Challenging Latinidad: Learning from Baseball in Teaching About Latinxs

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Abstract: Baseball is commonly recognized as the United States' 'national pastime,' implying a sense of shared unity among fans and players of diverse genders, races, ethnicities, and languages. However, Major League Baseball (MLB) as a league and cultural institution can hardly be called progressive on matters of racial, gender, and sexual orientation inclusion. Through two concepts, *essentialist discourses of Brownness* and *queer diaspora*, we center professional baseball as a critical object of (curricular) inquiry illuminating essentializing aspects of Latinidad. Thinking with these two concepts, we examine two 'moments' from the podcast, *Black Diamonds,* to show how baseball is a way to highlight historical and contemporary racialization and (re)construction of Black, Latinx, and Afro-Latinx categories.

Purposes

The term 'national pastime' suggests inclusivity, a universal welcoming of fans and players from diverse genders, races, ethnicities, and languages. However, Major League Baseball (MLB), the world's most popular and profitable professional league, can hardly be cited as progressive on matters of racial, gender, and sexual orientation inclusion. In fact, according to Iber et al. (2011), MLB has resisted, and has been slow to adapt to racial and cultural shifts in US society. As Domino Rudolph (2021) notes, MLB's history is intertwined with white nationalism despite its outward appearance of being a welcoming, even multicultural sport. In line with the prevailing laws and policies of racial segregation, white baseball owners long barred African-Americans and Black players from participating in Major League Baseball. It wasn't until 1947 that Jackie Robinson broke MLB's color barrier and played for the Brooklyn Dodgers.

While Robinson's 'breaking of the color barrier' is now universally (and rightly) celebrated and recognized by schools, communities, and MLB as a major Civil Rights achievement, there remains relatively little attention paid (especially in educational studies) to how baseball shapes and is shaped by historical and contemporary understandings of race and racial categories. Popular discourse about race, racialization, and baseball largely mirrors a Black/white binary in which Latinx and Black identities are also understood as mutually exclusive categories. This is reflected by a number of comments by African-American media personalities and professional players. For example, in 2015, comedian Chris Rock asked, "Why don't Black people like baseball anymore?" as he described himself as "an endangered species, a Black baseball fan" (Cwik, 2015). A few years before Rock, outfielder Torii Hunter said, "People see dark faces out there and the perception is that they are African-American. They're not us. They're imposters" (Ruck, 2011, p. xi). Such comments, which seem to erase and/or ignore the possibility of a Black/Afro Latinx subject (Burgos Jr, 2015), sit alongside (education) scholarship that tends to position Latinx as a static and monolithic ethno-racial category, a notion that also "insidiously positions Blackness as [its] foil" (Gamez & Monreal, 2021, p. 13). Baseball, then, offers a window into the production and resistance of racial categorization and hierarchization that intersects through and with skin color, gender, immigration (and diaspora), language, globalization, class, and identity.

Offering professional baseball as a critical object of (curricular) inquiry in education provides a way to consider essentialized views of Latinidad, and necessarily, its relationship to and with Blackness (Beltran, 2004; Busey & Silva, 2021; Cahuas, 2019; Gamez & Monreal,

accepted). Examining baseball in this context sheds light on the ongoing racialization of the Latinx diaspora, signaling unique perspectives on Latinx and Black ethnic studies, cultural studies, and histories beyond the prevailing monoliths present in scholarly discourse (Lee & Martin, 2019; Mahler, 2018). Such singular notions of Latinidad, couched in universal *Brownness,* ignore the intractability of anti-Blackness (Busey & Silva, 2021; Vargas, 2018) a point made by the "Afro-Latino Jackie Robinson" (and now MLB Hall of Famer) Minnie Miñoso: "I wanted people to know that it didn't really matter where you came from. You're from here or there, and it doesn't really matter. But then, there were two skin colors — black and white. What was the difference, if you were black and born in Cuba, or black and born here in America? Your skin is black everywhere you go." and "I never used to have anything against fans because someone called me a name, or because I had to stay in a different hotel, or had to be in a different place. It was not the fans who made it that way — it was the law. The law was what said you could not be in one place or another [because of your skin color]" (Kahrl, 2015, para. 18). In a similar vein, another MLB Hall of Famer, Orlando Cepeda, remembered how his Puerto Rican superstar father, Pedro "Purecho" Cepeda, was too dark-skinned to (want to) play in the segregated Major Leagues, "My father was a proud man, as a Black man he had neither the inclination to endure segregation nor the temperament to buck racism in the United States" (Ruck, 2011, p. 71). These quotes evidence not only the prevalence of anti-Blackness in baseball, but also how the story of Black baseball in the United States is a diasporic story, one in which to be Black and Latinx are not mutually exclusive.

Thus, we ask how baseball reflects and offers new ways of thinking about (anti-Black) Latinidad and the ongoing diaspora of Latinx bodies across the US. As self-identified Black (Iman) and Chicano (Tim) scholars, we explore this theme as a matter of curricular and cultural study, particularly how popular media, discourse, and sport (re)make certain narratives of Latinidad and Blackness (im)possible (Flores, 2021; Gamez & Monreal, accepted; Garcia Peña, 2021). In particular, we select two discursive moments from the Negro Leagues podcast *Black Diamonds* that highlight the historical and contemporary construction of Black, Latinx, and Afro-Latinx professional baseball. In particular, in this largely conceptual paper we ask the following guiding questions: 1) *How does professional baseball recreate certain Black and/or Latinx subjects?* and 2) *How does professional baseball offer a curriculum for (re)learning Latinidades?*

The map of this paper is as follows. First, we outline the two elements of our conceptual frame: essentialized/monolithic Brownness and queer(ing) diaspora. We explain how these critical ideas push back against oversimplified notions of Latinidad while also helping to understand how marginalized bodies move through systems of whiteness. The lingering diasporic travels of baseball players provide insight into the malleability of race, especially vis-a-vis (anti)Blackness, while also offering innovative perspectives on how movement of Brown and Black bodies continues to be translated within, for, and against neocolonial, white supremacist institutions. Next, we outline our selection and use of discursive moments from the podcast *Black Diamonds*. We also add important context about how the podcast is (re)telling the stories of the Negro Leagues[1] and Black baseball more generally. We then move to analysis of the two moments before concluding with implications for researchers, scholars, and educators and additional areas of critical (curricular) inquiry for and with baseball.

[1] The Negro Leagues are best described as the professional league for Black baseball players when they were prohibited from playing in the MLB.

Conceptual Framework

Two concepts inform our inquiry and analysis of the discursive moments from the podcast *Black Diamonds*: essentialist discourses of Brownness (Busey & Silva, 2021) and the queer diaspora (Gopinath, 2018). These two concepts not only help us critically interrogate how race is and has been (re)made with baseball, but also provide an example of how baseball can be put to use as a curricular object. That is, these two concepts show how educators might approach their own examination of race in baseball or other sports (Monreal & Barrera, 2024) in their own spaces. Application to baseball of critical theories of race and diaspora open up new ways of thinking with and against contemporary understandings of Latinidad.

Essentialist Discourses of Brownness: At a most basic and uncritical level, Latinidad suggests a unifying ethnocultural identity for individuals sharing a Latin American and Spanish-speaking heritage (Negron, 2014). However, the history behind the development and deployment of Latinidad illustrates multiple examples of its anti-Black construction (Busey & Silva, 2021). Twentieth century Latin American political figures and intellectuals theorized Latinidad through the lens of hybridity and mestizaje, "utilizing notions of 'mixing' as a biological apparatus to undermine racial inequalities, Whiten the population, and foster assimilation" (Busey & Silva, 2021, p. 179). Hence, the desirability of a racially-mixed identity was to project a future disentangled from Blackness and Indigeneity (Busey & Cruz, 2017; Busey & Silva, 2021; Flores, 2021), and tied to the idea of racial progress as movement toward whiteness. Still, mestizaje proved to be a key feature of civil rights groups like the Brown Berets as they sought to inspire political subjectivities and cultural pride through appeals to a shared set of privileged knowledges and experiences afforded by this hybridity (Beltran, 2004).

Politically useful as a way to bring marginalized peoples together while creating broad coalitions through claims to exceptionality, mestizaje was made visible through the discursive intervention of intermediary Brownness. Soon, to be (the right kind of) Latinx was to be Brown and, importantly, not Black (Gamez, 2023). Wedding a Latinx subject to Brownness necessarily made, and makes certain representations and understandings of Latinidad (im)possible. Busey and Silva (2021) maintain that the creation of Latinxs as monolithically Brown necessarily draws boundaries that exclude Black and Afro-Latinxs. Busey and Silva (2021, p. 181) write, in categorically equating Brownness to Latinidad, "monolithic Brownness functions to create sublatinities [in which] singular ontological mappings of Latinxs as Brown situate Black and Indigenous identities as "second-tier." Thus, it is important that any research intent on theorizing Latinidad (and in our case its relationship with baseball) eschew the tendency to start with reference to singular Brown epistemologies and ontologies.

Providing an additional layer to essentialist discourses of Brownness is the idea that the US empire, through military intervention, ongoing colonialism, and economic exploitation, created the boundaries of normative Black subjectivities. That is, as US representations of Blackness are globally hegemonic, any other notions of being Black must then be translated through, to, and against this hegemonic lens. García Peña (2022, p. 12, emphasis original) observes that the ubiquity of the US Black subject, whether it be through global icons (like Barack Obama) or larger movements (like the Civil Rights Movement and Black Lives Matter) "have made U.S. blackness appear to be the *only* way to be Black *and* a citizen." Put another way, people and groups outside these dominant representations, for example multiethnic, heterogeneous, and diasporic Black Latinxs, must explain and/or translate "their other blackness to a larger US constituency" (García Peña, 2022, p. 13). Taking together the notion of "translating Blackness"

with essentialist Brownness provides tools to understand how Afro-Latinx baseball players challenge normative ways of understanding race.

Queer Diaspora: From the late 1990s into the 2000s, building on postcolonial and woman of color feminist theories of diaspora, scholars in queer studies introduced the concept of "queer diaspora." This term describes how the meanings and expressions of sexual desire, subjectivity, and practices change and evolve within the context of diasporic movement, migration, and residence (Gopinath, 2021, p. 68; Gopinath, 2005; Manalansan, 2003). Previous scholarship has applied the queer diasporic framework across various disciplines, including art, Black studies, queer studies, Asian studies, and discussions on race and racism. For instance, Gayatri Gopinath, in *Unruly Visions* (2018), examines the aesthetic practices of the queer diaspora through an exploration of diverse forms of visual culture. Gopinath's work illustrates how these artistic expressions disrupt conventional notions of gender, sexuality, race, and nationality.

Moreover, a queer diasporic framework serves as a valuable analytical tool, enabling us to locate stories of baseball players as diasporic. This perspective allows for a deeper understanding of their experiences and identities within a broader context of displacement and migration. A queer diasporic framework provides a tool to unmoor Latinidad from essentialized understandings and challenge "the normative ways of seeing and knowing [baseball] that have been so central to the production, containment, and disciplining of sexual, racial, and gendered bodies" (Gopinath, 2018, p.7). The concept of "queer diaspora" not only disrupts heteronormative and patrilineal norms inherent in conventional understandings of diaspora but also challenges "conventional framings of queerness... and a politics of invisibility which demands a way of thinking outside of a Euro-American frame but instead in relation to histories of colonialism and globalization" (Gopinath, 2021, p. 68). Thinking through baseball as a critical curricular object, this framework is instrumental in re-positioning Latinxs as vital voices in the retelling of American history, challenging dominant white, patrilineal epistemologies.

Practices of the queer diaspora emerge out of and respond to the legacies of colonial labor relations, which include the "dispossession of indigenous peoples, postcolonial nationalisms, the diasporas of racialized, migrant labor" (Gopinath, 2018, p. 8). A queer diasporic optic transforms how one views the extensions of colonial labor relations that are often revived and repurposed in contemporary postcolonial or diasporic contexts. The queer diaspora allows us to consider enforced fixity and enforced mobility as interconnected elements of the neocolonial nation-state's strategy to standardize, control, and eliminate social structures that are viewed as out of place in both contemporary and historical contexts. The strategy to standardize, control and enforce mobility is shown in the monolithic, anti-Black, singular conceptualizations of Brown Latinidad. By adopting a queer perspective and reimagining unruly boundaries of Latinidad (Gamez and Monreal, accepted), we grant ourselves the intellectual freedom to envision our baseball subjects in history in alternative and expansive ways. This approach disrupts conventional ideas of gender, sexuality, race, and nationality, especially important as educational research continues to approach Latinidad in singular and underdeveloped ways (Busey & Silva, 2021; Salinas, et al., 2016; San Miguel, 2012).

Discursive Moments

Our analysis focuses on two discursive 'moments' that we selected from the podcast *Black Diamonds*. *Black Diamonds* was originally created as part of the 100th-year anniversary of the Negro Leagues, and is hosted by the president of the Negro Leagues Museum, Bob Kendrick.

Describing the show, Kolgraf (2022, para. 1) writes "the podcast will showcase the history of the Negro Leagues, highlighting the players, people, and events that shaped them, as well as spotlighting the leagues' achievements and innovations during a time of segregation and inequality."

We define 'moments' as brief pieces of or excerpts from text and media that, while not representative, provide useful opportunities for analysis, particularly in conversation with specific theories. The selection and choice of moments is "a decidedly subjective and intentional process meant to highlight particularly generative instances" of thinking with and/or against theory (Monreal, 2024, p. 8). Perhaps most important is that these moments are often rather banal, meaning their content is not highlighted by the speaker/writer. Following Dumas (2016) we think about how common (sense) discourse produces and reflects normative knowledge; in turn (re)creating the boundaries of how we come to understand things (e.g. race, Latinidad, baseball, etc.). Put another way, we view 'moments' as entry points to interrogate how ordinary discourses operate with and through the processes of racialization and racial categorization.

We selected two moments for analysis after Tim first listened to specific episodes that referenced, and in some cases centered Latinxs in the Negro Leagues. Tim then sent these specific episodes to Iman, and we individually wrote down time stamps that referenced moments we thought deserved further examination and analysis. We met to share, talk through, and relisten to parts of the content we highlighted. We then collaboratively selected two examples as particularly rich moments to discuss and theorize with in greater detail.

Moment 1: "From being a Black kid without a job to a Cuban with a job" The first moment comes from the episode titled "The Cuban Stars" (Simplecast.com, 2021). In this episode, the Negro League Museum president Bob Kendrick highlights the long history of Black baseball in Cuba and the numerous Cubans who went on to star in the Negro Leagues. Although the episode stresses the star power of famous players like José Méndez, Cristóbal Torriente, Minnie Miñoso (12:25), and Martín Dihigo (31:49), it was Kendrick's recollection of a story about a nameless amateur player that struck us as a particularly illuminating instance of anti-Blackness, Latinidad, and baseball. Early in the podcast, Kendrick describes a young Black *"*player in the United States who begs the manager of an all-white team to play. Tired of having to tell the player "No" day after day, the white manager decides to put the Black player in a position to fail. The manager calls him out of the stands without warning in a bases-loaded situation." Kendrick continues: *"*The manager hoped that this experience would embarrass the "kid" enough to deter him from continuing to pester him. However, the "kid" hit a line drive, clearing the bases. This led the manager to exclaim, "Look at that Cuban run." This Black kid went from being a Black kid without a job to a Cuban with a job."

This moment demonstrates how baseball invited, and at times deployed the malleability of racial classification to control its interests. The moment also shows how anti-Blackness was marshaled in constructing the Latinx subject. The idea that Blackness and Latinidad were, and in many cases still are, mutually exclusive allowed for a Black baseball player to occupy a new subject position, 'Cuban'. While the podcast does not reveal what became of the newly employed 'Cuban,' what is important for our inquiry is that the appeal of and to Latinidad rested on its anti-Black construction (Flores, 2021). In other words, so long as the player was Latino, and hence not Black, he might have a *chance* to play Major League Baseball.

This, of course, does not mean that Latinidad guaranteed entry into a segregated MLB. There are but a few examples of Latinos, specifically Cubans, that signed major league contracts in the early 1900s. Two players, Rafael Almeida and Armando Marsans were required to sign a document attesting to European heritage, and not African heritage (Santana, 2021). Once again this shows that Latinidad, and any hint of Brownness, were acceptable only in relation to whiteness. Such understanding evidences the rationale that the development of Latinidad was tied to and theorized in terms of notions of *blanqueamiento* and racial progress (Busey & Cruz, 2017). As Black and dark-skinned Latinos had no recourse to the possibilities of being a white baseball subject, their options depended on the open arms of the Negro Leagues showing that the production and racial categorization and hierarchization intersected through and with skin color, immigration (and diaspora), and language, among other things.

That US Black baseball and Black baseball players became mainstays in countries like Mexico, Cuba, Venezuela, and the Dominican Republic in the US offseason — given the relatively lucrative (and often desegregated) winter barnstorming, exhibition, and league schedule (Corey & Harnischfeger, 2017) — necessitated a diasporic return to the US. Negro League teams and their Latinx owners would make appeals to Latinidad to try and garner support in North America. Team names like the New York Cuban Giants and the Cuban X-Giants "reflected the cachet that Cubans had acquired in North American baseball circles and the more tolerant attitude white Americans had regarding Cubans than they had towards African-Americans" (Ruck, 2011, p. 12). Ruck further maintains that such attempts to be more racially acceptable to white communities garnered mixed results, but most telling (like the story in the discursive moment we've considered in the past few paragraphs), is the attempt itself, an attempt that rested on drawing boundaries between Latinidad and Blackness.

Moment 2: "I knew English before I came to this country, but I had never heard the N-word."
The second moment features a live interview with two former Negro League players, Pedro Sierra and Sam Allen (Simplecast.com, 2022). Taped in front of a live audience at Major League Baseball's Play Ball Park in Los Angeles, Kendrick asks the former ball players to discuss their careers in the Negro Leagues. Pedro Sierra, born in Cuba, discussed how coming to the US was a learning experience in ways that extended beyond baseball. Sierra shared a couple of examples:

> [1] About 90% of the Negro League players at that time had played in Cuba…. Those young kids knew that we had the opportunity to play… There was a scout in Cuba that recommended me to the Negro Leagues… [and there was a] nurturing approach they [Negro Leagues] had toward younger players. It was more nurturing that Oscar Charleston [his manager] tried to speak Spanish… he came to the mound and said, "Chico, hombre no gusta curva" and I was like, "Mr., I know English…"
>
> [2] …but it was that the worst impact for me in the Negro Leagues because I knew English before I came to this country, but I had never heard the N-word. I didn't know what that meant. So, when the guys, a Cuban guy told me you had to concentrate on baseball, so when the guys said the N-word to me, you know what I said, "Chico, yo no hablo English" and then I cussed them back in Spanish and they say, "What the heck are you doing?" But I mean, that was is, it was a great experience, and they were always telling you. I learned from the Negro leagues: respect the managers, respect the coaches, respect your fellow players, and above all respect the game. It wasn't easy to play in the Negro Leagues…. But it was a

> great experience, I was forming my dream to become a baseball player…. That legacy I carry with me. I will never forget. I am very proud of that.

This discursive moment is an example of how baseball as an object of curricular examination provides new lenses on race and racialization via diaspora, globalization, and resistance. Sierra evidences that the opportunity to "form a dream" and be a professional baseball player rested upon leaving his native Cuba, and occupying a new racial subject position corresponding to US Blackness ("I knew English before I came to this country, but I had never heard the N-word."). Such practices are legacies of US colonial relations with Cuba and other Latin American places like the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico which baseball maintains to this day through "diasporas of racialized, migrant labor" (Gopinath, 2018, p. 8; García Peña, 2022). Queering such relationships also shows how diasporic subjects like Sierra challenge their shifting subject positions through interactions with his manager Oscar Charleston, US fans ("and then I cussed them back in Spanish"), and his teammates ("What the heck are you doing?"). These re-creations of race are made possible via diaspora and its translation of Latinidad to US hegemonic norms. Interestingly we might also think about how diasporic relations go both ways, as the Black players barred from the Major Leagues in the United States, were welcomed across the Caribbean (Corey & Harnischfeger, 2017; Ruck, 2011).

The concept of queer diaspora also allows us to analyze and nuance how exploitative labor relations and hegemonic socialization existed alongside deep relations of male care. Challenging conventional framings of the male sport figure, we might highlight how Sierra found the league to be "nurturing." This is further exemplified by the quote, "I learned from the Negro Leagues: respect your managers, respect your coaches, respect your fellow players, and above all respect the game. It wasn't easy…." Even as these individuals were expected to adhere to racialized norms of behavior and subjugation via obedience, structure, respect, and assimilation (Monreal, 2024), they tried to support each other's shifting racial subjectivities. And even as we might critique the anti-Blackness of a mestizaje Latinidad, the application of queer diasporic frameworks suggests the opportunity to pursue a more unruly Latinidad rooted in *complexities* rather than monoliths (Flores, 2021; Gamez & Monreal, accepted). In sum, Latinx men who migrated to the US to pursue baseball in the Negro Leagues were diasporic individuals. In their migration, they challenge traditional notions of race and nation by asserting their agency in both accepting, complicating, and at times refracting rigid notions of Blackness and Latinidad.

Conclusion

Annually on April 15, Major League Baseball commemorates "Jackie Robinson Day," symbolized by all players wearing #42 in his honor.[2] Nevertheless, as DiAngelo (2018) contends, a critical examination of US history necessitates scrutinizing social institutions reliant on whiteness to marginalize non-white individuals. The apparent re-appropriation of this event obscures MLB's initial motive to end segregation and brings into focus an ulterior motive for economic gain that rested on the raiding and ruin of Negro League teams. Furthermore, our analysis centers the complex relationships between baseball, race, anti-Blackness, and Latinidad. Importantly, this relationship is not resigned to the past as evidenced by Chris Rock and Torii Hunter's statements. Moreover, given the growing presence of Latinxs in MLB and the establishment of international youth academies in the Dominican Republic and Venezuela, the

[2] MLB celebrates Robinson's "life, values, and accomplishments… requesting that every player and all on-field personnel wear his No. 42 during games scheduled on Jackie Robinson Day since 2009" (MLB.com, n.d.)

MLB again faces allegations of youth exploitation that directly intersect with race, immigration (and diaspora), language, globalization, and class (Red & Thompson, 2020).

Offering (professional) baseball as a critical object of (curricular) inquiry interrogates the role of "America's National Pastime" in producing and reflecting race and racial hierarchization tied directly to historical contexts of segregation. It also holds the opportunity to expand what it meant, and means, to be a Latino/Latina/Latinx/Latine in the United States (Busey & Silva, 2021) and as such provides a curriculum toward openness and complexity rather than essentialist understanding of race. Finally, as researchers disrupting anti-Blackness within our own contexts, we hope educators are able to use baseball (with or without our critical frames) to do the same with their students and/or research. The extensive geographic scope of baseball throughout the western hemisphere, spanning North America, Central America, the Caribbean, and northern South America, coupled with our personal engagements with sport and education compels us to confront the anti-Black dimensions of Latinidad in our scholarly and pedagogical efforts.

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