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# Baseball as History and Myth in August Wilson's *Fences*

The game of baseball has long been regarded as a metaphor for the American dream—an expression of hope, democratic values, and the drive for individual success. According to John Thorn, baseball has become “the great repository of national ideals, the symbol of all that [is] good in American life: fair play (sportsmanship); the rule of law (objective arbitration of disputes); equal opportunity (each side has its innings); the brotherhood of man (bleacher harmony); and more” (qtd. in Elias, “Fit” 3). Baseball’s playing field itself has been viewed as archetypal—a walled garden, an American Eden marked by youth and timelessness. (There are no clocks in the game, and the runners move counter-clockwise around the bases.) As former Yale University president and former baseball commissioner Bart Giamatti once wrote, baseball is “the last pure place where Americans can dream” (qtd. in Elias, “Fit” 9).

In his Pulitzer Prize-winning drama *Fences* (1987), however, August Wilson uses both the history and mythology of baseball to challenge the authenticity of the American dream. Set in 1957, just before the start of the civil rights movement, *Fences* takes place at a time when organized baseball has finally become integrated, but when racial discrimination remains widespread.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the protagonist, Troy Maxon—a former Negro League slugger—is consumed with bitterness, convinced that if you are a black man in America, “you born with two strikes on you before you come to the plate” (69). Throughout the play Wilson places Troy within the historical context of the Negro Leagues, allowing his character to echo the feelings of actual black ballplayers who were denied a chance to compete at the major-league level. Furthermore, by situating Troy within three of baseball’s mythic settings—(1) the garden, (2) the battlefield, and (3) the graveyard or sacred space—Wilson contradicts the idea of America as a “field of dreams,” using baseball instead as a metaphor for heroic defiance.<sup>2</sup>

In *Fences* Wilson taps into a history of black baseball that began in America in the decades following the Civil War and continued in various forms until 1947, when Jackie Robinson finally crossed baseball’s color line. Roger Kahn explains that “no documents attest to baseball’s apartheid. There was simply an understanding among every major league club owner and every minor league club owner for more than 60 years that no blacks could play in so-called organized baseball” (38). The Negro National Baseball League, founded in 1920 and reorganized in 1933, contained teams such as the Chicago American Giants and the St. Louis Stars (and, in the 1930s, the Homestead Grays and the Pittsburgh Crawfords—the two clubs most likely to be Troy

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Maxon's team in *Fences*).<sup>3</sup> The Negro American League, originally formed in 1923 as the Eastern Baseball League, boasted teams such as the Baltimore Black Sox and the Cuban Stars, and often faced the Negro National League in a World Series. Legendary stars like Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson, and Cool Papa Bell all made their livelihoods playing for these segregated teams, never having the opportunity before 1947 to compete at the major-league level.

So what would life in the Negro Leagues have been like for Wilson's character Troy Maxon? As Robert Peterson explains in *Only the Ball was White* (1970), the black ballplayers were traveling men—barnstorming the country on any kind of transportation they could find. They rode in packed automobiles and on broken-down buses, playing a game almost every day and competing all over the country. To supplement their incomes, they often played winter ball in Florida, California, Cuba, or Mexico. "Negro baseball was played the year round" (Peterson 3). According to first baseman Buck Leonard, this itinerant life was not an easy one:

Some seasons we would play 210 ball games. You're riding every day, playing in different towns. No air conditioning. Meals were bad. When I first started playing, we were getting 60¢ a day on which to eat. (Rust 33)

Sometimes we'd stay in hotels that had so many bedbugs you had to put a newspaper down between the mattress and the sheets. (Holway 259)

The black ballplayers also had to contend with racism in the United States and were unable to stay at hotels that catered to whites or to eat in whites-only restaurants. George Giles, a first baseman for the St. Louis Stars, recalled: "The racism we faced while I was in the Negro Leagues was one of the things that eventually pushed me out of baseball. . . . I was treated like a second-class citizen in my own country by people who knew they hated me before I could even say 'Hello' " (Craft 44). Ironically, most players found

greater freedom and respect when they traveled outside the borders of the United States, "the so-called land of the free" (Craft 69).

In *Fences* Wilson uses Troy's experience in the Negro Leagues to demonstrate that the American dream remained out of reach for people of African descent. When Troy's friend Jim Bono remarks that Babe Ruth and Josh Gibson were the only players to hit more home runs than Troy, Troy answers, "What it ever get me? Ain't got a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of" (9). Troy's wife, Rose, and Bono both claim that times have changed since Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in baseball, that many black players are involved in professional sports now, and that Troy "just come along too early" (9). To this argument Troy responds indignantly:

There ought not never have been no time called too early! . . . I done seen a hundred niggers play baseball better than Jackie Robinson. Hell, I know some teams Jackie Robinson couldn't even make! What you talking about Jackie Robinson. Jackie Robinson wasn't nobody. I'm talking about if you could play ball then they ought to have let you play. Don't care what color you were. Come telling me I come along too early. If you could play . . . then they ought to have let you play. (9-10)

Troy's complaints echo the words of actual players from baseball's Negro Leagues, a number of whom have shared their experiences in oral histories such as John Holway's *Voices from the Great Black Baseball Leagues* (1975).<sup>4</sup> The fleet-footed outfielder Cool Papa Bell, for example, commented that during his playing days in the Negro Leagues, "the doors were not open, not only in baseball, but other avenues that we couldn't enter. They say I was born too soon. I say the doors were opened up too late" (Holway 40). Likewise, first baseman George Giles observed: "People say to me, 'George, you were born too soon to be one of the ones to make it to the big leagues'. . . . [But] I was born in the United States of America. I'm an *American*, not a for-

eigner. For years, foreigners came here and had more opportunity than I had" (Craft 69). Upon being inducted into baseball's Hall of Fame in 1972, Buck Leonard emphasized that the Negro League players all wanted to compete in the major leagues, and his eyes reportedly filled with tears as he said, "But it's too late for me" (Goldstein A13).

Troy Maxon's disparaging remarks about Jackie Robinson are also voiced, to some extent, in the oral histories of actual Negro League players. According to Leonard, when Robinson was signed by the Dodgers, other players in the Negro Leagues did not regard him that highly: "At that time we didn't think too much of Robinson. . . . He was a hustler, but other than that he wasn't a top shortstop. We said, 'We don't see how he can make it' " (Holway 267). Catcher Joe Greene expressed his resentment that Robinson was the player to get all the attention: "I still say we did a lot for the game, even if nobody knows about us. They say Jackie Robinson paved the way. He didn't pave the way. We did" (Holway xviii).

Of course, it was not for his ability alone that Robinson was selected as the first African American to play major-league baseball. He was regarded as a role model: an exemplary human being, someone who didn't smoke or drink, who was not hostile and defiant, and who was likely to get along well with white players and baseball executives. Robinson himself wrote: "This player had to be one who could take abuse, name-calling, rejection by fans and sportswriters and by fellow players not only on opposing teams but on his own. He had to be able to stand up in the face of merciless persecution and not retaliate. On the other hand . . . he still had to have spirit. He could not be an "Uncle Tom" (qtd. in Shannon, *Dramatic Vision* 97).

Unlike Robinson, Troy is no model citizen, and as an actual person, he would surely have increased tensions in the racially charged environment of

the 1930s and 40s. As Troy reveals near the end of act 1, he first learned to play baseball in prison, where he served a 15-year term for knifing a man to death in an attempted robbery. Headstrong and confrontational, an actual Troy would never have turned the other cheek or failed to retaliate when abused. Even in Wilson's fictive world of 1957, he is regarded as a "trouble-maker" for complaining that black garbage workers should be able to drive the trucks, just like white men. Not only was Troy "born too early," therefore, but Wilson portrays him as lacking the conciliatory temperament to be one of the first players to break baseball's color barrier.

As Sandra Shannon has suggested, Troy is modeled in part on Wilson's stepfather, David Bedford, a talented black football player who, after failing to receive a much-hoped-for college scholarship, killed a man during a robbery and spent over 20 years in prison (*Dramatic Vision* 91-92). But Troy is also patterned after Josh Gibson, "the Babe Ruth of the Negro Leagues," and the man to whom Troy himself points as an example of someone who never had the chance to realize the American dream. Muscular and six-feet-one-inch tall, Gibson had the "largeness"—both of body and character—that we recognize in Troy Maxon. He enjoyed a spectacular 17-year career with the Pittsburgh Crawfords and the Homestead Grays, hitting nearly 800 home runs, including 75 homers in a single season.<sup>5</sup> He also hit for a high average, winning a batting title in 1943 with a spectacular mark of .521. "Josh was the most powerful hitter we had in the Negro leagues," recalled Leonard. "I saw him hit one out of Yankee Stadium. At the Polo Grounds, I saw him hit one between the upper deck and the roof. It hit an elevated train track outside the park" (Rust 35).

Despite his legendary abilities, however, Gibson was never given the chance to play in the major leagues—a circumstance that may well have contributed to his untimely death. As

teammate Ted Page noted, "Josh knew he was major-league quality" (Peterson 168). In the early 1940s, Gibson began to drink excessively and also developed a brain tumor that caused recurring headaches and blackouts. He died of a stroke at the age of 35, just a few months before Robinson crossed

major-league baseball's color line. In *Fences* Troy is clearly familiar with Gibson's story and even contrasts Gibson's situation

with that of a white ballplayer named Selkirk who batted a paltry .269 for the Yankees: "I saw Josh Gibson's daughter yesterday. She walking around with raggedy shoes on her feet. Now I bet you Selkirk's daughter ain't walking around with raggedy shoes on her feet! I bet you that!" (9). Troy himself, of course, has outlived Gibson, proving to be more of a survivor; but he can easily identify with this Negro League hero—not only because of the man's brilliant athletic ability, but because Gibson's life epitomizes for Troy the bitter experience of the black ballplayer who was born "too soon."

In *The Culture of Bruising* (1994), Gerald Early notes that Robinson and other black athletes transformed the game of baseball by introducing a more aggressive, free-wheeling style of play—one that emphasized speed, daring base running, and timely hitting. Unlike "the house of Ruth," which valued the home run above all else, "the house of Robinson" relied on the bunt, the stolen base, and the hit and run. This flashier, more dynamic style was exemplified by Cool Papa Bell (who, in a game against a team of major-league All Stars, scored from first base on a sacrifice bunt) and was later perfected by Robinson and Willie Mays, who brought speed and flamboyance to every facet of the game, their caps flying off as they rounded the bases or pursued a fly ball.

Curiously enough, in *Fences*, Troy aligns himself with "the house of Ruth" rather than with "the house of Robinson," not only through his overt criticism of Robinson, but through his self-styled image as a slugger. Like Babe Ruth (and his Negro League counterpart, Gibson), Troy has

embraced a conservative approach to the sport of baseball, eschewing the running game of Robinson or the spectacular fielding of Mays, and

focusing instead on hitting the ball out of the park. Troy says to Bono, "You get one of them fastballs, about waist high, over the outside corner of the plate where you can get the meat of the bat on it . . . and good god! You can kiss it goodbye" (10). By connecting himself with "the house of Ruth" (a tradition that Early links with white male privilege and the fulfillment of the American dream), Troy not only transcends certain racial stereotypes, but he affirms that he can beat the white man at his own game.

When talking about significant events in his personal life, however, Troy at times identifies with Robinson's style of play. Using the game of baseball as an analogue for his own experience, Troy tells Rose that when he married her, he fooled everyone by bunting: "I was safe. I had me a family. A job. I wasn't gonna get that last strike. I was on first looking for one of them boys to knock me in. To get me home" (70). Frustrated after a life of hard work and no visible reward (or "[standing] on first base," as he puts it), Troy engages in an extramarital affair—a behavior that he compares to a base runner's impulse to steal second: "Then when I saw that gal . . . she firmed up my backbone. And I got to thinking that if I tried . . . I just might be able to steal second. Do you understand after eighteen years I wanted to steal second" (70).

**In *Fences* the national pastime is stained by racism, the nation's Edenic promise is illusory, and the traditional mythology of baseball is counter revolutionary.**



Troy's metaphorical references to Robinson's brand of baseball help to capture what W. E. B. Du Bois called the "two-ness" or double consciousness of African American experience; for as a black slugger in a world dominated by whites, Troy inevitably belongs simultaneously to "the house of Ruth" and "the house of Robinson." He is both an American and a black man—"two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Du Bois 45). Driven to see himself (and to measure his success) through the lens of white America, Troy embodies both the psychological fragmentation of the black American and the dualistic nature of black baseball—a cultural institution that Early describes as an "ironically compressed expression of shame and pride, of degradation and achievement" (qtd. in Tygiel 92).

Besides invoking the history of the Negro Leagues in *Fences*, Wilson makes use of the mythology of baseball to reveal the failed promise of the American dream. As Deeanne Westbrook observes in *Ground Rules: Baseball and Myth* (1996), baseball's playing field can be understood as an archetypal garden—an image of innocence and timeless space—an American Eden. In W. P. Kinsella's novel *Shoeless Joe* (1982), for example, the protagonist Ray Kinsella rediscovers Eden by building a baseball park in his Iowa cornfield, creating "a walled garden of eternal youth." Players from baseball's past enter this magical garden, "not middle-aged or elderly, as they were at their deaths, but young, as they were at their moments of peak performance. They occupy the mythic present" (Westbrook 102).

In *Fences* the closest that Troy comes to participating in the American dream—and hence inhabiting such a paradise—is during his life in the Negro Leagues. Wilson associates the American dream with Troy's younger days as a ballplayer: with self-affirma-

tion, limitless possibilities, and the chance for heroic success. The very act of hitting a home run—especially when the ball is hit over the fence—suggests extraordinary strength and the ability to transcend limits. Troy's son Lyons recalls seeing his father hit a home run over the grandstand: "Right out there in Homestead Field. He wasn't satisfied hitting in the seats . . . he want to hit it over everything! After the game he had two hundred people standing around waiting to shake his hand" (94). Troy himself claims that he hit seven home runs off of Satchel Paige. "You can't get no better than that," he boasts (34).

For Troy, however, the American dream has turned into a prolonged nightmare. Instead of limitless opportunity, he has come to know racial discrimination and poverty. At age 53, this former Negro League hero is a garbage collector who ekes out a meager existence, working arduously to support his family and living from hand to mouth. "I do the best I can do," he tells Rose. "I come in here every Friday. I carry a sack of potatoes and a bucket of lard. You all line up at the door with your hands out. I give you the lint from my pockets. I give you my sweat and my blood. I ain't got no tears. I done spent them" (40). Troy claims that he would not even have a roof over his head if it were not for the \$3,000 that the government gave to his mentally disabled brother, Gabriel, following a serious head injury in World War II.

Wilson accentuates Troy's exclusion from the American Eden by converting baseball's mythical garden into an ironic version of paradise. In the stage directions to *Fences*, Wilson indicates that the legendary "field of dreams" has been reduced to the "small dirt yard" (xvi) in front of Troy's home—his current playing field. Incompletely fenced, the yard contains lumber and other fence-building materials, as well as two oil drums used as garbage containers. A baseball bat—"the most visible symbol of [Troy's]

deferred dreams" (Shannon, *Fences* 46)—is propped up against a tree, from which there hangs "a ball made of rags" (xvi). As the setting reveals, Troy does not inhabit a walled garden of timeless youth. At 53, he cannot reclaim his past glory as a power hitter; nor can he participate in the American dream. His playing field in 1957 has deteriorated into one of dirt, garbage, and rags. Indeed, only after Troy's death at the end of the play, when his fence is completed and when his daughter Raynell plants a small garden in front of the house, is there even a suggestion of a walled paradise.

According to Westbrook, baseball's archetypal playing field can also become a battleground—a scene of violent confrontation—much like the heroic fights at Valhalla, the "home of the slain" in Norse mythology. Each morning the warriors arm themselves for combat and battle one another fiercely in the great courtyard, returning to the banquet hall in the evening to feast and boast of their exploits. As Westbrook notes, "The ritualized aggression of both Valhalla and baseball field is rule governed . . . and endlessly repeatable" (109). The baseball players are modern-day warriors, the bat and ball are weapons, and the game itself a substitute for combat.

In *Fences* Wilson converts Troy's playing field into a battleground—an image reinforced by references to World War II (during which Gabriel got "half his head blown off" [28]), to the "Army of Death" (11), and to the Battle of Armageddon (when, according to Gabriel, "God get to waving that Judgment sword" [47]). Throughout the play Troy is pictured as a batter/warrior, fighting to earn a living and to stay alive in a world that repeatedly discriminates against him. As Shannon has noted, Troy sees life as a baseball contest; he sees himself as perpetually in the batter's box (*Dramatic Vision* 110). He tells Rose: "You got to guard [the plate] closely . . . always looking for the curve-ball on the inside corner. You can't afford to let none get past

you. You can't afford a call strike. If you going down . . . you going down swinging" (69).

Troy's front yard is literally turned into a battleground during his confrontations with his younger son, Cory. Bitter about his own exclusion from major-league baseball, Troy is resistant when Cory wants to attend college on a football scholarship, telling his son that black athletes have to be twice as talented to make the team and that "the white man ain't gonna let you get nowhere with that football noway" (35). But Cory, who seems to believe in the promise of the American dream—particularly for black athletes in the 1950s—insists that Troy is selfishly holding him back from success: "You just scared I'm gonna be better than you, that's all" (58). The intergenerational conflict reaches a climax in act 2, when Troy and Cory engage in an ironic version of the all-American father-and-son game of catch (Birdwell 91). "Get your black ass out of my yard!" (87), Troy warns Cory, after which the two combatants fight furiously over Troy's bat/weapon until Cory is expelled from his father's playing field.

Troy's efforts to prevent his son from playing football can be viewed as a form of what Harry J. Elam, Jr., calls "racial madness"—a term that suggests that social and political forces can impact the black psyche and that decades of oppression can induce a collective psychosis.<sup>6</sup> In *Fences* this racial madness is illustrated most vividly in the character of Troy's mentally handicapped brother, Gabriel, but it is also revealed in Troy himself, who is so overwhelmed by bitterness that he destroys his son's dream of a college education—a dream that most fathers would happily support. Instead, Troy instructs Cory to stick with his job at the A & P or learn a trade like carpentry or auto mechanics: "That way you have something can't nobody take away from you" (35). There is a certain method, however, to Troy's madness; for why should he expect college football (another white power structure) to

treat his son any better than major-league baseball treated him? Why should he believe, in 1957, that times have really changed for black men? Anxious for Cory to find economic security, and, more importantly, self-respect, Troy exclaims to Rose, "I don't want him to be like me! I want him to move as far away from my life as he can get" (39).

In Amiri Baraka's play *Dutchman* (1964), the African American protagonist Clay advocates a violent solution to the problem of racial madness, telling his white adversary, Lula, that "the only thing that would cure the neurosis would be your murder. Simple as that. . . . Crazy niggers turning their backs on sanity. When all it need is that simple act. Murder. Just Murder!" (qtd. in Elam 63). In *Fences* Troy's response to the racial madness that infects him is much less revolutionary than Clay's, but it is combative nonetheless. Troy chooses to challenge the white man, literally, by engaging in a form of social activism, that is, by taking a job complaint to his boss, Mr. Rand, and then to the commissioner's office. Moreover, he teaches his son how to fight. During their climactic struggle in act 2, Troy deliberately confronts Cory, taunting him, grabbing the bat from him, and insisting that he teach Cory how to swing. Determined to prepare his son for combat in a racist society, Troy uses the weapons and language of baseball as his teaching tools. "Don't you strike out," he tells Cory after an earlier altercation. "You living with a full count. Don't you strike out" (72).

Troy's playing field is the scene not only of father-son conflict, but of marital strife as well. In act 2 Rose learns that Troy has been unfaithful to her and has fathered a child with his mistress, Alberta. When Troy tries to explain (and even justify) his infidelity by using baseball analogies, Rose is not impressed. "We're not talking about baseball!" she says. "We're talking about you going off to lay in bed with another woman . . . and then bring it

home to me. That's what we're talking about. We ain't talking about no baseball" (70). After the conflict between Rose and Troy escalates into a cold war—the two of them rarely speaking to one another—it is the wounded Rose, rather than Troy, who eventually dominates the battle, taking in his motherless daughter and telling Troy: "From right now . . . this child got a mother. But you a womanless man" (79).

When viewed as battleground, baseball's setting invites stories of mythic confrontation (for example, Joe Hardy's heroic contest with the Yankees in Douglass Wallop's 1954 novel *The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant* or Roy Hobbs's showdown with Walter "the Whammer" Wambold in Bernard Malamud's 1952 *The Natural*). As Westbrook explains, baseball's battleground can be understood as a sanctuary for heroes—a space "reserved for the elite, the masculine, the bravest and best" (108). In *Fences* Troy sees himself as belonging to this masculine battleground. Indeed, throughout the play he uses the game of baseball to preserve a heroic self-image. Although his glory days in the Negro Leagues are far behind him, Troy still views himself as the strong man, the indomitable slugger of old. When Cory tells him that Hank Aaron just hit his forty-third home run, Troy replies, "Ain't nothing to it. It's just a matter of timing . . . getting the right follow-through. Hell, I can hit forty-three home runs right now!" (34).

Troy's dream of playing in the major leagues has been crushed by a racist society, but in his own imagination he is still at bat, still young, still a formidable threat at the plate. He is not Troy Maxon, garbage collector, but Troy Maxon, power hitter and hero.

Clinging to this heroic image of himself, Troy maintains an attitude of defiance throughout the play. He refuses to give in to his opponent, whether it is the white man, the devil, or death itself. In fact, Wilson specifically links the figures of the devil and death with



white racism, depicting the devil as a white furniture salesman who exploits blacks by charging exorbitant interest rates, and death as a grim reaper in a hooded white robe—evoking images of the Ku Klux Klan. “Death ain’t nothing,” says Troy, when Rose warns him about drinking himself to death. “I done seen him. Done wrassled with him. You can’t tell me nothing about death. Death ain’t nothing but a fast-ball on the outside corner. And you know what I’ll do to that!” (10). In act 2, after learning that Alberta has died giving birth to his daughter, Troy speaks directly to “Mr. Death,” warning him to stay on the other side of the fence until he is ready for him; and near the end of the play, after a final struggle with Cory, Troy boldly assumes the batting stance of the heroic ballplayer, taunting “Death, the fast-ball [on] the outside corner. . . . It’s between you and me now! Come on! Anytime you want! Come on! I be ready for you . . . but I ain’t gonna be easy” (89).

Troy’s yard—his battlefield—also becomes his dying place and ultimately a kind of hallowed ground. This symbolic use of space sustains the mythology of baseball; for, as Westbrook observes, baseball’s archetypal playing field can become a graveyard—a scene of literal or metaphorical death (156-58). In Kinsella’s novel *Shoeless Joe*, for instance, the baseball field that Ray Kinsella builds in his Iowa cornfield serves as a gravesite/shrine for ghostly ballplayers from the past. Ray even installs home plate “carefully, securely, like a grave marker” (21). In Malamud’s novel *The Natural*, outfielder Bump Bailey is actually killed at the ballpark when he runs into a wall “with a skull-breaking bang” (72), and Roy Hobbs, after striking out during the final plate appearance of his career, ceremoniously buries the pieces of his broken bat, Wonderboy, making a “grave in the dry earth” of left field (214). The connection between baseball’s space and death is also accentuated by the vocab-

ulary of the game itself (namely, “suicide squeeze,” “sacrifice fly,” “twin killing”); and, of course, a baseball contest cannot end in a draw: one team must eventually lose (or “die”).

Despite its traditional associations with the American dream, the game of baseball is thus infused with a tragic strain, one that is highlighted at the end of *Fences* in Rose’s account of how Troy has died:

He still got that piece of rag tied to that tree. He was out here swinging that bat. I was just ready to go back in the house. He swung that bat and then he just fell over. Seem like he swung it and stood there with this grin on his face . . . and then he just fell over. (95-96)

Troy knows that he cannot keep death at bay forever—that “everybody gonna die” (10), but he is determined to look death squarely in the face and to “[go] down swinging” (69). As Kim Pereira has observed, “if a hero is one who goes into a battle that he may or may not win, Troy Maxon possesses, in full measure, [that] warrior spirit. . . .” (37).

Because Troy dies the death of a valiant batter/warrior, his playing field in 1965 is finally pictured as consecrated ground. It is the spot where his family gathers—as if at a memorial service—to reflect on Troy’s life and death. It is the place where Troy’s daughter Raynell has planted her garden and where Cory and Raynell sing Troy’s song about Old Blue, the dog who died and went to the Promised Land. Most importantly, the yard is the setting for Troy’s entry into heaven—as imagined by his brother Gabriel, who believes himself to be the Archangel Gabriel. Signaling Saint Peter to open the gates of heaven for Troy, Gabriel makes an unsuccessful effort to blow his trumpet, then begins a primitive dance, howling in “an attempt at song” or speech (101). As light fills the stage at the end of the play, “the gates of heaven stand open as wide as God’s closet” (101).<sup>7</sup>

By depicting Troy’s final playing field as sacred space, Wilson mytholo-

gizes his African American hero and celebrates Troy's warrior spirit—a spirit that would come to dominate the 1960's civil rights era, when “the hot winds of change . . . [would] blow full” (xviii). Although the American dream has eluded Troy, the game of baseball has ultimately taught him how to live his life—how to fight heroically when the odds are against him and how to find dignity in the struggle of life. Baseball, of course, has always been a fertile ground for the creation of heroes—from Babe Ruth, to Joe DiMaggio, to Willie Mays, to Barry Bonds. George Grella has argued that “the game suggests to man his godlike potential: it reveals to him . . . the transcendent capabilities within his life, his spark of divinity” (qtd. in Elias, “Fit” 23). In *Fences* the audience is finally left with the image of such a hero in Troy Maxon, the defiant, larger-than-life batter/warrior. Indeed, when the gates of heaven open and Gabriel shouts the final line of the play, “That’s the way that go!” (101), it’s as if Troy has hit

one last home run and is circling the bases in triumph.<sup>8</sup>

Although Wilson’s dramas are typically grounded in elements of African and African American cultures—including ritual, superstition, the blues, and jazz—*Fences* is unique in that it appropriates a traditionally white cultural form—baseball—in order to portray an African American experience in the twentieth century. By adopting this white cultural form, Wilson artfully expresses Troy Maxon’s double consciousness—his complicated experience as a black man in a white-dominated world. At the same time, Wilson creates a “subversive narrative” that competes with the American Dream itself (Shannon, *Fences* 20). Thus, he demonstrates that the national pastime has been stained by racism, that the Edenic promise of America is illusory, and that the traditional mythology of baseball must ultimately make room for a new and revolutionary mythos: that of the defiant African American warrior.

1. Timpane notes that major-league baseball was not completely integrated in 1957, the year in which most of the action of *Fences* occurs: “Though blacks had been playing in the major leagues since 1947, it would take until 1959 for each major league team to have at least one black player” (70).

2. Although previous scholars have discussed the subject of baseball in *Fences*—especially Troy Maxon’s reliance on baseball metaphors—no study to date has examined Wilson’s use of the history of black baseball as reflected in the oral accounts of Negro League players and his appropriation of baseball’s mythology to express a social and political message. Such an examination is in keeping with a recent burgeoning interest in both the oral histories of Negro League players and scholarly studies of baseball as a form of popular culture. These sources, I believe, help to shed new light on Wilson’s 1987 drama.

3. Wilson might well have imagined *Fences* as set in his hometown of Pittsburgh; if so, he would also likely have imagined that Troy played for the Homestead Grays or the Pittsburgh Crawfords, two of the most talented Negro League teams during the 1930s and 40s. When describing Troy’s son’s recollection of Troy’s baseball heroics, Wilson even has Lyons refer to “Homestead Field” (94).

4. It is no surprise to find this connection between *Fences* and oral history; for, as Elam notes, “Wilson has his characters make history through processes of oral transmission, replicating oral practices from early African cultures that continued throughout the diaspora” (12).

5. Gibson’s exact record is unknown since complete statistics were not kept in baseball’s Negro Leagues.

6. Invoking the theories of psychiatrist-philosopher Frantz Fanon as well as the perspectives of Du Bois, Ellison, and others, Elam emphasizes that “racial madness” does not imply a pathology in blackness itself. Rather it is “a trope that became operative in clinical practice, literary creation, and cultural theory in the modern period as artists, critics, and practitioners identified social and cultural roots for black psychological impairment” (59). During his discussion of racial madness in *Fences*, Elam focuses on Troy’s brain-damaged brother, Gabriel, whom he describes as a force for redemption.

## Notes

7. This sacred space is pictured as both Christian and African; for, as many critics have noted, Gabriel's atavistic dance suggests a connection with an African spiritual realm.

8. Troy's spirit of defiance, as well as his showmanship, reflects the spirit of the Negro Leagues. McDaniel's has argued that "these African American ballplayers were continuing a tradition of resistance that had been engrained in their psyches since slavery" (198). They "dared to play what was designated as a white man's sport" (194). Referring to *The Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars and Motor Kings*—a 1976 movie celebrating the Negro Leagues—McDaniel's particularly focuses on the role of performance (e.g., showboating and clowning) in resisting white supremacy. James Earl Jones, who portrayed Troy Maxon in the original Broadway production of *Fences*, was also featured in *Bingo Long*.

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