup> In his comprehensive biography of Jackie Robinson, historian Arnold Rampersad refers to him as "Jack" throughout the book.<sup>6</sup> The November 30, 1940 UCLA vs. USC Football Program lists him as "22 year old Jack Robinson

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Eig *Opening Day* p. 36

<sup>6</sup> Arnold Rampersad *Jackie Robinson – A Biography*

from Pasadena.”<sup>7</sup> He was Second Lieutenant Jack Robinson in the 761<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion during his service in World War II. But on June 23, 1945, a time at which Robinson was being scouted for the Major Leagues, the Philadelphia Tribune published the Negro League Kansas City Monarchs lineup with “Jackie Robinson” at shortstop.<sup>8</sup> From then on, in every account of every game and even after he retired from baseball, he was Jackie Robinson. It seems strange to call him anything else.

It's possible that this change from Jack to Jackie was meaningless. I could find no explicit explanation in any of the literature. And after all, baseball is a game filled with nicknames, many of them used as “official” names on team rosters. On Robinson’s 1947 Dodgers team there was Harold Peter Henry “PeeWee” Reese and Edwin Donald “Duke” Snider among others, both monikers from their childhood. But baseball nicknames have also been used to make a point. Throughout the late 1950s and the 1960s, Puerto Rican-born Roberto Clemente was styled as “Bob” by announcers and on his baseball cards, ostensibly to “Americanize” him.<sup>9</sup> In reality, this nickname, which he never accepted or used, was purposefully employed to strip him of his Latino identity.<sup>10</sup> Clemente had no desire to hide who he was. He was well-aware of the challenges his dual identity posed. “Me, I’m a double nigger because I’m black and a nigger because I’m Puerto Rican.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.collectableivy.com/collectible-ivy-blog/jackie-robinson-in-ucla-football-program/>

<sup>8</sup> Philadelphia Tribune June 23, 1945

<sup>9</sup> Topps 1959 Roberto Clemente. Interestingly, even though the card said “Bob Clemente,” he signed it “Roberto” for publication.

<sup>10</sup> Bleacher Report “21 Facts You May Not Know About Roberto Clemente”

<https://bleacherreport.com/articles/1149087-21-facts-you-may-not-know-about-roberto-clemente-on-the-anniversary-of-his-debut>

<sup>11</sup> Adrian Burgos, Jr. “An Uneven Playing Field: Afro-Latinos in Major League Baseball” *The Afro-Latin@Reader: History and Culture in the United States* ed. Miriam Jimenez Roman and Juan Flores, Durham: Duke University Press (2010). 138

Similarly, Jesus Alou was “Jay,” in part because baseball announcers were uncomfortable calling him “Jesus,” using the English pronunciation, even though Jesus is a common name in Spanish-speaking countries and is, of course, pronounced “Hay-soos.”

So why Jackie instead of Jack? Jack is a simple, masculine name as in “Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy,”<sup>12</sup> a radio adventure series popular in the 1930s and 1940s. But for an African-American athlete, the name Jack may have had other, more problematic resonances. It may have recalled the most celebrated African-American athlete in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Jack Johnson. He was a heavyweight boxer famous for his power and ability in the ring and infamous for his personal life, particularly his association with and marriage to white women. “...(T)he “bad nigger” imagery - carnality, miscegenation, bravado, iconoclasm, flamboyance, hostility toward whites, assertiveness, and irresponsibility - once embodied by boxer Jack Johnson, evoked fear from white Americans.”<sup>13</sup> Likely as a result of that, Jack Johnson was hounded by the both the popular press and the United States government throughout his life.

Did that make “Jack” a loaded name for an African-American athlete? Or was it simply that the diminutive “Jackie” made Jack Robinson a more accessible figure? Did the childlike “Jackie” make the powerful adult Jack less threatening to the status quo, less likely to become a Jack Johnson-like figure with all of the implications of black manhood which had been baked into the culture by “entertainment” like *Birth of a Nation*? As Ralph Ellison observed, “...nicknames are indicative of a change from a given to an achieved identity...”<sup>14</sup> It’s worth

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<sup>12</sup> Goulart, Ron. "Jack Armstrong." *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture Online*, Gale, 2013. *Gale In Context: Biography*, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/CGQBAE872008277/BIC?u=columbiau&sid=summon&xid=116b8e1e..](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CGQBAE872008277/BIC?u=columbiau&sid=summon&xid=116b8e1e..)

<sup>13</sup> William Simons "Jackie Robinson and the American Mind: Journalistic Perceptions of the Reintegration of Baseball" p. 59

<sup>14</sup> Ralph Ellison *Shadow and Act* p. 222

thinking about the subliminal repercussions of the constant repetition of a naive nickname attached to an adult man -- to use Ellison's construct, the achieved identity "Jackie" versus the person Jack. Names have meanings and implications. Names repeated publicly attach unspoken connotations. The fact remains. Jackie was not Jack Roosevelt Robinson's given name nor his childhood nickname but it was the only name by which he was known publicly as an adult.

## **Chapter 2 War and Return**

*They had supposed their formula was fixed.  
They had obeyed instructions to devise  
A type of cold, a type of hooded gaze.  
But when the Negroes came they were perplexed.  
These Negroes looked like men...*<sup>15</sup>

*Excerpt from "the white troops had their orders but the Negroes looked like men"  
Gwendolyn Brooks*

For fans, the baseball diamond is a sacred space removed from the world. But the world in the form of World War II intruded on that. Many Major Leaguers joined the military and came home heroes. After the war, there was a profound hunger to return to "normal" and baseball was a part of that lifestyle dream. White soldiers demobilized and moved on. They used the GI Bill to go to college, get a mortgage, buy a home in the suburbs and raise little Baby Boomers who played Little League. The way they saw it, they had earned their right to participate in the ideal suburban existence in postwar America. Of course it wasn't all perfection. The William Wyler film, *The Best Years of Our Lives*<sup>16</sup>, shot in 1946 is perhaps the best contemporaneous depiction of returning white GIs confronting physical disability,

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<sup>15</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks *A Street in Bronzeville* 656

<sup>16</sup> William Wyler *The Best Years of our Lives* The Samuel Goldwyn Company 1946

alcoholism and a general sense that their experiences in the war have alienated them from their previous civilian lives. But what they faced was considerably less daunting than what awaited African-American veterans.

For returning African-American soldiers, the sense of dislocation was even greater. The war was over but a different war had just begun. In their case, the GI Bill was not the panacea that promised education and home ownership, the traditional basis of generational wealth in the United States. Those benefits were primarily vouchsafed to white soldiers. Instead, quotas abounded, even in vocational programs, let alone universities.<sup>17</sup> And as to home ownership, two forces lined up against African-American veterans to make the promise of a government-backed mortgage meaningless. One was red-lining. This was a process that the banks, with the support of the government, used to make certain neighborhoods ineligible for mortgage loans. Many of those neighborhoods were African-American. The other insidious practice was the perpetuation of covenants within neighborhoods, codified in title documents, that prohibited anyone but white Christians from buying a home. New suburban developments like Levittown openly and unashamedly banned the sale of homes to African-Americans.<sup>18</sup>

African-Americans had been urged to enlist in World War II but many found hypocrisy in being asked to fight racism and prejudice overseas while facing it as a way of life at home. They had joined up in unprecedented numbers, many of them focused on the idea promulgated by the African-American newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, of the “Double V.” Victory against tyranny abroad. Victory against prejudice at home.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Edward Humes “How the GI Bill Shunted Blacks Into Vocational Training” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* No. 53 (Autumn 2006) 93.

<sup>18</sup> Terron McGrew “The History of Residential Segregation in the United States, Title VIII, and the Home Ownership Remedy” *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*” (May- September 2018) 1020.

<sup>19</sup> Chris Lamb *Conspiracy of Silence: Sportswriters and the Long Campaign to Desegregate Baseball* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 2012) 168.

Persuasive as this call to service and the anticipation of reward was, some black draftees didn't buy into the narrative. Jazz trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie showed up at his draft board with his trumpet in a paper bag. As he told the story in his autobiography, *To Be or not...To Bop*:

At this stage in my life here in the United States whose foot has been in my ass? The white man's foot has been in my ass hole buried up to his knee in my ass hole!...Now you're speaking of the enemy. You're telling me the German is the enemy. At this point, I can never even remember having met a German. So if you put me out there with a gun in my hand and tell me to shoot at the enemy, I'm liable to create a case of "mistaken identity," of who I might shoot.<sup>20</sup>

Needless to say, Gillespie was classified 4-F.

With the exception of the Coast Guard, United States forces were strictly segregated and would continue to be until well after the end of World War II. In fact, at the outbreak of the war, there were no blacks in the Marine Corps. In the Navy, the saying was, "This is the Navy where men are men and colored men are cooks." Civil rights activists pressured the government to allow African-American soldiers to "fight like men." African-Americans fought in the Pacific on Iwo Jima. They fought in Europe in the air and on the ground. Second Lieutenant Jack Robinson was a morale officer in the 761<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion, known as "The Black Panthers." Eventually, after Lt. Robinson had been court martialed and acquitted, the 761<sup>st</sup> would be sent to Europe to fight as part of General George S. Patton's Third Army shortly before Robinson was honorably discharged.<sup>21</sup> Patton deemed the Black Panthers his greatest fighting force. In his typically tactful fashion he told them, "Men, you are the first Negro tankers ever to fight in the American army. I don't care what color you are as long as you kill those Kraut

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<sup>20</sup> Dizzy Gillespie *To Be or not...To Bop* University of Minnesota Press (2009) 120.

<sup>21</sup> US Army Airborne and Special Operations Museum <https://www.asomf.org/jackie-robinsons-career-in-the-army/>

sonsofbitches....your race is looking forward to your success. Don't let them down and damn you, don't let me down!"<sup>22</sup>

During the war, there was also racial tension on the home front. In Harlem in 1943, a white policeman shot a black soldier and riots broke out.<sup>23</sup> Other cities experienced upheaval that year as well. African-Americans were often turned away while trying to contribute blood to the Red Cross.<sup>24</sup> In case of attack, Washington, D.C. planned separate black and white air raid shelters. Lynchings continued unabated. Black GIs were attacked for attempting to use the same facilities as their white counterparts.<sup>25</sup> Writer James Baldwin in his groundbreaking book *The Fire Next Time* wrote retrospectively of the post-war period:

The treatment accorded the Negro during the Second World War marks for me, a turning point in the Negro's relation to America. You must put yourself in the skin of a man who is wearing the uniform of his country, is a candidate for death in its defense, and who is called a "nigger" by his comrades-in-arms and his officers; who is almost always given the hardest, ugliest, most menial work to do; who knows that the white G.I. has informed the Europeans that he is subhuman... and who watches German prisoners of war being treated by Americans with more human dignity than he has ever received at their hands.<sup>26</sup>

Jack Robinson's military service ended with him being court-martialed for his unwillingness to move to the back of a bus on a military base and his subsequent "insubordination." Although he was acquitted and received an honorable discharge, his time in the Army did little to convince him that fighting and dying for one's country would ameliorate American racism. "I was naïve about the elaborate lengths to which racists in the Armed Forces

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<sup>22</sup> <https://warfarehistorynetwork.com/2017/06/21/pattons-panthers-the-story-of-the-761st-tank-battalion/>

<sup>23</sup> Eric Lott "Double V, Double Time Bebop's Politics of Style" *Callaloo* No. 36 (Summer 1988) 598

<sup>24</sup> Nat Brandt *Harlem at War: The Black Experience in WWII* New York: Goodreads Press (1996) 3943

<sup>25</sup> Alexis Clark "Returning from War, Returning to Racism" *New York Times Magazine*

"<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/30/magazine/black-soldiers-wwii-racism.html> (July 30, 2020)

<sup>26</sup> James Baldwin "The Fire Next Time" *James Baldwin Collected Essays* (The Library of America New York 1998) 318

would go to put a vocal black man in his place...Everything would have been all right if I had been a 'yassuh boss' type."<sup>27</sup> Robinson could not have anticipated the degree to which he would have to suppress his righteous indignation as a member of the Brooklyn Dodgers.

In 1947, baseball would do something that even the United States military wasn't ready to do. Baseball would integrate one of the most emblematic of American institutions. Its instrument was Jack Roosevelt Robinson.

### **Chapter 3** **April 15, 1947**

*The destruction of the Eagles, Greys [sic], Black Yankees, Elite Giants, Cuban Stars, Clowns, Monarchs, Black Barons, to what must we attribute that? We're going to the big leagues. Is that what the cry was on those Afric' shores when the European capitalists and African feudal lords got together and palmed our future. "WE'RE GOING TO THE BIG LEAGUES!"*<sup>28</sup>

*Amiri Baraka*

"Dem Bums." That was the affectionate nickname of the Brooklyn Dodgers. For Brooklyn fans, they were the glue that held the borough together. Fragmented into neighborhoods of Irish, Jewish and Italian immigrants, the Dodgers were the one thing Brooklynites could agree on. Dodger fandom was both the common denominator and the engine of assimilation. To be a Dodger fan was to be a real American.

Brooklyn kids imagined that they were Dodger stars Pee Wee Reese or Ralph Branca while playing stickball in the street with broom handles as bats, manhole covers as bases and a hard, pink rubber Spalden standing in for horsehide. In the 1940s before athletes were stratospheric superstars, Dodgers players like Gil Hodges lived with their families right in the

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<sup>27</sup> Jackie Robinson *I Never Had It Made* p. 19

<sup>28</sup> Amiri Baraka *The Autobiography of Leroi Jones* p.45

neighborhood. They were a part of the fabric of Brooklyn's daily life. Opening Day of the baseball season was as wildly anticipated as Christmas. The return of the team author Roger Kahn subsequently dubbed the "Boys of Summer" to their home at Ebbets Field was an annual event that signaled the beginning of warm afternoons in the ballpark or sitting on the porch, listening to the game on the radio.

The population of Brooklyn had changed during World War II. Employment at the Brooklyn Navy Yard drew blacks to higher wages and a better standard of living. Afro-Caribbeans, mostly from Puerto Rico, as well as English speakers from the Caribbean moved to the Bronx and to Brooklyn. As Jews and Italians moved out of the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood, it became a black enclave. "During the 1940s, the black population of Brooklyn had increased from 107,263 to 208,478. The increase did not mark a breakdown in existing patterns of residential racial segregation. Almost two thirds of the black population was concentrated in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood in north central Brooklyn."<sup>29</sup> Syndicated columnist George E. Sokolsky wrote in 1947, "That baseball conscious town (Brooklyn) has an enormous Negro population. Negro boys and girls go to the same schools, the same movie houses, work in the same stores and factories as white boys and girls....And in Brooklyn or New York no antagonism to opening this door to equal opportunity has expressed itself in any form."<sup>30</sup> That may have been somewhat wishful thinking, but Branch Rickey certainly had reason to hope that Brooklyn was fertile soil for his "Great Experiment."

Ironically, the other two Major League teams in New York -- the Yankees and the Giants -- played near Harlem, the city's traditional black community from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the

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<sup>29</sup> Henry D. Fetter, "Racial Fault-lines in 'Baseball's Great Experiment:' Black Perceptions, White Reactions" *Transatlantica* (2011)

<sup>30</sup> George E. Sokolsky "Reason Must Prevail in Robinson Case".

first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>31</sup> But it was New York City's third Major League team, the Brooklyn Dodgers, that would break the color barrier.

The color barrier had been an unwritten rule of baseball since the so-called "Gentleman's Agreement" dating back to the 1880s.<sup>32</sup> Teams and leagues decided among themselves that they would not allow players with dark skin; whether African-American, Latin American or from the Caribbean, to play for any team. Race was also an insurmountable obstacle from a practical standpoint. Many of the players in the Major Leagues, perhaps up to one third, were southerners who refused to play, eat and travel with black players starting with the execrable declaration of "Cap" Anson. On August 10, 1883, future Hall of Famer Anson and his Chicago team refused to take the field against Toledo because of Toledo's African-American catcher, Moses Fleetwood Walker. As Anson bluntly and profanely stated, he would not play ball with "no damned nigger."<sup>33</sup> Subsequently, Anson's attitude became accepted practice throughout baseball. "Cap" Anson was no gentleman but the agreement persisted.

Integrating the Major Leagues was not a new idea. Indeed it was hotly contested in the black community. Wendell Smith, Sport Editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier* wrote this in 1938:

We have been fighting for years in an effort to make owners of major league baseball teams (choose) Negro players. But they won't do it, probably never will. We keep on crawling, begging and pleading for recognition just the same. We know that they don't want us but we still keep giving them our money. Keep on going to their ball games and shouting till we are blue in the face. Oh, we're an optimistic, faithful, prideless lot – we pitiful black folk.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/place/Harlem-New-York>.

<sup>32</sup> Kevin B. Blackstone "Baseball is honoring the Negro Leagues. It needs to explain why they existed." *Washington Post* August 16, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> John R. Husman "'Cap' Anson vs. Fleet Walker" <https://sabr.org/gamesproj/game/august-10-1883-cap-anson-vs-fleet-walker/#sdendnote3sym>.

<sup>34</sup> Wendell Smith *Pittsburgh Courier*.

By way of contrast, in 1945 an anonymous columnist called “Ajax” wrote in *The Negro Sporting News*,<sup>35</sup> “The least said about Negroes getting into the white major leagues the better for all concerned...” He opined that it was impossible to accurately judge Negro League players because, “...1944 was the first year that Negro organized baseball kept records” and, as if he could see into the future, “We don’t want one Negro to carry the load of 13 million on his shoulders.”<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, this type of dissent was kept within the black community. Outwardly, integration of the Major Leagues was an important goal on the road to change in society at large.

Opening Day, April 15, 1947, marked the end of the “Gentleman’s Agreement.” It was what sociologists and historians refer to as a critical event, an “event that disrupts order with (its) own logic, that mark(s) and begin(s) new patterns of order out of old...”<sup>37</sup> On the face of it, it was indeed a watershed moment. But as planned and executed by Dodgers’ President Branch Rickey and enacted by Jack Robinson, it actually reinforced and upheld pervasive cultural stereotypes about the meaning of heroism and the meaning of race in America in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Cultural critic Gerald Early writes: “Sports like all of popular culture, become the theater where the taboos are simultaneously smashed and reinforced, where one is liberated from them while conforming to them. Sports are not an idealization of ourselves but a reflection.”<sup>38</sup> In the case of Jack Robinson’s debut with the Brooklyn Dodgers, this is a particularly accurate

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<sup>35</sup> Sadly, there are almost no copies of the *Negro Sporting News* extant except the one or two housed at the Baseball Hall of Fame.

<sup>36</sup> “Ajax” *The Negro Sporting News Newspaper* April 25, 1945.

<sup>37</sup> John Kelly “Integrating America: Jackie Robinson, Critical Events and Baseball Black and White” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* Vol 22 No. 6 (November 2005) p. 1011.

<sup>38</sup> Gerald Early *A Level Playing Field: African-American Athletes and the Republic of Sports* Harvard University Press (2011) 1538.

statement. And it also begs the question; why Jack Robinson? In what way did he reflect both the conformities and the taboos of the United States in 1947?

Jack Robinson was not a star of the Negro Leagues. He was not one of the more well-known legends like Satchel Paige or Josh Gibson or “Cool Papa” Bell. In fact, he only played one season with the Negro League Kansas City Monarchs before Branch Rickey signed him to a contract with the Montreal Royals, a Brooklyn Dodgers farm team in the International League.<sup>39</sup> There is no doubt that Robinson was a superb athlete. He was a four sport star at UCLA, better known for football, track and basketball than baseball.<sup>40</sup> More than that, he embodied what baseball was looking for:

Numerous articles echoed Shaughnessy's (Frank Shaughnessy, President of the International League) assumption that Organized Baseball would give the "right type" of black a fair trial. With few exceptions the media employed phraseology, such as ‘right type of fellow,’ ‘right man,’ ‘right boy,’ ‘a credit to the race,’ ‘no better candidate,’ ‘ideal candidate,’ and ‘ideal Negro,’ that portrayed Robinson as a good choice to reintegrate baseball. The Robinson portrayed by the media was ‘the right type’ because rather than challenge the liberal consensus he appeared to apotheosize it.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, though he may have been the “right type,” when Robinson was chosen by Dodgers executive Branch Rickey, his baseball ability was uncertain, at least according to *The Sporting News*. “He couldn’t hit the curve. His arm had no zing. He was nervous and uncertain in the field.”<sup>42</sup> But Rickey’s focus was on the fact that he had already played on mixed race teams in college, he was from “neutral” Southern California and hadn’t experienced Jim Crow while growing up, and he had been an officer in World War II.

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<sup>39</sup> Jules Tygiel *Baseball’s Great Experiment – Jackie Robinson and His Legacy* New York: Oxford University Press (1983) 4

<sup>40</sup> Rampersad 66

<sup>41</sup> Willam Simons “Jackie Robinson and the American Mind: Journalistic Perceptions of the Reintegration of Baseball” *Journal of Sports History* Vol.12, No.1 (Spring 1985) 56

<sup>42</sup> *The Sporting News* March 12, 1947

In order to ensure Robinson's "purity" and eliminate any possibility of future miscegenation, any "Jack Johnson problem," Branch Rickey asked Jack if he had a girlfriend. When Robinson answered in the affirmative, Rickey suggested that they marry. "A man needs a wife and a good home, especially when he has a man's work to do."<sup>43</sup> The headline in the February 11, 1946 *Los Angeles Tribune* read "Dignity marks Robinson and Isum wedding service."<sup>44</sup> It went on, "With a dignity which has characterized both young people, Rachel Annette Isum and Jack Roosevelt (Jackie) Robinson were married last Sunday afternoon at Independent church."<sup>45</sup> Why would the use of "dignity," not once but twice, be necessary in a story about the marriage of two young people who attended college, one a former military officer and the other studying to be a registered nurse? It was, as Branch Rickey had hoped, the press setting the stage for Robinson to be "a credit to his race."

#### Chapter 4 Myth and Reality

*I play it cool  
And dig all jive  
That's the reason  
I stay alive  
My motto,  
As I live and learn,  
is:  
Dig and Be Dug  
In Return*

*"Motto"*  
*Langston Hughes*

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<sup>43</sup> Lee Lowenfish *Branch Rickey – Baseball's Ferocious Gentleman* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press (2007) 374

<sup>44</sup> *Los Angeles Tribune* February 11, 1946

<sup>45</sup> *Los Angeles Tribune* February 11, 1946 (Note that in this news story he is both "Jack" and "Jackie.")

Branch Rickey believed that Robinson had the temperament to withstand the onslaught of insults and more from fans and other players. As scholar of Sports Studies David K. Wiggins writes "...the leaders in predominantly white-organized sports spent much time selecting talented African American athletes who had the requisite intelligence, personality and non-threatening character to both cope with and handle appropriately the racial hostility they were likely to encounter in a largely white environment."<sup>46</sup> In fact, Rickey asked Robinson to agree not to react, to "turn the other cheek" for his first three years in the Big Leagues.<sup>47</sup> But it was Rickey's evocation, consciously or unconsciously, of other cultural scripts familiar to Americans in the 1940s that made Jack Robinson both comprehensible and acceptable to the public at large.

First, Robinson was chosen to integrate baseball alone. For the majority of the 1947 season, the Dodgers were the only Major League team with an African-American player.<sup>48</sup> He had no obvious ally on the team or anywhere in baseball. Although Rickey hired African-American sportswriter Wendell Smith to travel with the team and be Robinson's "friend" and chronicler, he was strictly behind the scenes. Smith reported for his paper, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, as well as ghostwriting a column for Robinson called "Jackie Says"<sup>49</sup> that was syndicated in African-American newspapers. As Gerald Early writes in describing Amiri Baraka's objections to Jackie Robinson, "...he agreed to integrate baseball as an *individual* (not

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<sup>46</sup> David K. Wiggins "Black Athletes in White Men's Games: Race, Sport and American National Pastimes," *International Journal of the History of Sport* Vol. 3 (Jan 2014)

<sup>47</sup> David K. Wiggins. 366

<sup>48</sup> Later in 1947, four additional African-American players joined Major League teams. Larry Doby with the Cleveland Indians, Hank Thompson and Willard Brown with the St. Louis Browns and Dan Bankhead joining Robinson on the Brooklyn Dodgers late in August.

<sup>49</sup> Rampersad 195

as part of a group but rather as a symbol of a group).”<sup>50</sup> On the field with hostile players and in opposition ballparks filled with sometimes jeering fans, Robinson was *sui generis*.

Rather than spread the risk, Rickey and the Major Leagues put the experiment of integration on the shoulders of Jackie Robinson. If integration failed, it would be unclear whether it was doomed to failure or one man had failed and they would try again in some undefined future. There was no reason to have only one team choose only one African-American player other than the sheer drama of it. While it might be argued that it would be easier for the Major Leagues if only one player and one team bore the brunt of failure, it can just as plausibly be argued that concentrating this extreme pressure and scrutiny on one person made failure a far more likely outcome as the “Ajax” column in the *Negro Sporting News* had earlier predicted.

Consciously or not, Branch Rickey was introducing Jack Robinson into a very American myth -- that of the lone hero. Robinson was Natty Bumppo setting off for *terra incognita*. He was Charles Lindbergh, the Lone Eagle, flying solo across the Atlantic. He was a Horatio Alger hero, pulling himself up by his bootstraps. (Jackie Robinson) “...was...a good fit for the Horatio Alger imagery so dear to the American mythology of success and social mobility.”<sup>51</sup> In that mythology, Rickey was the great benefactor, the captain of industry who sees promise in the humble shoeshine boy. The Alger storyline functioned as permission for white fans to root for Jack, the classic underdog who prevails against all odds. For black fans, this mythology served a purpose as well. “...what blacks may be responding to in black athleticism is a form of the

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<sup>50</sup> Gerald Early *A Level Playing Field: African-American Athletes and the Republic of Sports* Cambridge: Harvard University Press (2011) 1389.

<sup>51</sup> Joseph Dorinson and Joram Warmund *Jackie Robinson – Race, Sports and the American Dream* Routledge New York (1998)

American pioneer myth of reinvention and discovery – the need to conquer a wilderness that demands sheer physical courage. This mythology speaks to the tragedy of race, relying as it does on the need for human struggle to transcend race.”<sup>52</sup> Black fans had an investment in his will to succeed. Robinson was the sole focus of their hopes.

The Horatio Alger narrative was not the only plot which Rickey leveraged in order to position Robinson as a hero. Another myth defining Jack Robinson was as distasteful as it was effective. It was the false dichotomy of the house slave versus the field slave.<sup>53</sup> “House slaves were always made to feel they were better than field slaves.”<sup>54</sup> This position of “privilege” as a part of a slaveowners household burdened the “chosen” in a different way from the cruelties and indignities meted out on the plantation. “Frederick Douglass testified that the house servants on his master’s plantation ‘were a sort of black aristocracy; the distance between these favored few, and the sorrow and hunger-smitten multitudes of the quarter and the field was immense.’”<sup>55</sup>

1940s America was thoroughly familiar with this duality through the vehicle of popular entertainment. Two of the biggest African-American film stars of the 1930s were Bill “Bojangles” Robinson and Lincoln Perry, better known as the character he created, Stepin Fetchit. Bill Robinson had been a star of vaudeville and one of the great tap dancers of the era, black or white. In terms of skill and inventiveness he was on a par with Fred Astaire but he was best known by white movie audiences for two films: *The Little Colonel* and *The Littlest Rebel*, pairing him with the biggest star of the Depression, Shirley Temple. In both films, Robinson is

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<sup>52</sup> Early 1330

<sup>54</sup> Jay Thomas Willis “A Theory of the Origins and Dynamics of Heterogeneity Within African-American Culture” *Journal of Black Studies*; (Fall 1991) 178

<sup>55</sup> C.W. Harper “House Servants and Field Hands: Fragmentation in the Antebellum Slave Community” *The North Carolina Historical Review*, Vol. 55. No. 1 (January 1978) 43.

the loyal house slave, butler and major domo. In *The Littlest Rebel*, Robinson as Uncle Billy has the following conversation with Temple's character:

Uncle Billy: I heard a white gentleman say there's a man up North who wants to free the slaves.

Virgie: What does that mean, free the slaves?

Uncle Billy: I don't know what it means myself.<sup>56</sup>

Of course the implication of Uncle Billy/Bill Robinson's lack of knowledge is that his state is both permanent and acceptable. In his privileged position, the movie dialogue suggests, he may not even see himself as a slave but rather, as a "special case" imbued with advantage as part of the household to the extent that he has no need for freedom nor understanding of how it might be different or better. In 1930s America, bolstered by films like these and books and films like *Gone With the Wind*, this was the mainstream view of the "genteel" antebellum South.

This construct of "exception" is the unfortunate template for the narrative of Jack Robinson as the "chosen one." It was brought to humiliating life at the Association of Sports Writers dinner in February of 1946, shortly after Branch Rickey signed Robinson to the Montreal Royals. As recounted by Arthur Daley, the premier sports writer of the *New York Times* in his *Sports of the Times* column, the writers performed a skit that elicited much laughter from the group:

The burlesque was so broad that the scribes were able to risk bringing into the cast of characters as delicate a subject as Jackie Robinson, the Negro shortstop who Branch Rickey signed to a Montreal contract....

(Curtain rises showing Southern mansion. Ducky in satin knee breeches is dusting table with back to audience. He turns slowly, disclosing that upper part of uniform is a Montreal shirt...)

Butler – Looks lak de massa will be late dis ebning. (Exits)

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<sup>56</sup> Ina Rae Hark *American Cinema of the 1930s: Themes and Variations*. E-book, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press (2007)

Chandler – (Claps hands and calls) Robbie-eee. Robbie-eee. (Butler enters)  
Butler – Yassuh Massa. Here Ah is.  
Chandler – Ah, there you are Jackie. Jackie, you ole wooly-headed rascal. How long yo’ been in the family?  
Butler – Long time Kunl, marty long time. Ebber since Massa Rickey bote me from da Kansas City Monarchs.  
Chandler – To be sure Jackie, to be sure. How could Ah forget that Colonel Rickey brought you to our house. (Aside) Rickey – that no good carpetbagger! What could he be thinking of?<sup>57</sup>

“Chandler” was the Commissioner of Baseball, Albert Benjamin “Happy” Chandler, Sr., former U.S. Senator and Governor of Kentucky. Shocking as this performance might seem, it was no anomaly. “On February 5, 1933, the New York Baseball Writers’ Association met for their annual dinner...The high point of the evening, as it was every year, was a minstrel show, where the sportswriters in blackface delighted the crowd of hundreds of white league executives, players, politicians, judges and business leaders.”<sup>58</sup>

Between 1933 and 1946 nothing much had changed as far as the acceptability of overt racism. The level of bigotry condoned by these scribes and in the pages of the “paper of record,” the *New York Times*, was as tone deaf as what might be expected in the Deep South. But it’s clear that this skit would have been well understood by its audience and aimed to transform one Robinson into another – Jackie to Bill -- through the perniciousness of racial stereotyping. Author Jules Tygiel quotes sportswriters referring to Jack Robinson as “The Bojangles of the Basepaths.”<sup>59</sup> Clearly this is in reference to how light Jack was on his feet and how he appeared to “dance” on the bases. Nevertheless, it’s difficult to ignore that particular choice of epithet and its perhaps unintended resonance.

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<sup>57</sup> Arthur Daley “Sports of the Times” *New York Times* February 4, 1946

<sup>58</sup> Chris Lamb *Conspiracy of Silence* 52.

<sup>59</sup> Jules Tygiel *Baseball’s Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and his Legacy* 190.

As to the other half of this dichotomy, the field slave, that comparison belongs to the greatest pitcher ever to play in the Negro Leagues and perhaps the greatest pitcher in the history of baseball. Satchel Paige was an entertainer with an act designed to disguise his ruthlessness on the mound. On the basis of sheer talent, Paige probably should have been the first to break the color line. “The improvisatory array of Paige’s pitches directly questioned the immutable superiority of white styles of play.”<sup>60</sup> But Paige’s “act” was unmistakably reminiscent of Stepin Fetchit’s minstrel-inflected caricature of the slow, shiftless and devious field slave. “Satchel Paige sometimes did a ‘Stepin Fetchit’ which was an exaggerated slow stroll to the mound that would have appalled today’s sensibilities...”<sup>61</sup>



Paige and Robinson playing for the Kansas

City Monarchs

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<sup>60</sup> Ken McLeod *The Construction of Masculinity in African American Music and Sports* American Music, Vol. 27, No. 2.

<sup>61</sup> Donald Spivey “*If You Were Only White*” *The Life of Leroy “Satchel” Paige* University of Missouri Press (2012) xviii.

Even to his teammates, the comparison to Fetchit was obvious. “Former teammate Newt Allen draws the connection directly. ‘Remembering the comedian Stepin Fetchit,’ says Allen, ‘(Satchel) talks and sounds just like him.’”<sup>62</sup> In an article in the popular publication, the *Saturday Evening Post*, writer Ted Shane “wrote about what he considered to be Paige’s ‘apelike arms’ and ‘Stepin Fetchit accent.’”<sup>63</sup> His “act” also opened him to criticism in the African-American press. Wendell Smith, in his column in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, referred to him as “the Same Old Paige”<sup>64</sup> and asked the rhetorical question in reference to the possibility of Paige playing in the Majors, “If you were Satchel Paige, would you represent your people admirably or would you remain Satchel Paige?”<sup>65</sup>

Though Paige was one of the players who integrated the American League Cleveland Indians in 1948 along with Larry Doby who had joined the team in late 1947, his public image ensured that he could have never been the first. If baseball was going to be integrated, it would be with the requisite decorum ascribed to college man and military officer, Jack Robinson.

The third myth is that of white superiority in general and the superiority of the Major Leagues over the Negro Leagues in particular. Robinson was “ascending to the Big Leagues.” In the terminology of the day, he was leaving behind baseball that was neither “major” nor “organized.” Branch Rickey made this clear. Rickey “betrayed no sense of irony when he denounced the existing Negro American and Negro National Leagues as ‘organizations in the zone of a racket.’”<sup>66</sup> When he signed Robinson, he further asserted, “‘There is no Negro league

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<sup>62</sup> Jules Tygiel *Baseball’s Great Experiment – Jackie Robinson and his Legacy* (Oxford University Press 1983) 27.

<sup>63</sup> Spivey *If You Were Only White* 193.

<sup>64</sup> Wendell Smith *Pittsburgh Courier* 1943.

<sup>65</sup> Wendell Smith *Pittsburgh Courier* 1948.

<sup>66</sup> Lee Lowenfish *Branch Rickey Baseball’s Ferocious Gentleman* Lincoln :University of Nebraska Press (2007) 367.

as such, as far as I am concerned.”<sup>67</sup> In part, this was a justification for not compensating the Kansas City Monarchs for Robinson. It was also a statement of disdain for which he knew he would receive no criticism. After all, he was singlehandedly leading black people to the Promised Land.

Some in the African-American sports community thought differently. Writer Joe Bostic in his *Scoreboard* column in *The People’s Voice*, published in Harlem from 1942 to 1947<sup>68</sup> wrote, “We’re not convinced that the baseball played in the organized leagues necessarily represents the best caliber of ball played per se, and therefore, the Negro players would not be moving into faster company than that in which they were already playing.”<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, in order to justify integration, it was necessary that the white baseball establishment believe that the Negro Leagues were illegitimate and subordinate to the Major Leagues. In that view they were supported by Jack Robinson himself. “Robinson’s complaints about the Negro leagues...mirrored the criticism that blacks tended to levy against their own organizations and organizational skill.”<sup>70</sup> He openly scorned his year with the Kansas City Monarchs. The play and the players might have been on a par with – and in some cases superior to – the Major Leagues, but Robinson was unimpressed with the conditions. ““No one even thought of trying to get accommodations in white hotels. Some of the crummy eating joints would not serve us at all. You could never sit down to a relaxed hot meal. You were lucky if they magnanimously permitted you to carry out some greasy hamburgers in a paper bag with a container of coffee.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Lowenfish *Branch Rickey* 367.

<sup>68</sup> Jim Reisler *Black Writers/Black Baseball* (McFarland & Company 2007) 80.

<sup>69</sup> Joe Bostic *The People’s Voice* July 11, 1942.

<sup>70</sup> Early *Level Playing Field* 1426.

<sup>71</sup> Robinson *I Never Had It Made* p. 24.

This disparagement of Negro League baseball was reflected in the language of Jack Robinson's debut. "(I)t is referred to as signing with 'organized baseball,' a term despised by people associated with the Negro leagues."<sup>72</sup> The myth had to be perpetuated that the Negro Leagues were in some way incomplete – that they were not “major,” they were “disorganized baseball” in order to justify the theft of the best players by the Major Leagues that was to come and their ultimate decline and destruction.

## Chapter 5

### Us and Them

*What evolved in turn was an aesthetic of speed and displacement - ostentatious virtuosity dedicated to reorienting perception even as it rocked the house.*

*Eric Lott*

It is impossible to understand Jack Robinson's first year in the Majors without taking into consideration the culture of post-war New York City and all that surrounded his debut. New York in 1947 was a city in creative ferment. The present was breaking from the past. Midtown, the Actor's Studio was teaching a new kind of performance based on feelings and memories. Actors no longer took on a role and used the tricks of the trade, they *became* the role, they *were* the character. Jackson Pollock had just decamped from Greenwich Village to Long Island. He was putting his canvases on the floor and dripping paint on them and revolutionizing what we think of as art. On February 19, 1947, William S. Burroughs wrote a letter to Allen Ginsberg, "These jerks feel that anyone who is with it at all belongs in a nut house. What they want is some beat clerk who feels with some reason that other people don't like him."<sup>73</sup> It was the first written usage of the term "beat" that would become "Beat" that would become the Beat Generation. On

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<sup>72</sup> Early *Level Playing Field* 57.

<sup>73</sup> <https://www.beatdom.com/beat-first-written/>

April 12, 1947, James Baldwin's first published piece appeared in *The Nation* - a review of a book about Maxim Gorky.<sup>74</sup>

In addition to those changes, and most closely aligned with the integration of baseball, jazz, which had been metamorphosing in after-hours clubs during the war, became bebop. "Method acting, Beat writing, and Bebop jazz all fostered the development of politically resistant subcultures through their invention of new aesthetic means for disseminating strong ideological protest."<sup>75</sup> Bebop was not a force for assimilation - far from it - rather, it was a way of performing and expressing blackness with what could be described as an athletic muscularity.

In October 1947, Gilbert McKean wrote an article for *Esquire* called "The Diz and the Bebop." He attempted to explain this jazz form that had developed during the war years and now that records could be pressed again,<sup>76</sup> was being disseminated to those who considered themselves hip enough to "dig" this new and transgressive sound.

When the instrumentalists broke into solos, it was frantic, harshly beautiful music, made of curt phrases, complex excursions that somehow resolved themselves satisfactorily. The melody, complex and bizarre to begin with, was further dissected and juxtaposed until there was a feeling of being pleasantly stunned...<sup>77</sup>

It was both music and militancy. "...(B)ebop mirrored transformations in black life, attitudes, and politics in the crucible of urban America during World War II. By creating a new music, adapting a renegade style, asserting their intelligence, and demanding to be treated as artists,

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<sup>74</sup> <https://www.thenation.com/authors/james-baldwin/>

<sup>75</sup> Marianne Conroy "Acting Out: Method Acting, the National Culture, and the Middlebrow Disposition in Cold War America" Vol. 35, No. 2, *FIN DE SIÈCLE PERSPECTIVES ON TWENTIETH-CENTURY LITERATURE AND CULTURE* (spring, 1993) 243.

<sup>76</sup> Shellac was the main ingredient in records at that time and was needed for war production of coatings for bullets and electrical wiring. Scott deVeaux *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History* Berkeley: University of California Press (1997) 239.

<sup>77</sup> Gilbert McKean "The Diz and the Bebop" *Esquire* October 1947.

young African-American musicians forged a cultural politics that challenged all at once the banality of swing music...”<sup>78</sup>

The quote that starts this chapter is from Eric Lott’s essay “Double V Double Time,” about the evolution of bebop during World War II. Its reference to an aesthetic of speed and displacement could just as easily apply to Jack Robinson and his transgressive style of play on the field. Indeed, there is a body of scholarly literature that associates Jack Robinson with bebop not only because it is temporally synchronous but because of its “...rejection of the status quo, a sharp break with the past that ushers in something genuinely new – in a word, discontinuity.”<sup>79</sup> Bebop like Robinson reflected an urgency and, ironically, since Robinson was nominally moving from segregation to the mainstream culture, a turning inward. It was a recognition of a style that was not part of the dominant white American culture, but rather was intentionally insular. “...(H)is style of play embodied African-American cultural forms (as understood by African Americans and exoticized by whites)....”<sup>80</sup> Like bebop, Robinson’s style relied on improvisation and being in the moment. Musicians like Charlie Parker and Miles Davis fed off each other’s energy. They took the “standards,” songs from composers like Cole Porter and George Gershwin, and re-imagined them into unrecognizable flights of improvisational fancy. They knew the rules and chose to stretch them as far as they would go. In this, they were very much like the players in the Negro Leagues who played by the rules of baseball but found creative ways to extend and revitalize them.

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<sup>78</sup> Eric Porter “‘Dizzy Atmosphere’ The Challenge of Bebop” *American Music*, Vol. 17 No. 4 (Winter 1999) 423.

<sup>79</sup> Scott deVeaux *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History* Berkeley: University of California Press (1997) 6 <https://history.columbia.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2021/04/Nicholas-Loud-Undergraduate-History-Thesis.pdf>

<sup>80</sup> Montye Fuse, and Keith Miller, Chapter 5 “Jazzing the basepaths – Jackie Robinson and African American Aesthetics” *Sports Matters : Race, Recreation, and Culture* eds. John Bloom and Michael Nevin Willard New York : New York University Press,(2002) 120.

When he got to the Majors, Robinson employed what was referred to in the Negro Leagues as “trickeration.” It was a style of baseball that played by the rules – barely. Tricky baseball threw away the so-called “book” – that compendium of baseball wisdom that dictated what to do in any given situation, in favor of audacity, risk-taking and general abandon. Negro League baseball was what we call “small ball” today. It didn’t rely on the home run. Certainly there were sluggers like Josh Gibson. But Negro League players perfected the hit-and-run, the bunt for a hit and most particularly, the fine art of base larceny. In fact, Negro League play hearkened back to an earlier era of the Major Leagues. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, base stealing was a key part of the game. Ty Cobb, who played from 1905 to 1928, is still fourth on the all-time list of base stealers despite the fact that there were fewer games in the season than when latter day base-stealing leaders like Rickey Henderson played in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>81</sup>

With the end of the so-called “dead ball” era in 1920 and the advent of sluggers, most particularly Babe Ruth, baseball changed focus to power and the long ball. “(W)hites denied the efficacy of the baserunning skills and improvisational style of Negro League players. Cobb’s skill on the base paths was forgotten, allowing major league baseball to idealize the home run hitter.”<sup>82</sup> From well over two thousand stolen bases in the 1917 season, the numbers dropped to below a thousand per season in the 1930s.<sup>83</sup> Those numbers would not rise significantly until the late 1950s and early 1960s when every team in the Majors had at least one black player and the Negro Leagues style had been absorbed along with many of their best baserunners.

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<sup>81</sup> Baseball Reference “Career Leaders & Records for Stolen Bases” [https://www.baseball-reference.com/leaders/SB\\_career.shtml](https://www.baseball-reference.com/leaders/SB_career.shtml)

<sup>82</sup> Montye Fuse, and Keith Miller, Chapter 5 “Jazzing the basepaths – Jackie Robinson and African American Aesthetics” *Sports Matters : Race, Recreation, and Culture* eds. John Bloom and Michael Nevin Willard New York : New York University Press, (2002)129.

<sup>83</sup> Baseball Almanac “MLB League by League Totals for Stolen Bases” <https://www.baseball-almanac.com/hitting/hisb3.shtml>

Like Jack Robinson, bebop was also connected to the Kansas City Monarchs. Bebop innovator Charlie Parker was originally from Kansas City and began his novel style of play there. “(Satchel) Paige washed himself in jazz with the legendary Jay McShann Band and the pioneer saxophonists Lester Young and the incomparable Charlie ‘Yardbird’ Parker...”<sup>84</sup> It’s doubtful that the religious and straitlaced Robinson would have been clubbing with Satchel Paige. Among his Monarchs teammates, “Robinson fit in like a schoolmarm in a brothel.”<sup>85</sup> But jazz and baseball were the dual touchstones of Kansas City’s black community, thus furthering an “us” and “them” mentality. “It is simply one people showing its divergence socially through the aesthetic reflection of a different sector of themselves.”<sup>86</sup> Limited to a segregated world, black institutions forged their own style without reference to the mainstream and with the sense that there was no loss in doing so.

In Amiri Baraka’s *Blues People*, the author argues that bebop music and style pose an “‘anti-assimilationist’ challenge to black middle class and white society...”<sup>87</sup> Bebop’s goal was not to entertain. In fact, bebop musicians were disdainful of “entertainment” and all that it entailed – particularly the implication of minstrelsy exemplified by jazz trumpeter Louis Armstrong. “To Dizzy Gillespie, Armstrong was a ‘plantation character’; Miles Davis who admired Armstrong’s musicianship, regretted that ‘his personality was developed by white people wanting black people to entertain by smiling and jumping around.’”<sup>88</sup> Duality like Armstrong’s served as a warning to Robinson. For all of his immense talent and innovation, Armstrong was an “Uncle Tom” for what was seen as his attempt to ingratiate himself.

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<sup>84</sup> Donald Spivey *“If You Were Only White” The Life of Leroy “Satchel” Paige* Columbia: University of Missouri Press (2012) 173

<sup>85</sup> Jonathan Eig 382

<sup>86</sup> Baraka, Amiri *The Autobiography of Leroy Jones* Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books (1984) 80

<sup>87</sup> Eric Porter 424

<sup>88</sup> John McWhorter “The Entertainer” *The New Yorker* December 14, 2009.

There was danger for Robinson in entering the white world and entertaining white crowds. The joke attributed to a number of bebop pioneers is that a white person, used to the swing jazz of the war years, listens to bebop and says, “But you can’t dance to it.” The retort is, “*You* can’t dance to it.”<sup>89</sup> The message is, “It’s *ours*. It’s what we do for ourselves. You don’t have to like it.” This was a line of demarcation for both white audiences and black entertainers.

We discern echoes of the intra-group pride associated with bebop when Amiri Baraka writes about the Negro Leagues. He exults, “In flying around the bases and sliding and home runs and arguments and *triumphs* there was more of ourselves in celebration than we were normally ever permitted. It was *ours*.”<sup>90</sup> Baraka feels no kinship to Jack Robinson, no urgency to integrate Major League baseball. Despite his year with the Monarchs, Baraka doesn’t see Robinson as a product of the Negro Leagues but rather as a different sort of product. A product of the white mainstream purpose-built to be “a credit to his race” in the most mechanical and bloodless manner imaginable:

And you be standin’ there and all of a sudden you hear about – what? – Jackie Rawbeanson. I could tell right away, really, that the dude in the hood had been at work. No, really, it was like I heard the wheels and metal wires in his voice, the imperfected humanoid, his first words ‘Moy nahme is Jackie Rawbeanson.’ Some Ray Bradbury shit they had mashed on us. I knew it. A skin-covered humanoid to bust up our shit.<sup>91</sup>

Baraka is not even willing to grant Robinson his humanity. He is not prepared to see the responsibility Robinson has taken on and he assumes that in order to be the first to integrate the Major Leagues, Robinson must be some sort of automaton – some alien or worse:

I don want to get political and talk bad about ‘integration.’ Like what a straight out trick it was. To rip off what you had in the name of what you ain’t never gonna get....

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<sup>89</sup> Amiri Baraka *Blues People* 199.

<sup>90</sup> Amiri Baraka *The Autobiography of Leroi Jones* 44.

<sup>91</sup> Amiri Baraka *The Autobiography of Leroi Jones* 44.

So out of California laboratories of USC, a synthetic colored guy was imperfed and soon we would be trooping back into the holy see of racist approbation. So that we could sit next to drunk racists by and by.<sup>92</sup>

To Amiri Baraka, “Jeckie Rawbeanson” is not “one of *ours*.” He represents “ersatz ‘blackness.’”<sup>93</sup> Of course Baraka is writing about 1947 from the distance of 1984. He has seen the course of the Civil Rights movement, the assassinations and the disappointments. From that vantage point, he sees Robinson as fitting into the description from a speech by Malcolm X in 1963 as “the handpicked Negro who benefits from token integration.”<sup>94</sup> Baraka’s attitude toward Robinson is in line with Gerald Early’s analysis “... many black musicians, actors, and dancers are dismissed by members of their own group as ‘minstrels’ if they appear in work that the audience, rightly or wrongly, thinks is stereotypic or degrading, rather much like calling high-performance black athletes ‘slaves’ because the audience they entertain is largely white.”<sup>95</sup>

The question of what is intended for white people and what is intended for black people, what is entertainment and what is minstrelsy, is key to the meaning of Jack Robinson. Society is encouraged to cheer integration but incorporating Baraka’s critique, we must think about when it is integration and when it is actually exploitation. That consideration is further complicated by a profound change in how baseball was consumed in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Moving from the person Jack Robinson to the media figure, Jackie Robinson we are confronted with yet another duality. Before World War II, baseball was experienced in person, on the radio and in newspaper accounts. In 1950, only 9% of American households had a television. By the time Robinson stole home in the 1955 World Series, well over half (64.5%) of American households

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<sup>92</sup> Amiri Baraka *The Autobiography of Leroi Jones* 44.

<sup>93</sup> Amiri Baraka *The Autobiography of Leroi Jones* 45.

<sup>94</sup> Malcolm X “Twenty Million Black People in a Political, Economic and Mental Prison” Speech, 1963 Quoted in Robin D.G.Kelley “House Negroes on the Loose: Macolm X and the Black Bourgeoisie” *Callaloo* Vol. 21 No. 2

<sup>95</sup> Gerald Early *Level Playing Field* 98

had a television.<sup>96</sup> In terms of how most fans experienced the game, baseball had moved from the aural (radio) to the visual (television). “Television got off the ground because of sports,”<sup>97</sup>

The race of a player, the teams that were integrated and those that were not, were now present and undeniable in any fan’s living room. Along with that came the experience of the Negro Leagues style of play, something the vast majority of white fans had never seen.

“...(M)ost Americans knew little or nothing about Black baseball. When stories were written about Black players, they rarely went beyond caricature...”<sup>98</sup> Jack Robinson came into their living rooms, perhaps the first black man ever to do so, and did things on the baseball field they had never seen before.

Jack Robinson’s performance was both spectacular and a spectacle. “...(T)he exceptionalism that black performers have traditionally required in order to be accepted by white audiences has increased expectations of spectacularity...” By this, Ken McLeod, who writes about the intersection of sports and music, suggests that the anticipation of Jack Robinson’s performance was outsized before he ever took the field for the Brooklyn Dodgers. And it also gestures toward the meaning of spectacle as defined by Guy Debord – “The spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images.”<sup>99</sup> Race complicates this social relationship – the institution of segregation creates a sub-spectacle which

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<sup>96</sup> TV History. “Number of TV Households in America: 1950-1978.” Accessed November 15, 2014. [http://www.tvhistory.tv/Annual\\_TV\\_Households\\_50-78.JPG](http://www.tvhistory.tv/Annual_TV_Households_50-78.JPG) , “Number of TV Households in America 1950-1978,” *The American Century*, accessed April 1, 2022, <https://www.americancentury.omeka.wlu.edu/items/show/136>.

<sup>97</sup> "Sports on Television." Television in American Society Reference Library. . *Encyclopedia.com*. 28 Mar. 2022 <<https://www.encyclopedia.com>>. Quoting early network sports director Harry Coyle speaking to Stanley J. Baran in the Museum of Broadcast Communications publication "Sports and Television"

<sup>98</sup> Chris Lamb *Conspiracy of Silence – Sportswriters and the Long Campaign to Desegregate Baseball* p. 163

<sup>99</sup> Guy DeBord *Society of the Spectacle* Eastbourne: Soul Bay Press Eastbourne (2009) 427.

both diminishes and reveals. It diminishes by creating an experience that is separate and unequal and it reveals the hypocrisy of the general spectacle to those who are alienated from it.

The American blacks have their own particular spectacle, their own black newspapers, magazines and stars, and if they are rejecting it in disgust as a fraud and as an expression of their humiliation, it is because they see it as a *minority* spectacle, a mere appendage of a general spectacle. Recognizing that their own spectacle of desirable consumption is a colony of the white one enables them to see more quickly through the falsehood of the whole economic-cultural spectacle.”<sup>100</sup>

While Baraka revels in the colonized spectacle of the Negro Leagues, he also fears what is to come after Robinson when the separate spectacle of blackness is subsumed. His nostalgia is palpable. “The Negro League’s like a light somewhere. Back over your shoulder. As you go away. A warmth still, connected to laughter and self-love.<sup>101</sup> A spectacle of one’s own, even one enforced by a segregated society, may be preferable to the loss of identity and the falseness required to participate in the larger media manifestation.

To be part of the larger spectacle also calls into question issues of masculinity and the not-so-hidden concern of white athletes being “beaten” by black athletes. As mentioned earlier, in the spring of 1947, there were predictions throughout baseball that Jack Robinson would fail. In many ways, the more pressing problem was, what would happen if he succeeded. Judging by the overtly racist culture of 1947, a display of black masculinity on this most public stage would pose a challenge to the status quo and to Robinson’s ability to withstand the onslaught that was to come.

## Chapter 6 Body and Soul

*Jackie Robinson was a sit-inner before sit-ins. A freedom rider before freedom rides.  
Martin Luther King, Jr.*

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<sup>100</sup> Guy DeBord, unsigned tract originally translated into English by Donald-Nicholson Smith, distributed in the USA December 1965 reprinted by *Internationale Situationniste* #10 (March 1966)

<sup>101</sup> Baraka *Leroi Jones*. p. 46.

Jack Robinson's body breaks the plane of a segregated space. He is a black man alone. Branch Rickey could give him a contract. Commissioners Ford Frick and Happy Chandler could agree. Wendell Smith could travel with him and write his story. But only he could put on the uniform, walk out on the field, and make himself both the target of derision and the avatar of hope. As he had agreed with Rickey, he would be Christ-like. He would turn the other cheek. In Philadelphia he would stand at the plate as the players and manager in the Phillies dugout taunted him with the most pernicious slurs imaginable. He would bite his tongue.

Jack Robinson had to get his mind right. His body was another story. There is no greater dichotomy in the 1947 baseball season than the contrast between Jack Robinson's words and actions off the field and the message delivered by his body on the field. "He became almost a perfect Gandhi-like figure of sacrifice and forbearance, and he created the paradigm for how integration was to proceed in the United States in the 1950s and early 1960s – the Noble Negro who, through his nobility, a mystical product of his American heritage of suffering but enduring devotion to the foundational principles of American life, legitimates white institutions as he integrates them."<sup>102</sup> Robinson's statements and presentation were modest and self-effacing with a touch of "Aw shucks." "The muscular Negro minds his own business and shrewdly makes no effort to push himself. He speaks quietly and intelligently when spoken to..."<sup>103</sup> In interviews, his speaking voice was blandly unaccented and un-cadenced in the way of someone raised in Southern California. Its pitch was higher than his physical presence would have suggested giving his voice a distinctly gentle tone. It was as if his voice and his body had taken on separate lives. Aided by Wendell Smith, his Boswell, he was as soft-spoken and non-threatening as a six

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<sup>102</sup> Gerald Early *Level Playing Field* 366

<sup>103</sup> Arthur Daley *New York Times* April 16, 1947

foot tall professional athlete could be. His behavior off the field and in the dugout was controlled. But his performance on the field was extraordinary and transgressive.

The unwritten rules of baseball are numerous, arcane and white. Many of them relate to base stealing and bunting and they run directly counter to what was axiomatic in the Negro Leagues. “Never steal when you’re two or more runs down.” “Don’t bunt for a hit when you need a sacrifice.” “Don’t steal third with two outs.”<sup>104</sup> When Jack Robinson took the field for the Brooklyn Dodgers, he disobeyed those rules in spectacular fashion. He brought the unmistakable style of the Negro Leagues to the Majors.

In the 2016 Jackie Robinson biopic, *42*, there is one scene that shows Robinson playing for the Kansas City Monarchs. He steals third and calls the catcher a “rag arm” for not being able to throw him out.<sup>105</sup> The other players look on in apparent awe having never seen such base stealing prowess. *42* is a reasonably accurate depiction of Robinson during the 1945, 1946 and 1947 baseball seasons. But this particular scene is both imaginary and insulting to the Negro Leagues players. Jack Robinson’s rookie baserunning wouldn’t have impressed anyone on the Monarchs, particularly as one of their coaches was “Cool Papa” Bell, often considered the greatest base stealer of all time. According to Robinson’s biographer, Arnold Rampersad, “The former Monarchs manager William ‘Dizzy’ Dismukes is said to have asked “Cool Papa” Bell to ‘give Robinson a base-stealing exhibition because the Negro leaguers were not impressed with Robinson’s tagging ability.’”<sup>106</sup>

Clearly, Jack Robinson, football and track star, had the talent to absorb what he was taught. And this style of play served him well once he was a Brooklyn Dodger. It unnerved

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<sup>104</sup> “The Book of Unwritten Baseball Rules” Baseball Digest 1986 <https://www.baseball-almanac.com/legendary/liunwrit.shtml>

<sup>105</sup> Brian Helgeland *42* Warner Brothers Pictures (2016).

<sup>106</sup> Arnold Rampersad *Jackie Robinson* 117.

Major League pitchers. Yankees pitcher Vic Raschi said of Robinson, “I had never seen anything like [Robinson’s feints from third base] before...He did something to me that almost never happened: he broke my concentration and I paid more attention to him than to [the batter].”<sup>107</sup>



More than merely disturbing pitchers which he did with regularity, Jack Robinson’s baserunning was the answer that he was prohibited from giving verbally. “So long as he showed restraint when fans and players baited him, he could fight like hell on the ball field. No one could fault him for playing too hard.”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Jules Tygiel *Baseball’s Great Experiment* Oxford: Oxford University Press (1983) 191.

<sup>108</sup> Jonathan Eig *Opening Day The Story of Jackie Robinson’s First Season* New York: Simon and Schuster (2008) 551.



He ran with looseness and abandon. Video of the 1947 World Series shows him stretching singles into doubles, stealing bases and barreling into anyone who got in his way including Yankees second baseman, 5' 6" Phil Rizzuto. "He looks awkward but he isn't," recorded *Time*. 'He steps and starts as though turned off with a toggle switch....Once in motion he wobbles along, elbows flying, hips swaying, shoulders rocking – creating the illusion that he

will fly to pieces with every stride.”<sup>109</sup> His presence on the field was different from those around him not only because of the color of his skin but because of the way he played the game and the way he used his body.

Robinson ran as though he was on fire, but his style of play exemplified what author Richard Majors calls “cool pose.” Majors defines it as “...a set of expressive lifestyle behaviors...used by black men as a response to the limits that institutionalized racism places on their opportunities for self-expression.”<sup>110</sup> His behavior on the field prefigured a generational change in how black athletes presented themselves. “Cool pose in sports can sometimes be interpreted as cultural resistance to racism.”<sup>111</sup> From Muhammad Ali floating like a butterfly and stinging like a bee to the raised fists of Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Olympics to Colin Kaepernick taking a knee during the national anthem, it is arguable that Jack Robinson’s performance made these actions not just possible but inevitable.

His impact on baseball continues with the contentious style of Afro-Caribbean players who have become the largest minority group in Major League Baseball. In a column written by former Major League pitcher Dirk Hayhurst in 2014, he contrasts white players in the Majors to their Latino counterparts, “And for many freshly drafted whites...the thinking is that these new Latin teammates – the ones who can’t speak the language...but can effortlessly showboat on the field – don’t deserve it.”<sup>112</sup> The Afro-Caribbean style of play, particularly in the Dominican Republic and Venezuela, which are the two Latin countries most represented in Major League Baseball, features behavior deemed unacceptable according to “the book.” Bat flips, “styling”

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<sup>109</sup> Jules Tygiel *Baseball’s Great Experiment* 191

<sup>110</sup> Richard Majors “Cool Pose: Black Masculinity and Sports,” in *African Americans and Sport*, Gary A. Sailes, ed, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, (2009) 15.

<sup>111</sup> Richard Majors “Cool Pose” 18

<sup>112</sup> Jairo Ramos “Baseball’s Demographic Shifts Bring Cultural Complexities” NPR (April 18, 2014) 7

home runs (standing and admiring the hit rather than stoically running the bases), pitchers staring down and taunting hitters, all break the unwritten rules of baseball which remain frozen in time. Some teams resist these changes more adamantly than others. In 2013, "...the Braves were applauded for playing the game the 'right way' after lashing out on the field against two overzealous Latino players who had celebrated hitting home runs."<sup>113</sup> "Lashing out" typically consists of bench-clearing brawls or the pitcher "plunking" the offending player the next time he comes to bat.

With Latinos now representing fully a third of Major League Baseball players, it's a certainty that their style of play will become the norm just as Jack Robinson's aggression on the bases and the Negro Leagues style of play was absorbed (albeit sometimes reluctantly) into the baseball mainstream in the 1950s and 1960s. In the meantime, the divide in playing styles perpetuates a racial divide, exacerbated by language differences. The existence of a "right way" to play the game presupposes, much as it did in Jack Robinson's era, that the "right way" is the "white way."

## **Chapter 7** **Double Consciousness**

*Do I contradict myself?*  
*Very well then I contradict myself,*  
*(I am large, I contain multitudes.)*  
*Walt Whitman, Song of Myself, 51*

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<sup>113</sup> Jorge Arangure, "Passion Play" *Slate* <https://slate.com/culture/2013/10/dodgers-braves-playoffs-latin-players-are-changing-baseball-get-used-to-it.html> (October 3, 2013) 2

In August 1897, W.E.B. Du Bois published an essay in *The Atlantic* called “Strivings of the Negro People.” In it, he repurposed the term “double consciousness,” from its earlier uses by the American Transcendentalists and its medical/psychological meaning.<sup>114</sup> Du Bois wrote that in the context of race, double consciousness was, “...this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”<sup>115</sup> He wrote these words fifty years before Jack Robinson broke the color line in baseball and yet it is a perfect description of Robinson’s situation.

Sports is about being in the moment. How much more difficult must that be when one is constantly stepping out of oneself to see through the eyes of others. Compound that with being on the public stage, as Robinson was. And particularly in that first year, repeatedly subjected to hecklers in the stands and in opposing dugouts shouting obscenities and racial epithets with abandon. “(H)e combined militance with a sense of martyrdom and combined defiance with deference.”<sup>116</sup> Jack Robinson “stayed in his shoes” as the sports cliché would have it, assailed by both external turmoil and, as du Bois would suggest, an inner voice that was both him and not him. “One feels his two-ness, -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”<sup>117</sup>

In this paper, I have attempted to bring this “two-ness,” so eloquently expressed by Du Bois, to life through the duality of Jack Robinson. Jack or Jackie, he was neither inhuman as Amiri Baraka would have it, nor superhuman -- the “42” of Major League Baseball’s

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<sup>114</sup> Bruce D. Dickson Jr. “W.E.B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness” *American Literature* Duke University Press Vol. 64 No. 2 (June 1992) 300.

<sup>115</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois “Strivings of the Negro People” *The Atlantic* August 1897.

<sup>116</sup> *Early Level Playing Field* 1312

<sup>117</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois “Strivings of the Negro People”.

hagiography. Twenty years after the 1947 World Series, Jack Robinson wrote, “I cannot stand and sing the anthem. I cannot salute the flag; I know that I am a black man in white world.”<sup>118</sup> In a meeting of opposites, he was the man chosen for the impossible which he alone made possible.

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<sup>118</sup> Jonathan Eig *Opening Day* 4624.

## **The Video:**

### **Jackie's Epistrophy**

#### **Credits:**

YouTube MLB Vault "Jackie Robinson could FLY! Check out his greatest moments on the base paths" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9--5qEysEcA&t=23s>

"Epistrophy" on the live album *Thelonious Monk Quartet with John Coltrane at the Carnegie Hall* EMI Recorded November 29, 1957

#### **The Inspiration:**

Robinson's running style and his presence on the basepaths evokes bebop with his stops, starts, repeated motion and his exquisitely controlled apparent lack of control.

#### **Epistrophy and Thelonious Monk:**

Pianist Thelonious Monk and drummer Kenny Clarke's composition, "Epistrophy," written in 1942, comes at the very beginning of bebop.

"Epistrophe" is a Greek word that means "turn back upon."<sup>119</sup> It refers to a literary device which uses repetition at the end of a phrase. In his book *Epistrophies: Jazz and the Literary Imagination*, Professor Brent Hayes Edwards employs the term to illuminate the interface of music and literature and how these two forms turn on each other.

In this case, "Epistrophy" is a particularly apt composition to pair with Jack Robinson's baserunning as he goes forward and doubles back, using his body to state and restate physical themes that are both recurrent and transgressive. There is literal "interplay" between Robinson and the music. Edwards writes about the dance Thelonious Monk would do in the middle of playing. He would rise from his piano and literally "turn about." "...(T)here is something in the

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<sup>119</sup> "What is Epistrophe?" *Oregon State Guide to Literary Terms* <https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/wlf/what-epistrophe>

lurching chromatic harmony of “Epistrophe” in particular that seemed to be paralleled or repeated in his physical movements...Epistrophe, then, might be one name for the turning or troping that, in turning, has a tendency to jump the track from one medium to another.”<sup>120</sup> If we can consider baseball to be a medium, then, in their own areas of expertise, Robinson and Monk are both playing.

### **Epistrophe and Amiri Baraka:**

Baraka, too, is a recurrent theme in this meeting of bebop and baseball. His 1964 poem “Epistrophe” serves as conversation between himself and Thelonious Monk and adds yet another layer of meaning about the breaking of monotony – the moment of change.

Here is Baraka’s poem:

Epistrophe  
*Amiri Baraka*

It's such a static reference; looking  
out the window all the time! the eyes' limits...  
On good days, the sun.  
& what you see. (here in New York)  
Walls and buildings; or in the hidden gardens  
of opulent Queens; profusion, endless stretches of leisure.  
It's like being chained to some dead actress;  
and she keeps trying to tell you something horribly maudlin.  
e. g. ("the leaves are flat and motionless.")  
What I know of the mind  
seems to end here;  
just outside my face.  
I wish some weird looking animal  
would come along.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Brent Hayes Edwards *Epistrophies: Jazz and the Literary Imagination* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, (2017) 22

<sup>121</sup> Brent Hayes Edwards *Epistrophies: Jazz and the Literary Imagination* 22

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