Creating Home-Plate in America:

American Exceptionalism and Baseball as Imperialistic Home in Irwin Shaw's Short Fiction, August Wilson's *Fences*, and William Kennedy's *Ironweed*

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements…….3

Table of Contents…….....4

An Introduction to Baseball as Home and Institution of American Exceptionalism…….....5

Chapter One: An Imperialistic Field of Dreams…….....6

Chapter Two: The *Gentle People*.....25

Chapter Three: A Self-Constructed Stadium…….……....45

Chapter Four: The Homeless Heavy Hitter……...63

Conclusion: A Contextual Stadium……...83

Works Cited…….……..87

An Introduction to Baseball as an Imperialistic American Institution

Baseball has often been viewed as unique among the pantheon of American organized sports. Perhaps this view was spawned from baseball's supposedly pastoral origins, but the sport undeniably carries, as Allen Guttmann mentions, a brand as America's pastime (51). For millions of immigrants who entered America during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, baseball was the first and primary institution that provided them with a sense of belonging to America. Foreigners ascribed tremendous value to baseball in the nineteenth century, leading the French philosopher Jacques Barzun to comment that no other sport seemed genuinely entwined with a nation's identity (13). Baseball is unique in that it, as a sport, is situated as an institution that embodies the tenets of American exceptionalism by espousing a gospel of belonging. For writers Irwin Shaw, August Wilson, and William Kennedy, baseball operates in a unique function as imperialistic and exceptional, rendering their works subject and dependent to the societal need to belong within baseball that influenced their immigrant forebears. Baseball stadiums and culture eventually rivaled the Protestantism of American exceptionalism as the primary identifier of one's *Americanness*. How one related to baseball became a valid means of judging one's worth.

Chapter One: A Space of Reconstructed Dreams:

Baseball as Domestic Imperialism in the Creation of Empire as Home

"In 2003, according to the office of the Commissioner of (Organized) Baseball, 42 percent of all players in Organized Baseball are now from countries other than the United States" (J.D. Kelly 42).

"Baseball . . . is the greatest single force working for Americanization. No other game appeals so much to the foreign-born youngsters and nothing, not even the schools, teaches the American spirit so quickly, or inculcates the idea of sportsmanship or fair play so thoroughly" (Hugh Fullerton, qtd. in *Touching Base* 57).

"In Europe, nationality is related to community, and thus one cannot become un-English or un-Swedish. Being an American, however, is an ideological commitment. It is not a matter of birth. Those who reject American values are un-American" (Seymour Lipset 31).

"Progress, destiny, belief in the future – all form an optimistic core that feeds imperial efforts. At the other end of the continuum, however, one finds expansion motivated by the morbid need to fend off age and decay. Empires decline when 'the vicissitudes of fortune, which spares neither man nor the proudest of his works . . . buries empires and cities in a common grave.' Extending life through expanding territory is an anthropological theme associated with theories of state formation and cultural diffusion" (Alan Klein 14).

For the greater part of America's history, baseball has existed in a dualistic role as both America's pastime and as a reflection of its values and culture. Allen Guttmann writes that "[f]or approximately a century, from the 1850's to the 1950's, baseball was considered our national pastime. Commentators as different as Mark Twain, Morris Raphael Cohen, and Jacques Barzun agreed with the fans in the bleachers that baseball was an expression of a distinctly American culture" (51). In 1911, Albert Spalding – later the founder of the Spalding sporting company – declared questioning baseball's role as America's past-time akin to questioning the laws of nature itself:

> To enter upon a deliberate argument to prove that Base Ball [sic] is our National Game; that it has all the attributes of American origin, American character and unbounded public favor in America, seems a work of supererogation. It is to undertake the elucidation of a patent fact; the sober demonstration of an axiom; it is like a solemn declaration that two plus two equals four. (qtd. in Evans and Herzog 3-4)

In Spalding's mind, this seemingly unassailable belief in the power of baseball is reflected in its role in the lives of millions of Americans. This role was not merely that of a game, but one that deeply impacted the manner through which those Americans achieved "Americanness" within their culture.[1] Interestingly, certain immigrant groups – namely, Jewish-Americans, African-Americans, and Irish-Americans – exemplified how baseball imperialistically operated within urban centers to help create a sense of belonging to American culture. These three groups were

[1] Though Marcela Cristi's work *Performing Americanness: Race, Class, Gender in Modern African-American and Jewish-American Literature*, leaves Irish Americans out of her discussion of Americanness, her definition of the term is one that extends to my discussion: "I show why identification and the desire-to-be are important methodological terms for understanding how individuals have come to be gendered, raced, classed, and 'ethnicized' in the United States, and how these categories are both inextricable from hegemonic notions of what it means to be American and important axes along which social stratification has developed" (13).

among the many that experienced heavy discrimination within American cities during the turn of the twentieth century; this discrimination resounds in a new context when compared to the history of baseball within those cities. Baseball represented a new type of sport for America, one that was perfectly suited to the incongruent mixture of ethnicities rapidly occupying its towns. In turn, baseball would introduce American values to those immigrants. In *Touching Base: Professional Baseball and American Culture in the Progressive Era*, Steven Riess mentions the extensive influence that baseball had in spreading American values to the middle-classes of America:

> The ideology asserted that the sport was one of our finest national institutions which had certain latent functions contributing to both the public's and the individual's welfare. This creed claimed that baseball was an indigenous American game . . . [that] typified all that was best in our society . . . [t]wo of the principal functions ascribed to baseball were that it would teach children traditional American values and that it would help newcomers assimilate into the dominant WASP culture through their participation in the sport's rituals. (6-7)

While baseball had long-been part of nineteenth century culture, the advent of the twentieth century saw baseball evolve into a type of civic institution to immigrant groups as a means of acquiring *Americanness* that was largely denied to them.[2] For the three ethnicities I am examining, baseball deepened, and eventually came to symbolize, a desire to belong to America. The adoption of baseball as a symbol of Americanness was a result of the unique sway and influence sports had for groups of Americans who were denied or never had opportunity to

[2] Price writes, "The roots of baseball as an American civic religion lie in its nineteenth-century acceptance as the national pastime when it came 'to symbolize national virtues of freedom, justice, and equality.' But this trinity of civic virtues applied to a privileged sector, not in the sense of being restricted to a lordly class; but the reality of racial prejudice and economic oppression certainly stained this set of values" (115).

advance beyond their own social levels: “Sports held great economic and social promise, particularly for the downtrodden. . . [p]rofessional baseball fueled the aspirations of many who lacked the wealth and socioeconomic status to gain an education, a learned profession, and consequent respect. Professional athletes earned their salaries through physical prowess, independent of class affiliation or access to higher education” (Guttmann 79). Because these immigrants primarily lived and established roots within urban communities, the primary effect that baseball had upon them was, as Benjamin Rader mentions, that of unifying them with American culture: “At its best, baseball could even reduce antagonisms arising from class, religious, ethnic and racial diversions. In a nation comprising a multiplicity of ethnic, racial, and religious groups, one without a monarchy, an aristocracy, or a long, mythic past, the experience of playing, watching, and talking about baseball became one of the nation’s great denominators” (2). However, this unification extends beyond the three groups creating a sense of belonging in their respective cities; the purpose of this study is to examine how the shifting face of American imperialism is reborn within the domestic space of a baseball stadium through the concept of American exceptionalism.

Within American society, there has long existed a school of thought which believes in the inherent uniqueness of its culture. *The Faith of Fifty Million* notes that that America has nearly always been understood and viewed as a *promised land*, one whose success stemmed from the Protestant conception of God. This promise originated within the idea that God has promised to make America successful and blessed; however, by the advent of the twentieth century, the promise of success was no longer “to America, but *of* America” (Evans and Herzog 32). In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this inherent uniqueness manifested itself in the various

cultural institutions that have been displayed as distinctly American.[3] Baseball – like American politics, entertainment, and commerce – has been exported to nations around the globe, serving to both change their societal structures and to instill distinctly American values in those cultures. This exportation reflects the distinct belief in an American *exceptionalism*, which derives from the idea that facets of American society function as types of incomparable civil institutions. A primary and helpful definition of institution is espoused by Marcela Cristi, who maintains, though she narrows to institutions that derive from American government, that America's institutions inherently display a type of national sacredness: "In fact, America's uniqueness is supposed to be based on a special set of values having a sacred quality. It is institutionally '*carried* by the by the public system of education, the judiciary, the presidency and other political institutions'" (65). These institutions, though seemingly distant from this study, nonetheless act in the same manner as the social institution of baseball by "absorbing and then converting each new wave of immigrants into believers of the American creed" (65). While seemingly straightforward, the process by which immigrants have been "absorb[ed] and . . . convert[ed]" (65) into "American" individuals is strongly seen when we examine the role of baseball as an institution of American exceptionalism. A basic understanding of the term is

[3] Marcela Cristi explains that "[t]he civic-religious dimension of the American experience is often traced back to a blend of ideas stemming from its Puritan tradition and from the Enlightenment. These two traditions (Puritanism and self-seeking utilitarianism) have been present in American society since colonial times. America was founded upon the belief that colonists had been entrusted with a special mission: to establish a new social and political order . . . [t]he self-understanding of the original colonists was derived from Judeo-Christian symbols such as 'God's new Israel,' a 'chosen people,' and a 'covenanted nation.' Originating in the Puritan idea of a covenant between God and society, America was to be a community of God, for the glory of God, and subject to his judgment . . . [f]rom the American Enlightenment, the settlers adopted such ideas as equality, self-determination, and the right to 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness'" (49).

necessary to understand how America's history and culture have encouraged the premise of imperialism within a domestic space.[4]

These institutions serve as spheres of American culture, serving not only to reflect American values, but also to imperialistically instill a domestic sense of identity into immigrants and people groups looking to blend into the American social fabric. My discussion of baseball is rooted in understanding how America has functioned as a type of imperialistic empire. We traditionally understand imperialism as occurring only within foreign spaces, yet relying upon Amy Kaplan's understanding of the term places imperialism firmly within the familiar boundaries of American exceptionalism: the domestic space of America. American exceptionalism can be defined, as Kaplan mentions in *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture*, as a type of nationalistic imperialism which believes in its unique right "for boundless expansion, where national particularism and international universalism converge" (16). This definition connects the idea of national particularism with the concept of exceptionalism; combined with her essay "Left Alone with America," the work illustrates how America's conquest of foreign territories was effectively replaced by domestic imperialism and redefines America as a nation whose identity is found through the resolution of other nations and people groups within its boundaries.[5] Because of the failure to identify American exceptionalism as connected to the concept of imperialism, a greater potential exists to overlook the imperialistic civic institutions within the domestic space of America.[6] America's foreign expansion had all but ceased at the turn of the twentieth century, as society turned its imperialistic vision towards the

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[4] I refer to Edward Said's definition of "domestic" and "foreign" when discussing the concept of space; in his work *Orientalism*, Said argues that physical space can signify and distinguish the presence of an "Other" (xii) within imperialism. Kaplan localizes this premise through the concept of civic institutions.

[5] In the essay, Kaplan writes, "By defining American culture as determined precisely by its diversity and multivocality, 'America' as a discrete identity can cohere independently of international confrontations with other national, local, and global cultural identities within and outside its borders" (15).

[6] In "Left Alone with America," she writes, "The absence of the United States in the postcolonial study of culture and imperialism curiously reproduces American exceptionalism from without" (17).

divisions of home.[7] Instead of conquering lands, the movements of America's empire created the nation as a "home" that sought to define itself through civil institutions.

These institutions then became the primary means through which America culture could define itself against what Edward Said labels as the "Other" (qtd. in Kaplan and Pease 1). Said identifies this practice as common amidst nations with imperialistic tendencies, and reemphasizes the importance of "culture" in maintaining boundaries between the foreign and the domestic: "In time, culture comes to be associated, often aggressively, with the nation or the state; this differentiates 'us' from 'them,' almost to a degree of xenophobia. Culture in this sense is a source of identity, and a rather combative one at that, as we see in recent returns to culture and tradition" (1). Civic institutions, consequently, function as arms of an imperialistic culture in both foreign *and* domestic spaces; identity is found through a positive relation to these institutions, bestowing upon an individual with a civic code of conduct that reflects American exceptionalism. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, an eighteenth century philosopher, identifies this code of conduct as "civil religion", a function of American society that imperialistically identifies and integrates members into its culture.[8]

While not a traditional fulfillment of what is normally known as "organized religion," paralleling baseball with American exceptionalism grants an understanding into how the game's display of imperialistic measures distinguishes it as an American civic religion. A primary part of this religion is the imperialistic measures it employs to ensure both its livelihood and its

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[7] "The idea of the nation as home," as Kaplan states, " . . . is inextricable from the political, economic, and cultural movements of empire, movements that both erect and unsettle the ever-shifting boundaries between the domestic and the foreign, between 'at home' and 'abroad'" (1).

[8] Cristi notes that "[f]rom Rousseau's standpoint, civil religion would define a common morality and help maintain a sense of community and cohesiveness among members of a society. It would make possible a common basis 'that could sustain a community's quest to define and maintain the general good' . . . [c]ivil religion would inspire feelings conducive to civic virtue. It would affirm and foment, in short, those sentiments that motivate individuals 'to respect and uphold the contract and its laws'" (23).

expansion.[9] If we think of baseball as an institution of the American empire, then its domestic imperialism is seen as a method of self-sustainability, ensuring that it, maintains its members at the risk of promoting itself above traditional ethnic or socio-economic means of identity. As a result, baseball acquires an American sacredness that few other institutions have achieved. David Chidester writes that "[b]aseball is a religion because it defines a community of allegiance, the 'church of baseball.' In both the past and present, this sport has operated like a religious tradition in preserving the symbols, myths, and rituals of a sacred collectivity" (33). As a type of American civic religion, the symbols, rituals, and physical space – the stadium – integrated immigrants from foreign spaces into the domestic identities offered by the new nation and empire acting as "home." Though home and religion may seem like separate terms, civic religion encompasses both terms as fundamental to creating American community. Chidester supplies a definition of religion that emphasizes its function as a communal activity: "[*R*]*eligion* can be a useful term for understanding the ways in which transcendence, the sacred, and the ultimate are inevitably drawn into doing some very important things that happen in and through popular culture: forming a human community, focusing human desire, and entering into human relations of exchange" (2). Baseball becomes a civic religion through its ability to allow nineteenth and twentieth-century individuals a measure of belonging to their new home, America.

Within late nineteenth and twentieth American society, this idea of home was furthered by the primarily Protestant foundation of American exceptionalism. The acceptance of civil religions as a whole largely developed because of a national exceptionalism that helped establish

[9] Alan Klein mentions that the need for sustainability marks imperialism and connects American empire to the concepts of imperialistic exceptionalism: "Progress, destiny, belief in the future – all form an optimistic core that feeds imperial efforts. At the other end of the continuum, however, one finds expansion motivated by the morbid need to fend off age and decay. Empires decline when "the vicissitudes of fortune, which spares neither man nor the proudest of his works . . . buries empires and cities in a common grave. Extending life through expanding territory is an anthropological theme associated with theories of state formation and cultural diffusion" (14).

baseball as a new type of American religion. The relationship between baseball and religion was not, however, a completely new endeavor; baseball was an ideal institution to transform into a national civil religion because of its striking similarities to organized Protestant groups.[10] Ironically, baseball was originally a source of conflict among these groups. In *Sunday Baseball, The Major Leagues' Struggle to Play Baseball on the Lord's Day, 1876-1934*, Charlie Bevis details how baseball was largely considered a "doorway" into other, more vile habits.[11] Yet, the various sects of Protestantism eventually realized that sport was an avenue for the Protestant ideal of "Muscular Christianity" to be espoused to immigrant groups. Tony Ladd and James Mathisen note the physical elements of American exceptionalism – namely, moral and national superiority – subtly became associated with American sport through Christianity's influence.[12]

The primarily "postmillennial view" of God's kingdom within Protestantism links Muscular Christianity with the roots of American exceptionalism. [13] By emphasizing that physicality can reflect one's societal worth, Muscular Christianity within baseball becomes a signifier of how well immigrants could effectively find and maintain proper belonging within American belonging. Donald Bloesch mentions that "postmillennialists believe that Christians . .

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[10] Price, writing about early twentieth century baseball culture, mentions that "[b]aseball has also intersected religion when its fields and stadiums have been used for religious ceremonies, and its interface with religion has been tested as religious services have been held for players in the clubhouse and for fans in the grandstands. This fusion of the character and purpose of a religious organization with the play of baseball suggests that at times baseball itself has functioned as a form of faith, not merely providing an expression of faith, but actually becoming one of the distinct denominations in America's civil religions" (11).

[11] Bevis uses the term "Sabbatarians" to describe the religious opposition faced by baseball in its early years: "Rest for greater intellectual and physical well-being might have been acceptable for some Sabbatarians at this time, but rest used for leisure purposes was over the line. After 1889 [in which laws were passed to ban Sunday baseball], Sabbatarians thus greatly resisted the playing of Sunday baseball as they did many expansions of 'rest' on Sunday . . . [s]abbatarians feared that Sunday baseball would be an opening wedge to 'open' Sundays . . . that had legal openings of theater, poolrooms, and saloons" (16).

[12] "The impetus for sports and fitness was also nurtured by those who campaigned for moral reform as well as health and fitness. Helping fuel these moral reform movements were the efforts of American revivalists. The optimism of evangelical Protestant firebrands seemed unquenchable . . . Muscular Christians, energized by a post-millennial view of progress, a sense of duty, and a concern for health, used the dynamic environment . . . to engage the gears of the sport machine in culture" (26-7).

[13] The "post-millennial" view details, according to Donald Bloesch, a view that "Christ's kingdom is progressing in history and will culminate in a Christianized world prior to the second advent of Christ" (101).

. can bring changes in cultural life that will result in a modicum of justice and peace here on Earth. The Puritan ideal was that of a 'holy commonwealth' in which church and state work together to bring about a Christian *social* [italics mine] order" (101). Like American imperialism, Muscular Christianity seeks to employ the same distinguishing "us and them" mentality. Muscular Christianity can then be viewed as the evolution of the Christian social order dominated by physical mastery of the body, as its conception of a social order envisioned individuals outside the group as in need of religious and social domestication; consequently, baseball adapted this harsh means of identification. Evans and Herzog note the historical aspects of baseball intrinsically rely upon masculine ethos to determine those worthy of participating:

> [I]t is necessary to remember how the language of masculinity has been used over the years to shut other Americans out of the game . . . [i]n the mythology of baseball civil religion, baseball trained young American boys in the virtues of hard work and perseverance; yet it was apparent from the perspective of many late-nineteenth-century baseball moguls that that ideal *would and should not* [italics mine] apply equally to all Americans. (28)

Baseball had become, perhaps unknowingly to the majority of Americans during that time, a civil religion with roots in Protestantism. It served as an imperialistic institution to shape civil identity and assimilate people into the Kingdom of America.[14] As a result, Protestantism influenced baseball to reflect this kingdom mentality, as American exceptionalism and Muscular Christianity left visible imprints upon baseball that would largely determine how immigrant and Americans would eventually view the sport as distinctly American. Evans and Herzog note that similar to the manner that immigrants came to view baseball, so did the Puritans view America:

[14] Evans and Herzog write, "Turn-of-the-century Protestant church leaders preached a gospel of a new millennial civilization, where faith in the kingdom of God meant faith that the virtues of an Anglo-Saxon civilization would spread the Gospel and lead to unprecedented social advancement in the western world" (37).

"For just as New England Puritans believed that they served as a light to all nations, so did the civil religion of baseball preach its own gospel of redemption, whereby those who 'believed' would experience through the game all that was unique and righteous about America" (31). Thus, near the close of the nineteenth century, baseball, which had been labeled as an extended arm of Protestantism, developed into an institution whose religious qualities and similarities were overshadowed by its distinctly American values.

While sport had long been part of American society, the close of the nineteenth century saw the rise of organized sport organizations. Until this point in American history, sport had merely been "played" by various regional groups of individuals with little connection to each other. However, Skolnik notes that the twentieth century saw the creation of national leagues, ones that stretched beyond the pastoral into rural, commercial areas of America, turning games that had been merely "played" into professional sport (*Baseball and the Pursuit of Innocence* 43). In the past century, baseball separated itself from Protestantism into a unique civil institution that furthers the idea of American exceptionalism (Evans and Herzog 2, 4). Unsurprisingly, this culture filtered into the literary works of American authors to create literature that places sport as the foundation for morality and identity. Baseball exemplifies and constantly relives American history – a history filled with victory, defeat, power, wealth, and influence; consequently, culture consistently returns to the spectacle of sport to define its present-age. Through sport culture, American society reinvents and reconstructs its ideals to create a powerful civil institution both spectacle and transformative. American society once satiated its need for collective identity and spectacle in religion; however, this institution eventually was replaced by baseball, whose claims, however true they might be, to pastoral origins situated it perfectly as the sport that could rewrite the history of immigrants coming into their new "home." Additionally, baseball offered

the possibility of rewriting history, filling the collective need to erase the perceived historylessness of American society. The collective identity one sought in church or democracy was found in sport culture; no greater example of this collective identity exists than baseball.

As the century moved forward, baseball became branded as uniquely American. The exceptionalism once manifested and viewable in Protestantism became daily occurrences in the stadiums and fields of America's pastime.[15] It is hardly surprising then that even foreign travelers ascribed tremendous value to baseball. Nineteenth-century French philosopher Jacques Barzun once commented that "[w]hoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball, the rules and realities of the game . . . [b]aseball is Greek in being national, heroic, and broken up in the rivalries of city-states. How sad that Europe knows nothing like it!" (437). Baseball is unique in that it, as a sport, is perfectly situated to accompany the rapid changes of twentieth century America. Americans flocked to baseball stadiums because of rural urbanization and commercial success; naturally, baseball stadiums and culture eventually rivaled religion as the primary identifier of one's *Americanness*. How one related to baseball became a valid means of judging one's worth.

For writers Irwin Shaw, August Wilson, and William Kennedy, baseball serves in this manner with the created realm of literature, allowing each man to create a sphere where baseball is used to determine Americanness within their works. Baseball unites their desire to be recognized as American craftsmen with a civil institution that serves to illustrate each man's specific agenda within his texts. Though the men come from different ethnic backgrounds, they commonly display an infatuation with baseball that reflects childhood experiences and share the common fate of being immigrants or children of immigrants. Each writer's method finds

[15] I refer to *The Faith of Fifty Million*: "[B]aseball holds out hope that fairness in life, as on the diamond, will ultimately prevail, where the inequalities of our time will give way to a new era that reflects biblical themes of peace, justice, and the mutuality of all persons" (219).

American identity through baseball, a process Kevin Grzymala labels common amidst twentieth-century immigrants: “By playing and watching baseball, immigrants and their children were taking part in an important civic act, one full of symbolic meaning, which in many ways conferred a brand of citizenship more legitimate than any procured through courthouse naturalization proceedings” (qtd. in Reilly 64). While each man may seem removed from the immigration status of his ancestors, their pre-occupation with discussing the various elements of assimilation and baseball focuses them squarely in the center of a study of exceptionalism in baseball; their works display elements of baseball acting imperialistically, and are examples of how American exceptionalism helped reshape these men’s values to reflect the prominent role of baseball in their lives.

The power given to baseball to reflect and create distinctly American identity implies that American exceptionalism can, and largely does, reveal itself in the created realm of literature through baseball. Each man chooses baseball because it not only potentially helps create plot structure and thematic resonance, but because it exists as distinctively American in execution and structure. Baseball is reflective of our society as a whole, as it, perhaps in a greater manner than any other American institution, displays qualities that align with traditional values assigned to America. The extent of the similarities between baseball and American culture led former President Herbert Hoover to remark that “[n]ext to religion, baseball has furnished a greater impact on American life than any other *institution* [italics mine]” (qtd. in White 319). However, I contend that Hoover’s statement provides only partial context for baseball’s role in the past century. Baseball’s role as the prominent civil institution of America’s twentieth century has cemented it as a civic religion whose traditions equal, if not surpass, traditional merits of

American organized religion.[16] Instead of traditional gathering places, baseball offers its fans stadiums and cathedrals with atmospheres that rivaled religious euphoria and moments of transcendence; instead of religious language, baseball offered terms and phrases that would become as definitive as the game itself, ushering a method of speech into the collective psyche of America;[17] baseball offered transcendence and a reflection of the daily American life, leading to a experience that embodied both spiritual ritual and America's need for a collective social identity.

As American society progressed into a subsequent age of ethnocentric and communal identity, the distance between the individuals and communities occupying America became no physically closer; however, the psychological effect that the age had upon American consciousness enhanced the already existing desire – spawned from the belief of American exceptionalism – for collective identity. The idea of American religion was birthed from the new century, and baseball slowly became associated with this new concept. Baseball displayed similarities to organized religion that allowed it to acquire a dualistic civic and religious role in American culture. These similarities are most obviously seen in the building of stadiums where organized baseball could assimilate immigrants into a collective American identity; baseball, a

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[16] A definition of civic religion is provided in Joseph Price's *Rounding the Bases: Baseball and Religion in America*: "Writing in mid-twentieth century, theologian Will Herberg pondered the religious character of 'the American way of life' and its relation to religion . . . he recognized that to a significant degree all functioning societies 'share a *common* religion.' And Herberg determined that 'the American way of life' is 'the 'common faith' of American society' . . . this 'common faith' or 'civil religion' (a term that he did not explicitly employ) has characterized American experience, and throughout the intervening centuries this common faith has exercised a reciprocal and pervasive influence on the traditional faiths of the American people" (118).

[17] Price states, "Another ritual dimension of baseball that signifies its religious character is its language; Not only does baseball appropriate specific religious terms, such as sacrifice and perfect game, it also develops distinct linguistic meanings for other terms, thus creating a ritual language of its own. Terms like homerun, strike out, single, cellar, closer, dying quail . . . create a linguistic system that is distinct to the sport; and many of the terms have made their way into established dictionaries and provide roots for metaphors about the cosmic significance of baseball . . . [o]ne of the distinctions of a sophisticated ritual is that it employs a language of its own, thus privileging the insiders from the outsiders, the faithful from the pretenders" (142-3). He then continues, "The ritual language of baseball, of course, is understood by its ritual actors – not only players, coaches, and managers, but also umpires and fans" (144).

sport supposedly conceived in the pastoral fields of New York, provides the American collective identity with a cathedral to call home. Evans and Herzog mention that the focus remains on the individual, but as baseball grows in power within a character's life, the power of the stadiums begins to transform the individual into a member of a trans-national community (*The Faith of Fifty Million* 6-12). As a result, baseball stadiums exist as cathedrals of American imperialism, embodying the ideals of exceptionalism and promising inclusion to the exclusive society that is America.

The most striking similarity between baseball and "organized religion" lies in the way that individuals must journey to the stadium to partake in the collective identity. Belonging to America is paralleled with belonging to the physical space of the stadium, as the stadium exists as the sacred objective of what Price labels a journey of pilgrimage: "One of the most easily identifiable ritual actions associated with baseball is the journey of pilgrimage, which is often made with family members as one makes an initial trip to a ballpark or as seasoned fans trek to a special game" (144). This pilgrimage offers individuals a chance of equality and belonging to the American identity, as the stadium becomes a realized, physical gathering space for the American civic religion. It is important to note, however, this pilgrimage does not necessarily entail a physical visit to the ballpark. The inclusivity of American exceptionalism can be realized, as August Wilson and William Kennedy demonstrate, through a self-construction of the sacred space. Their self-construction comes, as discussed in chapters three and four respectively, in direct response to the "need to belong" that accompanies American imperialism, as these authors use memory and past experiences at baseball fields to self-construct their own versions of a stadium as a resolution of both personal history and created myth.

The connection of Kaplan's definition of social institution to that of civic religion allows a redefining of baseball stadiums as aspects of American civic religion. The premise of a stadium as a sacred American space is one that each one of my authors approaches from a different perspective. Irwin Shaw is the most orthodox in his depiction of stadiums, as he centers many of his stories within physically realized spaces of baseball and other sports, letting his characters, as either players or fans, travel to stadiums or urban fields to participate in these games as proof of their Americanness. Because Shaw was born and raised in Brooklyn during the 1920s, one of the most commercially and socially successful eras of baseball in history, his short stories reflect this dependency upon stadiums as cultural centers of identity. Many times, he wraps moments of morality and identity – a concept extensively discussed in chapter two – within stadium experiences, letting these instances function as existential examples of a character's ability or inability to belong to American society.

Similarly to Shaw, August Wilson uses the concept of a baseball stadium to establish barriers between his characters and American society as a whole. While baseball is never physically visited, realized, or played within the narrative, the memory of baseball haunts Wilson's narrative, reproducing an imperialistic space in the home of Wilson's protagonists. However, unlike Shaw, Wilson uses baseball to distinguish himself and his characters from American society. Instead of allowing his characters to assimilate through baseball, Wilson's play *Fences* creates a violent tension between the appeal of civil institutions and the African-American community as a whole. Susan Koprince, in her essay, "Baseball as History and Myth in August Wilson's *Fences*," notes that "[t]hroughout the play, Wilson places Troy [the African-American protagonist] within the historical context of the Negro leagues, allowing his character to echo the feelings of actual black ball-players who were denied a chance to compete at the

major-league level" (349). These black ball-players, without question, are represented by Wilson in the text; however, what has been less documented and discussed is the manner in which Troy, and by extension his home, function as an opposing force to American imperialism. While Wilson makes the concept of the "American dream" a central issue of his play, the concept introduces domestic imperialism into the play. Wilson is doing far more than simply arguing for the integration of black ball-players into professional leagues; rather, he establishes a place where imperialism and American exceptionalism become opposing forces to the African-American's struggle to maintain a distinct cultural identity. Ultimately, Wilson rejects the idea of an American civil religion, instead allowing his status as an African-American baseball player – thus rejecting the assumed protestant, Anglo-Saxon heritage of baseball – to prevail as the only meaningful and worthwhile means of American identity.

William Kennedy, though seemingly distant from the eras of Shaw and Wilson, similarly uses baseball as a determiner of social and American identity. Kennedy uses an Irish-American, former baseball player to relay how baseball acts religiously in the lives of foreigners. Moreover, despite the religious undertones that appear in Shaw's and Wilson's texts, Kennedy openly makes baseball a religion within his novel *Ironweed*, using the motif of a pilgrimage to demonstrate that once baseball has influenced an individual, that individual must replicate and return to baseball in order to maintain social importance. The motif of a journey is strongly present in each author's examined work, yet *Ironweed* creates perhaps the strongest connection between the idea of American exceptionalism and baseball through Francis' journey. In order for Francis' life to once again have any meaning, he must return not only to a home whose image reflects that of the American dream, but to a space whose ground becomes a cathedral of baseball. Deanna Westbrook, in her work *Ground Rules: Baseball and Myth*, states that "[h]ome

. . . is the destination of all journeys; his own earlier metaphor of running the bases as the image of his life of flight has acknowledged all along his inevitable, determined return" (144). The institution of baseball acts as home for Francis, and because Francis Phelan rejects the possibility of achieving the American dream and chooses to instead live as a homeless man, baseball, and the cultural acceptance it offers, becomes the only means for Francis to restore his life. He must accept American values, rejecting the role of an outsider, and allow himself to accept belonging to America through baseball. Though perhaps less visible, American exceptionalism and imperialism strongly influence the story, suggesting that Francis will remain incomplete until he returns to not only his home, but also the memory and power of baseball.

While America has served as a model of commerce, politics, and lifestyle for much of the world, baseball, though it has spread to various parts of the world, remains largely America's greatest and most distinguishable pastime. There is a distinctive "Americanness" within baseball that has not been in any other organized sport, as it serves to further the idea of an American empire within its borders. Each author is aware of the distinctly American nature of baseball and chooses the sport to purposefully expand the idea of domestic others— immigrants. The idea of civic religion became localized with the inception of American baseball; thus, as each one of these men write about the concept of finding or creating home, baseball, whose very existence served to integrate these domestic others, represents the ideal institution to serve as the backdrop for stories where racial, cultural, and social questioning and redefining is the primary focus. In the next three chapters, this study will examine how the civic religion of baseball, and its cultural foundation of American exceptionalism, operates within their texts, ultimately proving that domestic imperialism operates within these three twentieth-century American authors. Chapter two examines Shaw's existentialism and distancing from his Judaic heritage, focusing on moral

identity he found through baseball and the American space of a stadium. Chapter three examines Wilson's symbolic usage of a home to suggest his opposition to the American imperialism of baseball, as he chooses an African-American heritage where baseball reflects the power of his native identity. Finally, chapter four examines Kennedy's usage of the journey motif to examine how baseball operates in a dualistic civic and religious manner, a reflection that furthers the ideals of American exceptionalism. Ultimately, all three writers recognize baseball as an extension of American exceptionalism and imperialism, centering their stories on the symbol of a stadium as sacred space to illustrate their own views towards the identity offered by America's pastime.

Chapter Two: The Gentle Player:

Baseball and the *Gentle People* Within Irwin Shaw's Short Fiction

"And he went back to Jersey City, leaving his heart in Brooklyn."

(Irwin Shaw, *Short Stories: Five Decades* 110)

"I hate this," Alice said, holding onto him. "We're always saying goodbye. This is the last time. From now on, no matter where you go, I'm going with you." "All right." Roy smiled at her. "Even if you only go to Yankee stadium"

(Irwin Shaw, *Short Stories: Five Decades* 67).

"'I'll tell your mother,' Charley shouted desperately. 'You're going around with a Methodist! With a Protestant!'"

(Irwin Shaw, *Short Stories: Five Decades* 665).

"'You've never seen anything like this before,' Flaherty said. 'He wrote this play with a baseball bat'"

(Irwin Shaw, *Short Stories: Five Decades* 9).

"'Mungo?' they say. 'Mungo? He got a fish for a arm. A mackerel. He will pitch Brooklyn right into the first division of the International League'"

Irwin Shaw, *Short Stories: Five Decades* 13).

In George Eisen's and David Wiggin's work E*thnicity and Sport in North American Culture*, the author poses a question that hints at the complex relationship Jewish-Americans had with America's pastime: "Why Jews and Baseball?" (75). This question is most often answered through the question of assimilation,[18] as baseball provided Jewish Americans with an imperialistic and social means of belonging to American society.[19] During the 1920s, though anti-Semitism was still an issue within the nation,[20] the Jews within cities and urban spheres adapted baseball as a primary means of social identity; their identification with baseball allowed them to create a connection with American society, despite the relatively short time they had spent within it. Boxerman and Boxerman note that "the second trend [along with anti-Semitism] affecting Jews and baseball was a growing obsession with the game. Acculturated second-generation Eastern-European followed baseball almost religiously, attended more games, and often dreamed of being major leaguers" (75). Within the urban setting of New York, baseball's allure was interestingly strong; the tight quarters of city life often made finding space for baseball impossible, yet it nonetheless remained a prevalent influence in the lives of immigrant Jews. The spacial limitations of the city might seem like a hindrance to organized baseball, but its unique place in the lives of immigrants ensured that baseball would eventually become viewed as the most American, if not most-played, sport that a Jewish-American could participate

[18] Eisen notes that "[i]n all this concentration of baseball, there is, of course, a "de-Semitization" process, a reflection as in Arthur Miller's plays or Hollywood films about the America of the assimilated Jews' hearts' desire, a place where people have the same non-distinctive names, speak the same unaccented language, and share the same undivided national loyalties" (77).

[19] This imperialism points towards Kaplan's definition of American exceptionalism, as Shaw's Jewishness, and thus his primary identity, is replaced by baseball. This institution is, by merit of its distinction as being the American pastime, a societal means of transforming Shaw into a member of American society.

[20] In *Jews and Baseball: Entering the American Mainstream, 1871-1948*, authors Burton and Benita Boxerman state, "The decade of the 1920's was a time of somewhat conflicting trends for American Jews – increased anti-Semitism and a growing love of baseball. The anti-Semitism grew out a number of factors . Following World War I . . . Jews who came to the United States as part of the mass deportations of radicals from Southern and Eastern Europe were accused of being subversives . . . [i]n general, this anti-Semitism meant discrimination and quotas for Jews – in immigration, in their chosen professions, and in the colleges they could attend" (75).

in.[21] Nowhere did this connection become more viewable than within the urban center of Judaism— New York City.[22]

Irwin Shaw, a twentieth century writer who lived from 1913-1984, unsurprisingly incorporates the issue of assimilation overtly throughout his short fiction; however, much subtler, and far less understood, is his usage of sports as a means of social, physical, and, in a very real sense, religious assimilation. Shaw discusses a plethora of sports within his short fiction, using the cultural symbol of a stadium – a physical space – to suggest sports are a more complete means of assimilating into American society than religion. Shaw wrote his fiction over fifty years of his life (a point that he prided himself upon),[23] yet his stories consistently return to the motif of sports as American. His usage of baseball can be distinguished from his other employments of sports, as it is central to his own attempts to belong within American society.

Shaw's short fiction is characterized by his depiction of common individuals and a frank depiction of urban life, influenced by being raised in Brooklyn, that reflects Shaw's existentialist tendencies.[24] His short works operate in a realm where the only cohesion between individuals is

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[21] Peter Levine's *Ellis Island to Ebbets Field: Sport and the American Jew Experience* details how baseball worked to integrate the Jewish community despite the cramped confines of urban life: "Whether playing it in neighborhood streets and school yards or following the exploits of major league heroes, baseball, by its very status as America's National Game, symbolically permitted an immediate sense of belonging to a larger American community in ways that few other sportive experiences provided. It is this theme that defines the game's special contribution as middle ground in the process of becoming American . . . [a]lthough basketball remained the most popular participatory team sport and the one rooted deeply in the social and community fabric of Jewish neighborhoods, in New York and elsewhere, baseball both informally played in the streets and in more organized settings, always attracted its share of Jewish youth" (88).

[22] Eisen notes that "a preponderance of Jewish youth identified their urban roles by their ball clubs: if one grew up in Flatbush, one followed the Dodgers, in 'the shadow of Coogan's bluff,' the Giants, in the Bronx (perhaps) the Yankees" (77).

[23] In the introduction to Shaw's collection *Short Stories: Five Decades*, Shaw presents a view of himself as a man who thrived upon his love for short fiction: "[T]here is the private and exquisite reward of escaping from the laws of consistency. Today you are sad and you tell a sad story. Tomorrow you are happy and your tale is a joyful one. You remember a woman whom you loved wholeheartedly and you celebrate her memory. You suffer from the wound of a woman who treated you badly and you denigrate womanhood. A saint has touched you and you are a priest. God has neglected you and you preach atheism. In a novel or play you must be a whole man. In a collection of stories you can be all the men or fragments of men, worthy and unworthy, who in different seasons abound in you. It is luxury not to be scorned" (i). All future references to Shaw's short fiction will come from this text.

[24] A foundational (basic) understanding of Shaw's conception of existentialism is given in David Cooper's

their struggle to remain decent. James Giles, in *Irwin Shaw: A Study of the Short Fiction*, labels the characters within Shaw's fiction as the *gentle people*, a reference that Giles intends to reflect a communal thread of commonality that weaves from story to story:

> The device of placing his ordinary Americans, his 'gentle people' in situations that threaten their dignity and sense of decency . . . recurs throughout Shaw's fiction . . . [h]e is concerned with the necessity and the difficulty of the individual preserving an integrated moral center in an increasingly complex era. Moral struggle, then, is central to Shaw's aesthetic. Clearly, in most of Shaw's stories commitment to a code of decency is the basis of an integrated sense of self and is thus the necessary foundation of individual dignity. (3-4)

Thus, the prevailing code of decency within Shaw's fiction is the desire to maintain individual dignity in a world designed to consistently engage the moral nature of his characters. Morality within Shaw's short fiction, then, stems not from religion, but from an existential self-centeredness. Instances, rather than consistent actions, become the determiner of morality and identity. This code of morality may seem more prevalent because short fiction provides only a fragmentary glimpse of reality. Yet, the focus upon the *gentle people* reveals that Shaw engages "moments of morality" as the central cruxes of his stories. These moments, then, become the most important part of Shaw's stories, as they serve as existential centers of meaning; consequently, gentility and decency in relation to one's community become the mark of how well an individual can belong to that community. Because Shaw is primarily concerned with

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Existentialism: A Reconstruction: "First of all, human existence is said to have a concern for itself. As Kierkegaard puts it, the individua3l not only exists but it 'infinitely' interested in existing'. He is able to reflect on his existence, take a stance towards it, and mould it in accordance with the fruits of his reflection. Or, as Heidegger would say, humans are such that their being is in question for them, an issue for them. Second . . . an existing individual is constantly in the process of becoming . . . [and] no complete account of an individual can be given of a human being without reference to what he is in the process of becoming" (2).

Americans, his stories then read as portraits of American immigrants coming to terms with a nationalistic identity that excluded them from belonging within American society.[25] Shaw constantly employs "'various uses and manifestations of the flesh . . . [that] challeng[e] [his characters] to remain faithful to internal beliefs for which no external verification is possible" (Giles, *Short Fiction* 7), and thus expects his readers to acknowledge his *gentle people* as common individuals defined by encounters within social spheres. For Shaw, no greater social sphere exists than sports.

Sports abound within Shaw's short fiction, and they serve as the most influential and dominant social sphere for his characters. Though not limited to the urban sphere, Shaw primarily places his sport stories within domestic areas where the moments of morality are remarkably frequent and similar. These moments are inherent in constructing social, communal foundations for his characters. Stephen Reiss' *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports* provides context on how sports helped connect, and thus create, what Shaw labels the *gentle people* in search of assimilation and belonging: "Participation was enjoyable and uplifting, provided a means of gaining recognition, and served as a focal point around which urbanites . . . could find a community of like-minded fellows in sports clubs that supplied members with friendships, identity, and stability in the alienating and antebellum city" (154). If the city serves to fragment and challenge Shaw's *gentle people*, then sports, specifically their gathering places – stadiums – represent their chance of belonging within the urban sphere.

[25] Giles identifies these stories as "an examination of the American character struggling to retain a sense of national decency. The threats to this unique brand of decency are internal as well as external; and fidelity to self is as much a concern as loyalty to groups and causes" (13).

Shaw fills his short fiction with references to stadiums as physical places of consequence;[26] they function as places of change and decision, and an individual's relation to these physical spheres becomes existentially important in determining his or her social identity. In a theological sense, the impact these stadiums have upon Shaw's characters is greater than any other religious encounter. As concrete places of social gathering, these stadiums replace religious cathedrals, and incorporate and introduce existentialism into Shaw's realist worldview.[27] Giles notes that Shaw infuses his short fiction with a humanistic self-reliance that nearly negates transcendence and religion:

> Shaw perceives the twentieth century as an age dominated by the obsession with, and the perversion of, the flesh. Modern society, tormented by old beliefs in the preeminence of the soul, is painfully aware of the absence of a moral center to the universe. Random accidents, rather than a benevolent god, control us. For Shaw, belief in humanity is all that is possible in such a fallen world: 'believe in man, and take the accidents as they come.' (*Short Fiction* 6)[28]

Because Shaw's realist mentality renders religion incapacitated within his short fiction, determiners of social identity shift from religion towards those of the stadium.

These spheres of influence create a type of pseudo-religious experience, confronting individuals with questions of not only moral and physical identity, but also challenging the social status of an individual. As a natural consequence of these confrontations, the degree of one's belonging within America becomes the focal point of one's existence. Keeping in mind Kaplan's belief in the imperialistic nature of American social institutions, the stadiums within Shaw's then

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[26] By consequence, I mean that encounters with stadiums indelibly affect an individual in ways that religious symbols or experiences cannot comparably match within Shaw's fiction.

[27] One of Shaw's more famous stories, "God was Here, But He Left Early," serves as an obvious example of his belief that man must make the most of his own ends.

[28] By "transcendence," I simply mean this term implies a connection to the divine.

appear as social spheres that display conflicts of identity within a distinctly American space. They reflect the imperialistic nature of twentieth-century American culture as a social absorber and creator of overarching identity. Shaw's usage of them in his stories stem directly from his visiting the stadiums as a young man in Brooklyn; as a young teenager, the stadiums provided him with a sphere where he could encounter American life and speech. As Tony Williams notes in his essay "A Fantasy Straight Out of Brooklyn: From *The Gentle people* to *Out of the Fog*," Shaw's ability and desire to express his own struggle to assimilate originated during trips to watch the Brooklyn Dodgers.[29] As such, a strong connection can be made between Shaw's choice of stadium as symbol and his focus upon the common, "gentle" people within his fiction.

References to baseball and baseball stadiums appear throughout his fiction, providing evidence of Shaw's Americanness being intrinsically connected with the sport. This dependence upon baseball to lend a sense of Americanness to his work appears throughout nearly all of Shaw's fiction. In his war novel *The Young Lions*, Shaw references the Dodgers to parallel the routines of war with the routines of American life: "The Dodgers, steadfast – though weary and full of error – had passed through another day of war and thousand edged-death, and despite some nervousness down the middle of the diamond and an attack of wildness in the eighth, had won in Pittsburgh" (221). Born in Brooklyn, Shaw's allegiance to the Dodgers links his usage of baseball as religion with the idea of American exceptionalism and imperialism. Shaw's life-long obsession with baseball is undeniable, extending beyond his seemingly unmitigated passion for football.[30] His own love for the Dodgers expresses Shaw's deep connection to baseball, as, like

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[29]Williams notes that "[w]ell before fifteen-year-old Irwin Shamforoff enrolled in the then tuition-free Brooklyn College in 1929, he had already experienced the Brooklyn speech patterns he would employ in his works by regularly attending the Dodgers' games" (34)

[30] Shaw's intense love for football is undeniable, yet his stories about football are mere caricatures of his own self; they were not about America so much as they were about him working through his personal issues.

many other immigrants during the early twentieth-century, the overriding desire within Shaw's own life was simply to be known as an American. As the son of first generation Jewish immigrants, Shaw did not deny his Jewishness. Rather, as Ben Yagoda mentions in *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made*, Shaw was "militantly assimilated, in life and in art . . . [as] many . . . of his protagonists were identifiably Gentile" (164). While stories like "Select Clientele" and "God on a Friday Night" featured distinctly Jewish settings and protagonists, Shaw's stories primarily focus on the commonality and struggle to be American.

These stories rely upon sports and baseball imagery to portray this struggle and incorporate stadiums in ways that reveal the moral inclination of an individual, as many of them reference sports arenas as physical spheres of consequence. "The Eighty-Yard Run," Shaw's most critically respected story, features a football field as the context when a young running back fails the moment of morality;[31] "The Girls in Their Summer Dresses" presents the stadium as a place where a married couple considers maintaining the illusion of a happy union, ultimately foreshadowing marital infidelity through the couple's refusal to attend a football game; in "I Stand By Dempsey," a discussion about boxing between two friends quickly escalates because of a recent viewing of a boxing match; "Return to Kansas City" displays the reluctance of an individual to enter into a boxing arena because it will lead to a possible divorce with his wife; a lesser known story, "Stop Pushing Rocky," details the boxing arena as the place where identity is sold and bought for little more than a meal; "March, March on Down the Field" displays the resilience of football players in the immediate moments before they subject themselves to physical pain within a nearly empty stadium; in "Free of Conscience, Void of Offence," Shaw presents the stadium as foreign concept for a young college girl, revealing her disregard for

[31] Christian Darling, the story's protagonist, fulfills his life's ambition to be a successful player only on the practice field, rendering Christian, in the context of Shaw's existentialism, unsuccessful and doomed to isolation.

accepted social apathy towards warfare and humanity.[32] While the stories may not be entirely set within the stadiums or arenas, these spheres nonetheless influence, and frequently dominate, the unfolding action of those stories. Shaw regularly entwines the message of his stories within the context of a sports arena, exposing the strength of an individual – whether that strength be physical or mental – as tied to that arena. For Shaw, decency is found through perseverance and fortitude, and a proper relationship with baseball.

Within Shaw's fiction, the common ground for his *gentle people* is baseball. The *gentle people* of Shaw's characters are commonly associated with baseball through various symbols; these symbols and references reflect Shaw's own desire to belong to America. Like the existentialist themes in his literature, Shaw's decision to consistently return to baseball reflects his desire to belong to American society through an institution that America wholeheartedly embraces as its own. Shaw relies upon baseball as a primary way to Americanize his stories; often, baseball is associated with violence and uncouthness, as if to relate the physical struggle that Shaw's *gentle people* must overcome to belong. The baseball bat itself occupies a specific place of violence in Shaw's fiction; it is rarely portrayed as merely an object of sport, but is often used to convey a foreboding sense of violence. In the story "The Greek General," Shaw uses a stadium sound that his audience would have recognized to portray the sharp violence of his scene: "Alex . . . pitched forward, his head hitting the dashboard with a smart crack, like the sound of a baseball bat on a thrown ball" (*Short Stories: Five Decades* 362). The imagery is deliberate, and one that Shaw would again repeat in the story "I Stand by Dempsey" to emphasize the cultural significance ascribed to baseball in his fiction: "'Louis is a master boxer,' Flanagan said. 'Also, he punches like he had a baseball bat in his both hands'" (83). By

[32] This story revolves around the young girl's inability to connect with her father; central to this disconnect is her failure to relate to the central event of the story, a football game: "This was in the Autumn of 1938, the year Columbia beat Yale 27-14 in the first game of the season" (143).

referencing the baseball bat, Flanagan establishes himself as a strong character who views physical strength as the worthiest component of an individual.

Unsurprisingly, he later imposes his will upon the other characters in the story through sheer force, showing that Shaw associates a relationship with baseball as a symbol of power within American society. In the story "Night, Birth, and Opinion," a bartender uses the threat of "a sawed-off baseball bat he kept under the counter" (167) to quell an argument between two immigrants in his bar. Shaw's decision to give the bartender, whose lack of name and profession reveal an existing connection to America, a baseball bat reveals the bartender's power within the situation. Though seemingly a random weapon, the baseball bat (and thus baseball) *replaces* the concept of muscular Judaism for Shaw; his writings do not echo a Judaic heritage, but a distinctly American influence born of a desire to be respected as a writer who had distanced himself from his Brooklyn upbringing.[33] As a result, muscular Judaism proves inconsequential within Shaw's fiction; characters may be physically strong and accomplished, yet without a lasting connection or acceptance of baseball, their physical prowess ultimately fails to provide them with the existential decency and belonging that is the focus of his fiction. [34] Though Shaw himself was an accomplished and striking physical specimen, his *gentle people* vary in physical fortitude, furthering the premise that some institution other than muscular Judaism dominates his stories.[35] Chester Eisinger, one of Shaw's contemporary critics, notes that Shaw refrains from

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[33] Shnayerson quotes Leslie Fielder as noting that Shaw's seemingly base desire for critical acceptance was critical to constructing his identity as distinctly American: "The two strongest impulses in all of Shaw's fiction, [Fielder] noted, were a 'desire to get the hell out of Brooklyn and stay out,' and a 'great, warm, free-floating cloud of sentimentality' and self-pity that translated into an insatiable need for success" (244).

[34] This concept, explained in Todd Presner's *Muscular Judaism: The Jewish Body and the Politics of Regeneration*, details that "it is no longer sufficient to see the Jewish body as simply 'degenerate,' weak and effeminate and the fascist body as 'regenerate,' strong and masculine; instead, as I argue in this book, the 'muscle Jew is the prototype of the hardened, strong, hygienic, and resolutely masculine warrior" (17).

[35] An interview with Shaw in *The Paris Review* from 1971 humorously describes Shaw's physical prowess: "He has the heavy shoulders and short legs of the backfield star, the muscled forearms of the pelota champion (which, ironically, is one of the few sports he doesn't play), and the large, close-cropped head typical of another of

displaying the concept of Muscular Judaism, as he chooses to focus on *how* the Jewish community should blend into the American fabric: "Shaw's concern for the Jew, then, turns out to be, not a hope that the Jew might exist in the United States as a unique person with his own culture who embodies an idea of Jewishness, but a hope that the Jew will assimilate himself to the dominant culture and become like everybody else" (qtd. in *Irwin Shaw: A Study of the Short Fiction* 208). As a result, Shaw turns to baseball and its stadiums as the predominant motif that shows his hope of complete assimilation.

Because many of Shaw's stories occur within or revolve around the various stadiums of American sport, the impact these playing grounds have upon shaping a collective American identity takes primary importance. Shaw uses these spaces to parallel the existentialism of his worldview, as, like his conception of created fortune, baseball demands immediate readiness from its participants. Murray Baumgartner mentions that "[b]aseball and city life are experiences in surprise, rewarding alertness to new situations where split-second judgments depend on knowing how to take advantage of the breaks. Like walking in the city, which is a matter of feeling your way through space, so baseball is a game of the individual's constant negotiation with its changing environment" (qtd. in Eisen and Wiggins 77). Though Shaw completely constructs only two of his short stories around baseball, and those stories illustrate the concept of American exceptionalism better than any of his other fiction. Within the stories about baseball, Shaw's dependence upon it as a social institution is made supremely clear; not only is a relation to baseball of primary importance, but failing to maintain a proper relationship with the sport reveals a person's inability to belong to society.

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his pleasures—boxing. Ernest Hemingway once told the author Peter Viertel that there is only one way to handle Irwin Shaw in a boxing match: "Rip off your glove and sink your fingers deep into the bulge of his forearm, severing a few of the muscles there and rendering the arm more or less useless" (2).

Within the story "Main Currents of American Thought," Shaw places Andrew, a serial radio writer, firmly within the struggle to belong to America. Perhaps his most autobiographical short story, it reveals that Shaw viewed his early life, and his struggle to assimilate, through baseball. In an interview with Giles, Shaw states:

> First of all, the character writes for the radio. And I, in fact, have a long paragraph in which he dictated something very much like what I used to dictate . . . [a]nd he lives on the street where I lived with my mother and father and my brother. I played football in the field – baseball and football in the field opposite. I was in love with a girl like that one – and I didn't want to marry. Because I knew I'd have to support another family, and then I'd be committed to writing for money all my life. (23)

Shaw's fear that he would remain trapped by the limitations of radio writing is imparted to the main character, Andrew, of "Main Currents of American Thought." At the onset of the story, we learn that Andrew's primary income comes from the "forty dollars a script" (21) he earns from writing weekly serials. His struggle to maintain financial stability marks him as one of Shaw's *gentle people*,[36] and baseball, the same institution that reprieved Shaw, is presented to Andrew as a means of stability and belonging within America. As Andrew longs to escape from the demands of his situation and succeed at baseball, American Exceptionalism comes into effect; his conception of baseball as reprieving belies its distinctly social function as a means of assimilation. Baseball becomes Andrew's escape from the situation, and his conception of baseball as reprieving belies its social function as a means of belonging to America. After being

[36] Shaw infused this story with distinctly auto-biographical elements, as Shnayerson notes: "In a few short pages, Shaw captures a sense not only of his own life but of the times in which he lives . . . [h]e does this with a storyteller's natural gift, weaving Andrew's brooding thoughts about how to direct his characters in the next week's radio scripts with the real-life demands put upon him by his family" (54).

told he "need[s] a vacation" (21) from his work, Andrew's mind is drawn to a local baseball field near his home:

> He closed his eyes and tried to sleep. The sun came in through the open windows and the curtains blew softly over his head and the sun was warm and comforting on his closed eyes. Across the street, on the public athletic field, four boys were shagging flies. There would be the neat pleasant crack of the bat and a long time later the smack of the ball in the fielder's glove. The tall trees outside, as old as Brooklyn, rustled a little from time to time as little spurts of wind swept across the baseball field. (21)

More than just an escape, the baseball field offers Andrew a chance at connecting to his society. The old trees represent the field's timelessness, gesturing to its rootedness in America culture and separation from his problems, and the simplicity of the baseball game violently contrasts against the frantic pace of his profession and life. Though the story does not explicitly refer to Andrew as Jewish, Shaw references Jewish culture in a manner that seems to involve and implicate Andrew as a member.[37]

As such, in his struggle to assimilate and grasp at American exceptionalism, baseball is the best part of Andrew's world, and he recognizes its importance by making the physical space of the field his escape from the world around him. Andrew is one of Shaw's *gentle people*, as baseball acts an imperialistic determiner of identity, granting him acceptance into a culture that denies him social worth because of his failure at his profession. The radio potentially offers Andrew the creative possibility to alter his life, yet, as his agent consistently reminds him, his

[37] One of Andrew's radio characters, Martha, seems to embody the same feelings that Andrew feels towards his own situation, as the unclear usage of the pronoun "you" blurs the line between Martha's thoughts and his own: "Martha was Jewish. That meant you'd have to lie your way into some hotels, if you went at all, and you could never escape from one particular meanness of the world around you; and when the bad time came there you'd be, adrift on that dangerous sea" (*Short Stories* 26).

failure to create quality radio serials parallels his social circumstance: "'The complaints're [sic] piling up on the Blades scripts. They're as slow as gum. Nothing ever happens . . . I think you've rather run out of material'" (23). Andrew muses over the amount of work he produces each week, growing more disconcerted with himself as he realizes how little value his work carries: "He was going to go off in the automobile, find a place in the mountains, write a play. Only he could never get himself far enough ahead on Dusty Blades and Ronnie Cook and His [sic] friends. Twenty thousand words a week, each week, recurring like Sunday on the calendar. How many words was *Hamlet*? Thirty, thirty-five thousand?" (25). Andrew's troubles are two halves of the same issue; he fails at what he believes is his life's calling, and Shaw's deliberate characterization of him as failure reveals that baseball, his former claim to American identity, will ultimately reject him. Unsurprisingly, Shaw's existential tendencies reveal themselves in this moment through Andrew's identity crisis; as his professional identity crumbles, he increasingly turns to baseball as the only meaningful determiner of identity. Baseball is not only an escape for Andrew from his situation, but revelatory of his self-worth:

> Out on the athletic field more boys had arrived and formed an infield and were throwing the ball around the bases and yelling at each other . . . Andrew felt like picking up his old glove and going out there and joining them. When he was still in college he used to go out on a Saturday at ten o'clock in the morning and shag flies and jump around the infield and run and run all day, playing in pickup games until it got too dark to see. He was always tired now and . . . didn't move his feet right, because he was tired, and hit flat-footed and wild. (24)

The scene is one of despair, contrasting Andrew's former athletic lifestyle against his current situation; within Shaw's existential worldview, the loss of hope and the recognition of one's

inferiority is one that marks Andrew's complete inability to belong to society. Andrew's lack of relation to baseball marks him not only as physically insignificant, but as a failure at what he believes is his life's calling: "[H]is heart lies not with radio writing, but with the play that sits unfinished on his desk, and with the books he buys but has no time to read" (Shnayerson 54). When Andrew first considers joining the game across the street, he is portrayed in a manner where baseball, and a meaningful identity, has forgotten him. His life is compared to a baseball game, with his inability to fit into the uniform a suggestion that he will never escape from his current mediocrity:

> Andrew felt like going out and playing with them. He changed his clothes and put on a pair of old spikes that were lying in the back of the closet. His old pants were tight on him. Fat . . . [y]ou grow fat and the lines become permanent under your eyes and you drink too much and you pay more to the doctors because death is nearer and there is no stop, no vacation from life, in no year can you say, 'I want to sit this one out, kindly excuse me. (26-7)

Like his failing career, the baseball uniform no longer fits him. Andrew has become a shadow of his former self, and the existential process of becoming that Shaw uses as foundational to his fiction condemns Andrew for not maintaining a connection to American society. Though Shaw provides an escape to Andrew through the baseball field across the street, this escape is not permanent. In the final moments of the story, when Andrew finally escapes to the field, Shaw allows the field to reveal the surprising truth about Andrew – he is world-weary at twenty-five and no longer possesses any aptitude at baseball: "The sun and breeze felt good on the baseball field, and he forgot for an hour, but he moved slowly. His arm hurt at the shoulder when he threw, and the boy playing second base called him Mister, which he wouldn't have done even

last year, when Andrew was twenty-four" (28). He has lost his last chance at an American identity, and the meaningless title of "Mister" (25) marks him as a domestic other.

The second of Shaw's baseball stories, "No Jury Would Convict," takes place almost entirely within a baseball stadium. Though the story is barely over three pages long, it portrays better than any Shaw story the connection between immigrants and their desire to claim an American identity. Written from the perspective of people watching the game, the story details Shaw's existential worldview, and, in a religious sense, reflects the imperialistic "Kingdom of Baseball" identity set forth by the writers of *The Faith of Fifth Million*.[38] The story, which was Shaw's initial work in the *New Yorker* and printed in 1937, takes place during an exhibition game between the Jersey Giants – a former minor-league team – and the Brooklyn Dodgers, and centers around the conversation that takes place between nameless fans of both teams.[39] The lack of names for the men suggests that they are members of Shaw's "*gentle people*," and the physical space of the stadium suggests that the focus of the story "is not so much a narrative as a brilliant exercise in capturing the talk of rough-hewn New Yorkers" (Shnayerson 78). Yet, the language of the men, and a few well-placed details, reveal how dependent these Americans are upon baseball to supply them with a sense of American identity. Baseball becomes a reflection of life and death, leading characters to not only switch allegiances to root for a winning team, but to desire success at the expense of another individual. Essentially, the story recreates Shaw's own experiences at Dodgers games, and grants us a vision of how he came to understand the workings of his culture. "No Jury Would Convict" showcases Shaw writing about American

[38] This idea is fully discussed in the first chapter; essentially, baseball functions as a social institution of belonging in that it replaces traditional religion and allows individuals a distinct type of religious and social identity within American culture.

[39] Shaw's amusingly has trouble remembering the title of the story in an interview with Giles, yet clearly remember the story's focus: "'What was the first one in the *New Yorker*?' 'It was something called 'No Jury Would Convict.' A baseball story'" (162).

exceptionalism through the eyes of Brooklyn, the hometown and people he knew best: "By relying on dialogue, Shaw was playing to this proven strengths . . . [b]y setting his characters in Brooklyn, he was wisely writing what he knew . . . Shaw's story showed an unabashed empathy for his characters" (Shnayerson 78). Shaw regularly attended these games in the 1920s, and used his experiences within baseball stadiums as foundation for the style and language of his works. Thus, the meticulous description of the game reflects how Shaw came to understand baseball as a civic religion, and the changes that occur during the course of the game, emphasizes, like "Main Currents of American Thought," Shaw's existential tendencies and their connection to American imperialism.

At the beginning of the story, Shaw suggests that the baseball stadium operates as a sphere of assimilation, as a nameless character indicates baseball's timelessness and ability to offer an American collective identity: "'I come from Jersey City,' the man in the green sweater was saying . . . 'and I might of just as well stood home. You look at Brooklyn and you look at Jersey City and if you didn't look at the uniforms you'd never tell the difference'" (107). The men on the field are physically indistinguishable, and fans only recognize their players when the players wear the uniforms of their correct team. This nameless grouping speaks of baseball's collective identity; however, as the fans continue to converse, identities are supplied for players on the field, yet the fans remain nearly completely ambiguous and unnamed. The focus of the story is a "man in a green sweater" (107), whose only other distinguishing feature is "his dark Greek face" (107). Though the ethnic reference seems out of place, it deliberately calls attention to the imperialistic nature of baseball and will function in a much greater role near the end of the story. As the story continues, the man is subjected to taunts and jeers from his fellow fans because his allegiance is with the wrong team. Shnayerson mentions that "[b]eneath the banter

lies the poignancy . . . of men whose strongest feelings of love and loyalty and despair are stirred by the figures on the field" (78). As the story continues, we find the banter, at least towards the nameless man, is meant to separate him from the civic community of the stadium, marking him as foreign: "'I been watching the Dodgers for twenty-three years . . . and I never seen anything like this.' He put his hat on again, over his dark Greek face, the eyes deep and sad, never leaving the field where the Dodgers moved wearily in their green-trimmed uniforms'" (107). Unlike the other fans in the seats, the man in the green sweater is not there to root for the winning team; indeed, Shaw suggests that the man is a voice echoing the frustration of an ethnic group – in this case, the Greeks – whose social position in America will remain second-rate so long as the Dodgers remain continual losers: "For twenty-three years . . . I been rooting for this team. I'm getting tired of rootin for a minor league team in a major league . . . [l]ook at them, the man in the green sweater pointed his scorecard in accusation at the nine weary figures. 'Take 'em one by one. Look at Wilson. Why, he's the worst ballplayer in the world. He's even worse than Smead Jolley" (108).[40] The man's allegiance to his team signifies him as a domestic other; as the story continues, Shaw increasingly parallels the man's Greek heritage with his team's failed attempts at success.

As the man "watche[s] the play quietly for a few seconds, his Greek eyes bitter but resigned" (108), the narrative increasingly suggests the man's social plight is anchored within the plight of his beloved Dodgers. When the Dodgers appear close to staging a miraculous comeback, Shaw writes that "the ancient Greek sorrow [was] gone from his eyes for the first

[40] Bob Broeg, in the November 1973 issue of *Baseball Digest*, provides context for the Smead Jolley reference; a Major League outfielder for four years, Jolley was a notoriously horrible outfielder in the 1930's whose consistent fielding errors are remembered in an incident known as the 'Jolley Play.' After charging a routine single, ". He missed [it], which rolled through his legs to the wall. As he turned to grab the rebound, it rolled through his legs again. At this point, rather than fall on his fumble as he would have wisely done in football, Jolley reportedly heaved the ball over the catcher's head and into the stands" (77).

time in the entire afternoon" (110). By using the word "ancient" (110), Shaw ensures that we view the man's sorrow as far greater than simply twenty-three years of defeats; he is a tragic figure whose hope that he could belong to America on his own terms, through the Dodgers, is eradicated by one final loss: "In the next inning the Brooklyn second baseman juggled a ball and another run scored. All hope fled from the dark Greek face. 'Why is it,' he asked, 'that other teams don't do it?' He got up, preparing to leave. 'A man on third and one out . . . and no score. They ought to shoot Grimes for that. No jury would convict'" (110). The man's claim that no jury would convict the murderer of the team's manager illustrates how deeply he desires to blend into the setting of the stadium, reflecting the imperialistic undertones of the story. Consequently, now that his hope has been destroyed, he does what Shaw's existentialism deems best: he switches allegiances to Jersey City in hope of rooting for a winning team.[41] Consequently, Shaw writes that the Dodgers fan "leaves his heart in Brooklyn" (110), making the stadium a burial ground for the man's ethnic and social identities. American exceptionalism wills the man into sacrificing his personhood, as the man chooses to embrace belonging to society by switching his allegiance to Jersey City.

Ultimately, Shaw uses baseball within his literature to gain an identity that is distinctly American. His short fiction was critically praised far beyond any of his novels or plays, and baseball functions as the institution that determines an individual's level of belonging to America. Viewing baseball through the lens of existentialism, Shaw uses its symbols and spaces to illustrate a desire to blend into cultural milieu of America. Characters that embrace his vision

[41] The man's final words echo his newfound declaration to only praise the winning team: "'I'm going to root for a winning team from now on. I've been rooting for a losing team long enough. I'm going to root for the Giants. You don't know,' he said to the Brooklyn fan moving along with him, 'you don't know the pleasure you get out of rooting for a winning team'" (110).

of baseball as American are welcomed into its collective identity, while those who reject it are forever marked as domestic others.

Chapter Three: The Stadium's Spiritual Separation:

Home and Space in August Wilson's *Fences*

"Baseball stood for democracy, because any player, from any background, could become a hero. The fact that he could do it only on management's terms was not something the public needed to know about"

(332, *Sport, Society, and State: Playing by the Rules*).

"There ought not never have been no time called too early!"

(August Wilson, *Fences* 16)

"Life was rich, full and flourishing. The Milwaukee Braves won the World Series, and the hot winds of change that would make the sixties a turbulent, racing, dangerous and provocative decade had not yet begun to blow full"

(August Wilson, *Fences* 6).

"We're not talking about baseball! 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"

(August Wilson, *Fences* 67).

In August Wilson's Pulitzer Prize winning play *Fences* (1985), there is an undeniable reliance upon baseball to provide a unifying structure to the play's various themes and images. Wilson, an African American who passed away in 2005, recognizes the role of baseball as America's pastime, as he uses the institution to explore and confront the racism that African Americans faced during the mid-twentieth century. However, unlike Shaw's usage of baseball to provide his characters with a sense of Americanness, Wilson inverts the relationship that many minorities sought to achieve with baseball. Shaw perceives baseball as a civic religion that granted him, and consequently the Jewish community, a means of belonging to America. This belonging, however, does not present itself as a positive relationship for Wilson. His play centers on the tension between baseball and African Americans, as they were completely prohibited from participating in professional baseball leagues until the middle of the twentieth century. This exclusion ultimately led to formation of the Negro leagues in the 1880s, where African Americans could freely play in organized games against each other; however, these leagues were viewed as second-tier and semi-pro in comparison to professional leagues. In 1887, as Kyle McNary notes, these players were segregated to less important markets and teams based on an unwritten rule that would dominate baseball for over sixty years: "No blacks allowed" (13).[42] This age of baseball segregation is what primarily concerns Wilson, even if his play is set in the years immediately after the breaking of the color barrier in baseball.

Beyond any other type of professional title, Wilson's protagonist Troy Maxson is known as baseball player, and we must understand his relationship with the sport if we are to understand Wilson's usage of baseball. Troy anchors the play to baseball through his past history with the sport. The play's setting is a dilapidated yard filled with baseball imagery, and we learn through

[42] McNary notes, "After the 1887 season, with no other outlet to show off their baseball talents, blacks started forming traveling teams in earnest. They took to the dusty roads of America to play in nearly every one-horse town with a plot of land that could serve as a baseball field" (14).

various conversations throughout the play that Troy only begins to play baseball after serving time in prison. He works as a garbage man "hauling white folks' garbage" (2.77) and has aspirations to one day become a garbage truck driver, despite never having earned his license. He is married to a black woman named Alice who has provided him with two sons; the younger son, Corey, provides much of the surface conflict in the play through his desire to play football, a decision that his father believes "ain't gonna get him nowhere" (1.14). Troy's harsh stance towards his son is one that extends to his relationships with nearly every character in the play. As his relationships begin to grow increasingly volatile, Troy relates his struggles through baseball, allowing Wilson to use the language and his own history with the sport to explain the imperialistic nature of American institutions.

Wilson's decision to use baseball as the institution that dominates his work is a deliberate and natural extension of his own conflicting racial identity. Wilson, like the characters in his play, was raised in a section of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania known as the "Hill, the poor black neighborhood that had been his home and remained his inspiration" (Freedman vii). The town, which Wilson confesses he chose as the setting for *Fences* simply because it was his hometown, resounds differently when knowledge of Wilson's familial heritage is revealed: Wilson, though primarily concerned with African-American identity, bears traces of European heritage through his father. In his foreword to *Fences*, Samuel Freedman explains that "August Wilson had been born and raised as Frederick August Kittel, the son and namesake of a white father whose ancestry traced back to the Austro-Hungarian empire. Wilson was his black mother's surname" (viii). For Wilson, this mixed heritage became a point of contention that influenced and eventually determined his own identity. [43] Wilson's Pittsburgh community held to strict racial

boundaries that defined him by the feminine, African-Americanness of his mother, leaving him no choice but to embrace his blackness as the determiner of his identity.

As such, Wilson's usage of baseball distinctly reflects his desire to relate his own blackness while proving his, and the black race, belonging within American society. Wilson sees baseball as inherently imperialistic, as the institution becomes meaningful only through a distortion that allows the black community to claim baseball not as American, but as a primary source of black identity. Wilson employs baseball as a central motif to the African-American community struggle for belonging because of his familiarity with the Negro Baseball League. This league offered Wilson a concurrent example of what he had experienced within the Hill community. Instead of struggling to be accepted because of the color of his skin, Wilson chose to align himself with the struggles faced by the Negro League, making it the means through which Wilson embraces his identity as an American "other."[44] Wilson not only witnessed the discrimination towards black ballplayers in the 1950s, but chose to recreate that era within *Fences* as an example of a black institution that successfully defined the black community's opposition and resistance to American exceptionalism. In Rob Ruck's *RaceBall: How the Major Leagues Colonized the Black and Latin Game*, Wilson's attitude towards baseball reflects a type of black exceptionalism that is defined by its separation from other racial groups: "In that time in America, there were very few blacks in any positions of authority . . . [s]o it's important, if you

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[43] Freedman explains that "[h]is biological father was a white man who left his wife and six children. Frederick Kittel, a baker by trade, visited 1727 Bedford [Wilson's home as a child] only intermittently, and often while angry and drunk. On occasion, as August Wilson recalled in an interview with John Lahr of the *New Yorker*, his father hurled bricks at the windows. Once on Thanksgiving, he tore the door off the oven" (ix).

[44] Neil Lanctot's *Negro Baseball League: The Rise and Ruin of a Black Institution* details the distinctly anti-imperialistic mindset that led to the creation of the Negro Baseball League: "Rather than actively agitate for participation in Organized Baseball (defined as the major and minor leagues), blacks began to build separate institutions of their own, forming their own amateur and later professional teams by the mid-1880's. Unable to survive solely through the support of the black community, black teams earned the bulk of their income playing white independent 'semi-pro clubs outside Organized Baseball, a near constant practice during much of the existence of black professional baseball" (4).

go the Negro Leagues, to see the umpire ain't white. It's a black umpire . . . [n]obody's white. This is our thing, and I think it's important to transfer that over into the community – and we have our everything – until integration. And then we don't have our nothing" (178). The quote reveals that Wilson believes complete alienation, not acceptance, from the civic religion of "white" baseball is necessary for the black community to thrive as a independent people group within American society. As a result, Wilson parallels integration into baseball's professional leagues, which came through Jackie Robinson's breaking of the color barrier in 1947, with the negative idea of assimilation.[45]

Wilson believes that maintaining the African-American tradition is impossible without the distinctly black institution of Negro baseball, and the loss of the league blurred the unique identity of African Americans as *other*. In *Raceball*, Wilson details his fierce connection to the institution: "It was our teams, and it gave us a sense of self that we don't have anymore [sic]. You had your own thing and it gave you a sense of *belonging* [emphasis mine]" (178). Through this statement, we find that Wilson sees Negro baseball as a civil religion that provides belonging; however, the sense of belonging it provides is not to American society, but to a unique African *and* American heritage. The uniqueness of this heritage stems from Wilson's belief that his blackness is more than simply an African heritage, but an identity born and cultivated by the struggles of the African-American community. Wilson believes African Americans should be distinguished by their approach to life, as he claims that a refusal to assimilate with American society is the proper way to maintain identity: "I'm talking about black Americans having uniquely African ways of participating in the world, of doing things, different ways of socializing . . . I'm saying blacks should hold on to what they are. You don't have to go

[45] Wilson includes several references to Robinson within *Fences*, yet most of the references are painted in a negative light; this idea is discussed later in the chapter.

to Africa to be an African" (Lyons 7-8). His words reveal an acceptance of the view of America as a space of domestic imperialism, and by instructing blacks to "hold on what they are" (8), Wilson demands that blacks see themselves as *other* in a society that threatens to assimilate and destroy their institutions. Consequently, because he views the Negro Leagues as the ultimate black civil institution, Wilson places his story within a localized setting to center *Fences* around the destruction of the black identity through the loss of Negro baseball.[46]

Wilson sets his play within Pittsburgh not only because of his deep connection to the city, but also because of its history with Negro baseball. Through Pittsburgh, Wilson not only recreates his own experiences with mid-century racism that prohibited African Americans from participating in baseball, but uses the setting of his hometown of Pittsburgh to construct a powerful parallel between African-American memories and identity. An early reference within the play indicates that Wilson was quite aware of his city's black baseball tradition: "I saw Josh Gibson's daughter yesterday. She walking around with raggedy shoes on her feet" (1.16). We must identity the reference to Josh Gibson as deliberate; he not only was one of the Negro leagues' greatest ballplayers, but spent most of his life living in and playing baseball for Pittsburgh's Homestead Grays, the local Negro league team.[47] Though Pittsburgh is currently known for its professional team the Pirates, the Homestead Grays are considered one of the most

[46] Sandra Shannon details Wilson's words about the how the localized setting of his plays could naturally extend as an accurate reflection of the black condition: "I set them in Pittsburgh because that is what I know best. I think that a lot of what was going in Pittsburgh was going on in Detroit, Cleveland, or anywhere black Americans were. So they actually could be set anywhere there is a black community in various cities. There's some peculiar kind of things in relation to Pittsburgh. And that's what I know best" (146).

[47] After moving to Pittsburgh as a young boy, Gibson, as Nick Twemlow mentions, found in the city "a vast playground of streets and sandlots, and he soon established himself as one of the neighborhood's best athletes . . . as the professional prospects for African American baseball players increased, along with the possibility that a young African American boy could become a professional ballplayer, the lure of the game became irresistible. For Josh . . . the team that filled [his] dreams was known as the Homestead Grays" (27-8).

iconic and successful teams in baseball's history to never assimilate into professional baseball.[48] Yet, the team was nonetheless segregated in the Negro leagues, and its players were denied the opportunity to participate in organized professional baseball. Though Homestead Grays players like Gibson are regarded as among the best to ever play the game, their denied entry into professional leagues reflected the Negro community's lower-class position in American society.[49] Wilson's words about Gibson's daughter can then be interpreted as understanding the influence that the institution of baseball had upon not only Negro ballplayers, but also upon the generations that would come after those ballplayers.[50]

Pittsburgh and the legacy of the Homestead Grays loom over the text, and Wilson draws upon this history in creating Troy Maxson.[51] Like Gibson, Troy Maxson is never given the opportunity to participate in professional baseball, and this denial fuels the imperialistic undertones of the story. *Fences* revolves around the story of Maxson, the patriarch of a lower-class black Pittsburgh family and former ballplayer whose relationship with baseball has always been determined by the color of his skin. Troy was once was a feared player in the Negro Leagues, a point that Bono, Troy's best friend, makes early in the play: "Ain't but two men ever played baseball as good as you. That's Babe Ruth and Josh Gibson. Them's the only two men

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[48] In the introduction to *Black Baseball in Pittsburgh*, Larry Lester and Sammy Miller comment that "[o]ne of the greatest teams in all of baseball was the Homestead Grays. During its history, the team won nine consecutive pennants, a record unsurpassed in sports" (i).

[49] Out of all the Negro leagues teams, the Grays showed the most endurance, proving their longevity by surviving the demise of their own league for a year. They still, however, ultimately endured the same end: "After the Negro National League folded at the end of the 1948 season, the Homestead Grays carried on as an independent team before folding at the end of the 1950 season" (Lester and Miller 8).

[50] In "'I Done Seen a Hundred N****** Play Baseball Better than Jackie Robinson': Troy Maxson's Plea in August Wilson's *Fences*," James Saunders details how the "the tragedy that Wilson wants us to acknowledge is that so many other blacks, including Gibson, were denied that opportunity and the consequences go beyond Gibson's generation but extend to at least one subsequent generation" (48).

[51] Susan Koprince's "Baseball as History and Myth in August Wilson's *Fences*" comments on the parallels between Maxson's denied acceptance into professional baseball and his real-life counterparts: "The Negro National Baseball League, founded in 1920 and reorganized in 1933, contained teams such as . . . in the 1930's, the Homestead Grays and Pittsburgh Crawfords – the two clubs most likely to be Troy Maxson's team in *Fences* . . . [l]egendary stars like Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson, and Cool Papa Bell all made their livelihood playing for these segregated teams, never having the opportunity before 1947 to compete at the physical level" (349-50).

ever hit more home runs than you" (1.15). Ruth and Gibson, famous for their powerful homeruns, are the only players worthy of comparison to Maxson, who once could brag of "hitting .432 with thirty-seven home runs" (1.16). Troy's emphatic belief in his own strength aligns with Wilson's conception of the ideal black man, who resolutely believes in his own power despite his position in life.[52] Though Troy is never given the opportunity to play against white ballplayers, he nonetheless declares to his son that he would have excelled against any competition:

> Troy: [. . .] Hell, I can hit forty-three home runs right now!
>
> Cory: Not off major-league pitching, you couldn't.
>
> Troy: We had better pitching in the Negro Leagues. I hit seven home runs off of Satchel Paige. You can't get no better than that! (1.36)

Troy rather hastily believes the Negro League represents the best competitive type of baseball, and maintains that he has played against the best ballplayers of his time. The belief in his own prowess grants him a position of black superiority and necessarily alienates him from the white ballplayers, ensuring that we view Troy as a physically dominant and *other* ballplayer.

Despite being fifty-three, Troy's physical presence allows him to mock white ballplayers for their underwhelming performances on the field. This mocking is meant to draw attention to Troy's status as *other*: "Now you take that fellow… what's that fellow they had playing right field for the Yankees back then . . . Selkirk! That's it! Man batting .269, understand? .269 [. . .] [m]an batting .269 and playing right field for the Yankees [. . .] [h]ell, I'm fifty-three years old and can do better than Selkirk's .269 right now" (1.16, 40). However, Maxson has nonetheless

[52] In Lyon's interview with Wilson, the playwright candidly expresses his admiration for the strong Negro identity: "We're all victims of white America's paranoia. My characters don't respond as victims. No matter what society does to them, they are engaged with life, wrestling with it, trying to make sense out of it. Nobody is sitting around saying, 'Woe is me'" (11).

been forced by old age and familial responsibilities to forsake the hope of playing professional ball. This bitterness towards the condition of the black ballplayer, and thus the black community, is seen in a passage when he tells his wife, Rose, that "I done tried all my life to live decent… to live a clean… hard… useful life . . . [b]ut… you born with two strikes on you before you come to the plate. You got to guard it closely . . . always looking for the curveball on the inside corner" (2.66). After being reminded about his former skill as a baseball player, Troy responds in a tone that betrays his anger: "What it ever got me? Ain't got a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of" (1.15). Troy's bitterness towards the alienation caused by his blackness fuels much of the play's discourse about his inability to accept his old age and fractured relationship with baseball. This idea juxtaposes the physical description of Troy, a central image throughout the play: "Troy is . . . a large black man with thick heavy hands; it is this largeness that he strives to fill out and make an accommodation with. Together with his blackness, his largeness informs his sensibilities and the choices he has made in life" (9). Troy's physical presence is eerily similar to the description of Gibson, a point that Susan Koprince identifies as a similarity that marks Troy as domestic other.[53]

Additionally, the similarities between Gibson and Maxson link the two men with the traditional of strong blackness associated with the Negro Leagues, a direct contradiction of Wilson's feelings towards the ballplayer Jackie Robinson. A central point of discussion throughout the play is the integration of Jackie Robinson into professional baseball in 1947; Robinson's "speedster" style of play emphasized a fundamental, strategic version of baseball, and the radically different style is one that Troy despises in the play's first act: "I done seen a

[53] Koprince calls the physical parallels between Gibson and Maxson an essential connection between the two men: "Muscular, and six-feet-one-inch tall, Gibson had the 'largeness' – both of body and character – that we recognize in Troy Maxson . . . [d]espite his legendary abilities, however, Gibson was never given the chance to play in the major leagues" (351).

hundred niggers play baseball better than Jackie Robinson. Hell, I know some teams Jackie Robinson couldn't even make! What are you talking about Jackie Robinson. Jackie Robinson wasn't nobody" (1.16). Troy's disdain for Robinson embodies Wilson's contempt for the imperialism of the professional leagues. Ultimately, Troy chooses to instead view himself as a power player, a view that harkens back to the strength of the Negro Leagues: "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" (1.17). Troy's largeness reflects the strength that Wilson sees in black baseball, a strength that Robinson destroyed by forever marring the distinct boundary between the Negro League and professional baseball.[54] Thus, by emphasizing Troy's largeness, Wilson ensures that we view Robinson as traitor to African-American culture, as his integration into the professional leagues shifted the inherent power of black baseball *into* the professional leagues, leading to the destruction of black organized baseball altogether. Without the institution of black baseball, Troy's physical prowess becomes a sign of his inability to belong in society. However, Wilson allows Troy's largeness to remain a source of strength. We find that Wilson uses this context to establish the yard as the imperialistic space – a type of recreated stadium – to illustrate Troy's decline and bitterness towards American civic institutions.

Just as Troy's desire to mend his fence represents the black community's attempt to create and maintain their own institutions, Wilson's awareness of the imperialistic and Protestant

[54] While this type of betrayal to the black community is more commonly known as being an *Uncle Tom*, Wilson deliberately distances himself from this term to challenge the term and the myth of the irresponsible black male: "No doubt, the myth of the lackadaisical, irresponsible African American male has its roots in the era in African American history immediately following the Civil War and the subsequent emancipation of slaves . . . Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* did much to solidify this image and to actually endear it to white society in the later half of the nineteenth century. Wilson's work in *Fences* is to challenge this lingering, more-than-a-century-old stereotype. Wilson was so determined to analyze and lay to rest the myth of the irresponsible African American male that his commitment to do so greatly influenced his processes of writing and revising *Fences*" (Shannon 52).

nature of baseball dominates the presentation of all other civic institutions within *Fences*. Unlike Troy, who embodies the view Wilson believes should be held by the black community, many characters in the play maintain an imperialistic allegiance to some type of civic institution. Here, we find Wilson addressing the protestant roots of American exceptionalism; institutions provide a sense of belonging, yet the belonging that his characters achieve comes only through a distortion of their black identity.[55] By choosing to partake in American, and thus "white," civic institutions, these characters betray their blackness and embrace the civic imperialism that Wilson views as the cause of the African-American community's loss of identity. Thus, Troy's words to Rose during a conversation about their son can be interpreted as Wilson warning the black community about the danger of white civic institutions: "He's alive. He's healthy. He's got to make his own way. I made mine. Ain't nobody gonna hold his hand when he get out there in the world" (1.40). A large part of Wilson's opposition to civic institutions stems from the Protestant ideals they traditionally espouse. Civic institutions marginalize their members, crafting a common identity for those individuals; Wilson maintains that the primary purpose of these institutions is to minimize, and ultimately eradicate, African-American culture. Ultimately, Wilson, as Jay Plum notes, uses baseball to challenge the traditionally positive view of Protestant civic institutions (562). Wilson desires for his blackness to mark him as a domestic other so as to force the black community to examine its role and identity in American society.[56] By opposing

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[55] Wilson is extremely averse to every institution but baseball in *Fences*, even relegating the church to a place of secondary importance: "At the end of *Fences* every person, with the exception of Raynell, is institutionalized. Rose is in a church. Lyons is in a penitentiary. Gabriel's in a mental hospital and Cory's in the marines . . . [t]hat was conscious on my part because in '57 that's what I saw. Blacks have relied upon institutions which are really foreign – except for the black church, which has been our saving grace. I have problems with it but I recognize it as a central social organization and sometimes an economic organization for the black community" (*Conversations with August Wilson* 34).

[56] Jay Plum's "Blues, History, and the Dramaturgy of August Wilson" helps us understand Wilson's usage of baseball as a black institution: "In constructing American history . . . historians (the majority of whom have been white male protestants) have valorized white male[s] . . . and marginalized . . . people of color." He then goes on to say, "Whereas Puritan and Pilgrim settlers (and their descendants) function as subjects in this narrative,

the Protestant reduction of minority culture through civic institutions, Wilson attempts to redefine the importance of both Negro baseball and African-American culture's failure to shape the institution of baseball in its own image.

Because Wilson intends for us to view Troy as African-American other, we therefore can view his inability to finish building the fence around his home as a reflection of the refusal of the black community to claim baseball as its own. The yard is the primary setting for the play, and baseball's dominative presence in it is established in Wilson's stage directions: "The yard is a small dirt yard, partially fenced (except during the last scene), with a wooden sawhorse, a pile of lumber, and other fence-building equipment off to the side. Opposite is a tree from which hangs a ball made of rags. A baseball bat leans against the tree" (5). The yard is the play's only setting, and its nine scenes (mirroring the nine-inning structure of a baseball game) represent the sacred institution of Negro baseball, a sphere that opposes the exceptionalist qualities of American civic institutions. The opening of the play finds Troy and his friend Bono entering the yard, engaging, as Troy later tells his wife, in "men talk" (1.12). Unsurprisingly, "men talk" revolves around baseball, and Troy's opening speech in the yard draws attention to his powerful, and seemingly immortal, identity as a black ballplayer: "Death ain't nothing but a fastball on the outside corner. And you know what I'll do to that . . . [i]f I'm lying . . . that 450 feet of lying! *(Pause)* That's all death is to me. A fastball on the outside corner" (1.16-7). To understand the significance of this reference, we are forced to associate the discussion with the motif of sacred journey.

Wilson's description of Troy's reveals that until the construction of this home and yard, he has essentially searched for the sacred space of home. Primary to this searching is his failed

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marginalized groups such as African-Americans play supporting roles. Wilson's dramaturgy challenges the secondary position of African Americans within American history by contextualizing black cultural experiences and, in turn, creating an opportunity for the black community to examine and define itself. Rather than writing history in the traditional sense, Wilson 'rights' American history, altering our perceptions of history to give status to what American history has denied the status of 'real'" (562).

relationship with his father, a fractured connection that Troy identifies as the point he began searching for home. As a fourteen-year old boy, Troy is "fooling around" (2.50) with a young girl when his father forces him away and begins to rape her. Consequently, when Troy attempts to stop him and is brutally beaten, he decides to leave his father's home and the "devil himself" (50; act 2): "What I see what the matter of it was, I lost all fear of my daddy. Right there is where I became a man . . . at fourteen years of age . . . [t]he only thing I knew was the time had come for me to leave my daddy's house. And right there the world suddenly got big. And it was a long time before I could cut it down to where I could handle it" (2.50). Just as the black community struggled to maintain a sense of belonging within America, Troy's departure from home leaves him without a sphere or institution to supply him with an identity. To compensate for his lack of belonging, Troy becomes a violent vagabond and drifter, symbolizing the black community's lack of institutional identity before the era of the Negro leagues.[57] Troy becomes like his father and uses physical violence to maintain a position, however precarious it might be, in society. Only after Troy commits murder and is locked in a penitentiary – what Wilson sees as a Protestant, white institution – is baseball introduced as a remedial institution:

> That's where I learned to play baseball . . . Rose'll tell you. She asked me when I met her if I had gotten all that foolishness out of my system. And I told her, "Baby, it's you and baseball all what count with me." You hear me, Bono? I meant it too. She say, "Which one comes first?" I told her, "Baby, ain't no doubt it's baseball. . . but you stick and get old with me and we'll both outlive this baseball." (2.52)

[57] Wilson presents Troy as an example of the lack of identity facing the black community: "[Y]ou couldn't find no place to live. I thought I was in freedom. Shhh. Colored folks living down there on the riverbanks in whatever king of shelter they could find for themselves" (2.51).

The prison, reflective of those who have no place in society, allows Troy to embrace baseball as his source of identity. Yet, once Troy leaves prison, he creates his own space dominated by a baseball "made of rags" (5), symbolizing the poor, yet self-constructed and prideful relationship that African Americans had with baseball. Only through this creation of an anti-imperialistic space can Troy complete the journey he originally started by leaving his father's home. In lieu of Wilson's belief in Negro baseball as the ultimate black civic institution, the yard exists as sacred space, a point of reference from which Troy can view and understand the world around him. In this space, as Deanne Westbrook mentions, Troy resolves both his past and his present, as the sphere allows Troy to resolve elements of his own displaced identity.[58] I contend that the space is ultimately meant to draw us towards a realization of Troy's status as domestic other; the yard, and by association the home, is a space of safety for Troy and the other black characters in the play. Consequently, by recreating a space of black sacredness in Troy's yard, Wilson retells the story of the rise and fall of black institutional baseball.

We must notice, then, that the only other character to enter the yard beyond Troy and his family throughout the play is symbolic of the death Wilson feared would overtake the black community: assimilation. If we believe that Troy's father symbolizes the possible death faced by a black community without civic institutions, the parallel is overshadowed by a death figure that represents a black community *willingly* sacrificing its identity.[59] After Troy has constructed his home, he is visited by a white businessman who enters the sacred space without permission: "[D]evil standing there bigger than life. White fellow. . . got on good clothes and everything.

[58] Westbrook mentions that Troy's fractured relationship with his father forces him to confront the society around him: "At this point Troy is launched into a world that 'suddenly got big' . . . exiled from home to begin the quest for home again" (55).

[59] This figure is especially important when considering Wilson's conception of Troy as a member of the black working class, a class that maintained power apart from white civic institutions: "Troy represents in a broader sense a largely unnoticed and certainly uncelebrated black working class. He also embodies the stoicism of his generation, a generation of blacks who absorbed all manner of indignity, carried within all kinds of untended wounds, and pushed onward, embittered yet indomitable" (Freedman xi).

Standing there with a clipboard in his hand. I ain't had to say nothing" (20). This "white" figure threatens Troy with the possible destruction of his sacred space, as he enters the yard without Troy's permission and even stands on his porch. We can view this second devil as symbolic of the second half of Troy's, and the African-African community's, journey; having completed his journey away from the black primacy and lack of home of his father, Troy's second journey finds him encountering the "white devil" of imperialism that threatens to overtake the institutional space he has claimed as his own.

This second journey is defined by Troy's inability to finish building his fence, as it symbolizes his refusal to accept a life apart from white civic institutions. Troy's failure to complete the fence marks him no longer as other, but as assimilated. Appropriately, the reason that Troy does not finish his fence is an institution that marks him as an equal within American society. He visits Taylor's, a local bar, to supposedly watch baseball, yet his visits to the bar are not motivated by the sport, but by a black woman he eventually commits adultery with. The bar is another created space of baseball, yet it offers the possibility of only *watching* baseball through television, making the distinction between Troy – a former ballplayer – and those viewing the game complete negligible. Interestingly, Troy refuses to bring the television, and thus assimilation, into his home: "Cory: 'Hey, Pop. . . why don't you buy a TV?' Troy: [. . .] I say what I want with one?' Cory: 'So you can watch it. They got lots of things on TV. Baseball games and everything. We could watch the World Series.' Troy: 'Yeah. . . and how much this TV cost?'" (1.33-4). However, despite his refusal to bring the television into the home, Troy nonetheless frequents the bar to watch white baseball, showing his resolve against baseball exists only superficially. Thus, we can interpret his visits to the bar as both *illegitimate* journey and representative of the responsibility he, and the black community, have ignored to claim baseball

as their own. The woman – representative of institutions beyond black baseball – enables Troy's downfall, as the motivation that causes him to pursue delays his completion of the fence:

> Rose: Where you going off to? You been running out of here every Saturday for weeks. I thought you was gonna work on this fence?
>
> Troy: I'm gonna walk down to Taylors'. Listen to the ball game. I'll be back in a bit. I'll work on it when I get back. (1.32).

In seeking belonging outside of his home, Troy embarks on a journey that should *not* be taken. While Troy claims that his affair with the woman is akin to "steal[ing] second" (2.66) from a society that opposes his status as a lower-middle class black man, it more accurately reflects Troy's social desire to belong to white civic institutions and inadvertently destroy the sacredness of black baseball. As a result, Wilson, and perhaps others in the black community, compares Troy's affair to a baseball strategy associated with Jackie Robinson's inferior style of play—stealing second. Additionally, when Troy confesses to Rose about the affair, he parallels his life with her with bunting, one of baseball's weakest devices:

> Everything is lined up against you. What you gonna do. I fooled them, Rose. I bunted. When I found you and Cory and a halfway decent job. . . I was safe. Couldn't nothing touch me. I wasn't gonna strike out no more. I wasn't going back to the penitentiary. I wasn't gonna lay in the streets with a bottle of wine. 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 [. . .] [t]hen I saw that girl. . . 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. (2.66)

Troy views his life with Rose as "standing in the same place for eighteen years" (2.67) and maintains that his pursuit of the woman frees him from social constraints; however, Troy's symbolic stealing of second is *unnecessary*. Troy's journey to construct a space of black identity has already been completed, yet his failure to construct a wall between society and the sacred space symbolizes the black community's willingness to give away its claim on baseball.

The fence is necessary for African Americans to exist as an anti-imperialistic people, so Troy's movement to the woman, and to the bar, ultimately signifies Troy's forsaking of his completed journey and status of domestic other. Unsurprisingly, only when the woman dies in childbirth – separating him from "second base" and forcing him back home – does Troy finally realize what he has done. He has violated the sacredness of home, giving away the space through immersing himself in an institution where he does not belong. Consequently, Troy realizes his error; however, his recognition implies that though he may finish the fence, he has ensured baseball's loss as a black civic institution:

> All right. . . Mr. Death. See now. . . I'm gonna tell you what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna take and build me a fence around this yard. See? I'm gonna build a fence around what belongs to me. And then I want you to stay on the other side . . . [y]ou ain't gonna sneak up on me no more. When you ready for me. . . when the top of your list say "Troy Maxson". . . that's when you come around here . . . [y]ou stay on the other side of the fence until you ready for me. Then you come up and knock on the front door. Anytime you want. I'll be ready for you. (2.72)

Troy's violation of the sacred space ensures that assimilation, and the forsaking of black baseball, is inevitable. Troy can finish the fence, yet death – imperialism – will still come *through* the yard and to the front door. The yard, and Negro baseball, no longer has the

possibility of a distinctly black identity, and Troy's only option is to delude himself into "want[ing]" (2.72) the imperialistic movement of the kingdom of baseball to bide its time. The space, void of its black sacredness, can no longer protect him from the outside world. Consequently, the emptiness of the contained space reflects the fate of the Negro leagues when Robinson left to play for professional baseball,[60] ensuring that Troy will never again achieve any type of belonging to baseball and will forever remain a domestic other.

Like the Negro leagues, Troy will die an irrelevant death. The only description we are given of his death is a brief passage retold by Rose: "He was out here swinging that bat . . . [h]e swung that bat and then he just fell over. Seems like he swung it and stood there with this grin on his face. . . and then he just fell over" (2.87). Troy, whom one source appropriately identifies as a master storyteller, has accomplished the greatest hoax: feigning happiness at the imperialistic taking of black identity.[61] For Wilson, such a disgraceful end for a character like Troy is fitting; Troy has forsaken the identity given to him by black baseball, and his death is little more than a footnote to American exceptionalism's imperialistic movement within the black community. Ironically, though Troy eventually finishes the fence, it occurs far too late to be of any use; he has forsaken the possibility of creating a space for black baseball, and, similar to the disbanding of the Homestead Grays, Troy vanishes not with a home-run, but with a bunt.

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[60] Ruck mentions that "after Jackie Robinson, sport took place in a different context with different power relationships, one where African-Americans had far less say in why and how the games were played, who got to play them, and what they meant" (79). Lester and Miller are even more direct in their critique of what happened to black baseball after Robinson: "The debut of Robinson with the Dodgers in 1947 caused a mass exodus of fans from the Negro League to the majors. As a result, teams folded and leagues collapsed" (8).

[61] Sandra Shannon's *August Wilson's Fences: a Reference Guide* notes the troubling manner in which Troy delivers several of his stories, lavishing details and lies upon the narrative for the sake of the listener (140). Ironically, the lie he keeps from his wife is his undoing.

Chapter Four: The Homeless Heavy Hitter:

A Journey Towards Sacred Space and the Restoration of Physicality in William Kennedy's *Ironweed*

"I owned a rubber baseball, a glove, a bat, and a uniform at such an early age I can't know how young I was"

(William Kennedy, *Riding the Yellow Trolley Car* 469).

"I wrote this book not as a booster of Albany, which I am, nor as an apologist for the city, which I sometimes am, but rather as a person whose imagination has become fused with a single place, and in that place finds all the elements that a man ever needs for the soul"

(William Kennedy, *O Albany!* 3).

"'Mine? No, it's yours. It's baseball'"

(William Kennedy, *Ironweed* 183).

William Kennedy's *Ironweed* is perhaps the most subtle yet powerful commentary on the connection between American imperialism and baseball. The novel's focus is the reconciliation of Francis Phelan, a former baseball player, with his family and society after living as a homeless man from the late 1910s to 1938. His story clearly addresses the idea of "home" as a sphere of belonging, yet issues of race, central to the texts of Shaw and Wilson, initially appear less prominent within *Ironweed*. Francis' journey to home appears to simply be a snapshot of Irish-American homeless life in Albany, New York during the era of the great depression. Yet the dominant baseball imagery throughout the text suggests that American exceptionalism and imperialism work within the life of Kennedy and within the characters of his text. Francis, like Kennedy himself, remains incomplete until he returns to home— the civic religion of baseball.[62] Francis' journey away from Albany, caused by the accidental killing of his son, positions him as a domestic *other* in need of reconciliation with the belonging offered by baseball. As a result, Kennedy employs baseball as an institution that, unlike Shaw's complete assimilation and Wilson's rejection of American identity, allows his Irish-American heritage to intertwine with baseball. Francis is an Irish, former ballplayer who has fallen on hard times. We learn that he has run from Albany because he accidentally killed his infant son because of his alcoholism. Instead of confronting and coping with his mistake, he chooses to live as a homeless man, seeing in the meanderings of a bum connections to his former baseball life, where each summer he would leave his family to pursue a life of professional baseball. The novel opens with Francis returning to Albany for the first time in twenty-two years, establishing a context where we are naturally

[62] Kennedy himself acknowledges the fulfillment he obtained from focusing on baseball when he began writing his novels about Albany: "The army made me a sports editor of a weekly newspaper . . . [t]his, of course, was temporary insanity, and at the end of my stint with the army I abandoned sports for the police beat, politics, and fiction, more expansive ways of indulging dementia. But sports, and especially baseball, lurked insidiously in my imagination and, when I began to write long fiction, the figures from childhood and sportswriting days demanded attention. Their stories seemed then, and now, elemental to my own life and the life of my family" (476).

granted a view of Kennedy's affection for both his hometown and its Irish community. Ultimately, *Ironweed* reads as a retelling of the classical journey motif using baseball as the American civic religion that draws Francis Phelan home to an imperialistic identity that is both American and fully Irish. [63]

Understanding the connection between Kennedy and his hometown allows us to view the author as an individual whose early childhood was greatly influenced by Albany's baseball background. Albany's baseball history is one that has been detailed in Don Rittner's *Albany Revisited*, as Rittner details the extensive history and influence of the Albany Senators.[64] Rittner's description of the Senators, who played in a place known as Hawkins stadium, provides an idea of how the myth of the Senators influences writers from Albany: "I remember as a young boy exploring the abandoned Hawkins stadium with my friend . . . [w]e climbed to the roof over the grandstands and then explored the outfield and infield. As [we] stood at the pitcher's mound, we heard the crack of the bat, the roar of a crowd, and the announcer over the address system. We ran like the dickens and never looked back" (8). Rittner's description of the stadium echoes the mythical grasp that the Senators had over Albany and parallels Kennedy's own experiences at the stadium as a child. The powerful description of the stadium is echoed in Kennedy's essay

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[63] In the essay "Francis Phelan in Purgatory: William Kennedy's Catholic Imagination in *Ironweed*," Brennan O'Donnell notes that the novel emerged from Kennedy's exploration of the historical and emotional layers within Francis: "Kennedy goes on to suggest, emerged from a desire to explore such complexities in the history and consciousness of a single character" (52). *O Albany!* continues this thought: "I wrote this book not as a booster of Albany, which I am, nor as an apologist for the city, which I sometimes am, but rather as a person whose imagination has become fused with a single place, and in that place finds all the elements that a man ever needs for the soul" (3).

[64] Rittner goes to explain that "[f]or nearly 75 years, Albany had a professional baseball team. Throughout their history the Albany Senators were affiliated with several major league teams including the Cincinnati Reds, 1938-1939; Pittsburgh Pirates, 1940-1950; Boston Red Sox, 1952-1954 and 1956-57; and the Kansas City A's, 1958-1959. They played at Hawkins Stadium, built in 1928 and located in Menands, a northern suburb of Albany. The Senators played in a few different leagues: the New York State League in 1899-1916; Eastern League in 1920-1932; International League in 1932-1936; New York-Penn League in 1937; and Eastern League in 1938-1959 . . . [i]n 1960, the Eastern League reduced the number of teams from eight to six, and Albany was eliminated. The team disbanded and the stadium went up for auction for back taxes and was torn down. All that remains now are the history of the team . . . through more than 80 photographs. Albany has made several attempts to bring back baseball starting in 1983, but it has never taken off like the days of the Senators" (7-8).

"Baseball at Hawkins Stadium: 'Here's Your Son, Mister'," as the author reveals how Hawkins stadium influences Albany and his own life. In *Riding the Yellow Trolley Car*, Kennedy describes the overwhelming sense of pride and belonging that he found within the stadium's boundaries:

> School was inimical to life on opening day when the Albany Senators of the class A Eastern League took to the field at Hawkins stadium in Menands, just north of North Albany . . . [t]he stadium seated about 8,500, but eleven thousand would crowd in for special games. All season long we'd find a way to get in, either by shagging a foul ball that came over the wall, and which got you in free when you returned it, or waiting for the friendly Menands village cop . . . to hook us up with a ticket buyer ('Here's your son, mister'), for if you arrived with a parent, then the boy scrambled under the turnstile, free . . . I don't remember doing this, and Joe Keefe says he lacked the bravery such crime required. Sometimes we actually paid to get in. (472)

Much like the influence of Shaw's Dodgers and Wilson's Grays, the Albany Senators provide Kennedy with an identity and a sense of ownership within American society that allow him to even call the stadium his "back yard" (*Riding the Yellow* 472). Baseball at Hawkins shaped how Kennedy would inevitably view his connection to Albany; baseball dominated and influenced his childhood, as the sport instilled a sense of belonging within Kennedy that eventually reproduced itself within his relationship with his hometown.

Kennedy believes that Albany's main identity comes from its predominantly Irish-American population; consequently, he reconciles his desire belonging within American society within a distinctly Irish vision of belonging through baseball. Reginald Byron's *Irish America*

notes that few towns could ever claim as great an Irish immigrant influence as Albany: "In the rank of American cities, Albany was second only to Boston . . . in Irish ancestry in the 1980 US Census . . . Albany thus shares, in some measure, the main institutional characteristics of Irish America that had been derived from studies of large industrial cities; [sic] characteristics which are said to have created and sustained an Irish-American ethnic identity" (166). Like Shaw's Brooklyn and Wilson's Pittsburgh, Albany's Irish population shapes how Kennedy approaches baseball, as he makes his connection to the sport distinctly reflective of his own Irish ancestry. In his non-fiction collection of essays *O Albany!*, Kennedy describes the prominent local influence that baseball had upon his community, transforming Albany, a city that Kennedy identified as a melting pot of immigrants, into a community driven by the sport: "It was what you did when it was raining or you were too exhausted to anything else, though I don't remember much exhaustion in those days. The action seemed endless . . . ball games always, in all seasons, even playing with the older men . . . [t]hese men gathered – not often enough – after dinner to chase flies and grounders and show us how it was done" (34).[65] Baseball unified Kennedy's community during his childhood as, similar to Rittner's description of Hawkins stadium, the games "seemed endless" (34) and served as the sphere in which Albany could resolve its ethnic diversity. Baseball fields and stadiums were scattered across the town and were nearly always in use, and Kennedy devotes several passages of *O Albany!* to discuss the prominent connection between Albany's various institutions and communities with the sport.[66] These fields supplied

[65] Kennedy views his hometown as a unique blend of ethnicities, even comparing Albany to larger cities known for their immigrant population: "It was always as much a melting pot for immigrants as was New York or Boston, and it epitomizes today the transfer of power from the Dutch to the English . . . to the ethnic coalitions. In Albany, the power came to be centered singularly in the Irish, Albany proceeding Boston in putting an Irishman in City Hall" (6).

[66] Kennedy notes, "It stood next to Hawkins Stadium, the home of the Albany Senators in the Eastern League (Class A baseball). In an earlier age Albany had been in the International and State leagues, its games played at Chadwick park, about where Hawkins was. Before that the Senators played at Riverside Park in Renssealer . . . [p]rofessional ball was also played in Dewey's day at Island Park, where the Menands Bridge begins" (29-30).

American identity and resolved conflicts between various Irish populations within Albany.[67] Moreover, Kennedy connects the eccentricity and uniqueness of the Irish-American individuals of his childhood with their exploits on the baseball field, as characters from his past are described only in relation to their baseball prowess. He combines the Irish history of Albany with his memories of the sport, making baseball operate as the sphere where he reconciles the Irish-American community's history in Albany with his own memories of various civic and religious institutions within the city.[68]

While many of the descriptions about the lives of homeless men and the city of Albany are historically accurate, Kennedy's memories of the exceptionalist nature of Protestantism – as well as the foreign institution of Catholicism – in Albany overlap into his recreation of the Irish community's struggle to belong within America.[69] Religious institutions feature prominently within *Ironweed*, yet their parallel to the civic religion of baseball reveals them as secondary and unfavorable institutions. For Irish immigrants, allegiance to Catholicism within Albany marked them as domestic others; the concept of American exceptionalism cast these immigrants into a position of otherness because of their questionable ties to an institution centered *outside* the borders of America. The nativist movement – an institution comprised of individuals who were harshly against immigrants – is a group that Byron associates with the Irish, allowing us to see the American reaction to foreigners who professed allegiance to institutions beyond American's

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[67] Kennedy mentions that "Beaver/Lincoln Park was, and is, an oasis in a densely settled part of the city, Rocky Ledge Pool has been replaced by a public swimming pool, and baseball is still played in the park's basin, as it was in the early 1900's when it was the focal point for neighborhood rivalries – the Shamrocks from St. James's [sic], the Peacocks from St. Joseph's, the Schuleys from St. Ann's, the Emeralds from the North End" (76).

[68] Christopher Evans notes that Kennedy's retelling of Albany's history through created myth fits within the context of baseball as an imperialistic institution: "[P]art of the significance of the kingdom-of-baseball metaphor at the beginning of the twenty-first century is how it focuses attention on the often ambiguous relationship between 'history' and 'memory'" (43).

[69] Byron provides a depiction of Irish immigrants in Albany that is perfectly captured within *Ironweed*: "Albany's Irish poor at first lived in miserable tenements and shanties in the slums or in shacks on the city's outskirts. The orphanages and prisons, as well as the almshouse and hospitals, were filled with the Irish. There were begging in the streets, thievery, drunkenness, and fighting" (63-4).

domestic borders: "The nativist . . . movement, a phenomenon seen in many other American cities, was a reaction against the floods of immigrants, especially the Irish, whose Catholicism and presumed loyalty to the Pope, a 'foreign power,' made their loyalty to American ideals doubly suspect" (64). Consequently, instead of embracing Catholicism as a substitute to American exceptionalism, Kennedy's depiction of the Church within *Ironweed* acknowledges that it ultimately fall short of providing the Irish with belonging within America.[70] Helen, a homeless woman whose life ends from a cancerous tumor, provides the best example of the Church's failure within the Irish community. Helen's dependence upon the Church, and not an American institution as her means of "redemption" (33), marks her as domestic other. Francis represents belonging to America through the civic religion of baseball; thus, when Helen decides "to stay out of his life" (121) near the end of *Ironweed*, her decision to trust in the Church – rejecting baseball and her Irishness – to provide her with restoration to society will ultimately leave her as devoid of an identity as her cancerous womb:

> The church was Saint Anthony's, Saint Anthony of Padua, the wonder-working saint, hammer of heretics, ark of the testament, finder of lost articles, patron of the poor and of pregnant and barren women. It was the church where the Italians went to preserve their souls in a city where Italians were the niggers and micks . . . Helen usually went to the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception a few blocks up the hill, but the tumor felt so heavy, a great rock in her belly. (120)

[70] O'Donnell's essay notes that the Catholic Church heavily factors within Kennedy's rendering of Albany's memory and myth: Kennedy's keen, not to say obsessive, interest in rendering the particularities of historical Albany—especially of Irish-Catholic Albany between 1850 and 1960—makes attention to the role of the Church in the lives of his characters supremely important. A writer who wants to bring to life the world and worldview of such characters cannot but be attentive to the presence of the Church, the influence of which historically has pervaded the domestic, social, and political lives of Albanians" (51).

The description of the church deliberately mentions ethnicity to invoke a comparison between Helen – who is Irish – and the Italians who have failed to belong within Albany. She is grouped among the domestic others, and we begin to see that the imperialism offered by civic institutions will never allow Helen to overcome her alienation from society. Ultimately, the mass service provides her with no healing, and Helen questions her faith on her deathbed: "Helen is no symbol of lost-anything, wrong-road-taken kind of person, if-they-only-knew-then-kind of person . . . [she] has even come to the question of whether or not she is really a Catholic, and to what a Catholic really is these days. She thinks that, truly, she may not be one anymore" (138). Shortly after these thoughts, Helen dies alone, denied any possibility of reconciliation with society. Helen's death represents the alienation of the Irish from American society, and the irreconcilable distance between the Church as a foreign institution and the ideals of American exceptionalism.

Similarly, Kennedy's rejection of Protestantism as a holistic means of integrating the Irish community within Albany is seen in the depiction of the Methodist homeless shelter. Kennedy's opinion of Protestantism wastes no words as he recalls his family's stance toward the Protestant church in Albany: "Bunch of Protestant bastards" (*O Albany!* 40). This stance translates rather directly into the depiction of the shelter in *Ironweed*. The shelter, known as the Mission of Holy Redemption, is operated by Reverend Chester, a "gargantuan man with a clubfoot, wild white hair, and a face flushed permanently years ago by a whiskey condition" (33). Upon entering the mission, Francis is immediately greeted by the sounds of voices "raised in praise of good old Jesus, where'd we all be without him" (32), and the sight of Reverend Chester leaning over "his lectern" (34) at the homeless individuals who have gathered to hear him preach in exchange for a meal and bed. However, the reverend's focus is conditional,

echoing the selective nature of American exceptionalism. Instead of helping all people who come to his mission, the reverend – representative of Kennedy's opinion of the Protestant church – primarily cares about those individuals who have no identity beyond being homeless. In other words, the Protestant minister cares only to create identity in those who turn to him for help, and dismisses those individuals whose identity exists *apart* from his institution:

> Among them, as always, were good men and straight, men honestly without work, victims of a society ravaged by avarice, sloth, stupidity . . . [s]uch men were merely transients in the mission, and to them a preacher could only wish luck, send prayer, and provide a meal for the long road ahead. The true targets of the preacher were the others: the dipsos, the deadbeats, the wetbrains, and the loonies, who needed more than luck. What they needed was a structured way, a mentor and guide through the hells and purgatories of their days. (34)

The ethnic and derogatory slurs the preacher uses in the consideration of the homeless "collection" (34) reveals he only allows individuals into his mission if they conform to his standards. The reverend's selective nature even denies Sandra, a drunk, homeless woman who site outside the mission's door, the possibility of coming inside: "Francis admitted the futility of preaching to Sandra. Who could preach to Francis in the weeds? But that don't make it right that she can't go inside to get warm. Just because you're drunk don't mean you ain't cold" (32). The transients within the mission, men who depend upon the mission only for an occasional meal and bed, are dismissed by the reverend in favor of those who completely lack any connection to an external institution. However, this conforming comes at the cost of forsaking Irishness, a point that Francis makes about Pee-Wee, a homeless man who has lived at the shelter for eight months: "Pee-Wee . . . was full of energy, running the mission for Chester. Pee-Wee was

peaceful now, no longer the singing gin-drinker he used to be. Francis still felt good things about him, but now thought of him as an emotional cripple, dry, yeah, but at what cost?" (40).[71] Essentially, Pee-Wee remains a domestic other, belonging to society only within the context of the mission. His eventual end, an end that remains incomplete after nearly a year at the mission, is contextualized by Francis as a lifelong enslavement to the institution: "He would then have a clean bed, clean clothes, three squares, and a warm room with Jesus in it for as long as it took him to answer the question: What next . . . carry your share of the work load, and then rise you must, rise you will, into the brilliant embrace of the just God" (43). His example illustrates that Protestantism operates as a selective and ultimately inferior civic institution, disregarding and "send[ing] [a] prayer" (34) to those who do not conform to its standards. As a result, religion falters within the context of *Ironweed*, and baseball operates as the only civic institution that provides the possibility of belonging to America without the sacrifice of ethnic identity. While this compromise may seem contradictory, Kennedy's familial history suggests that his Irishness can coincide with the ideals of American exceptionalism.

Through Francis, Kennedy resolves his Irish heritage in Albany with his memories of the sport, as the author's uncle served as the inspiration for Francis in *Ironweed*. The creation of Francis comes from within the boundary between memory and myth, creating a parallel between Kennedy's fascination with the sport and the Irish American struggle to assimilate. Francis, a former third-baseman turned bum, was inspired partly by the memory of Kennedy's uncle Coop McDonald, whom he describes as "a lifelong teetotaler who played baseball for Boston, New York, and Chicago in the teens of the century" (*O Albany!* 44). Surprisingly, the familial

[71] A definition of "Irishness" is found in the introduction to *Affecting Irishness: Negotiating Cultural Identity Within and Beyond the Nation*: "*Irishness* aims to move *between* locations – national and transnational, contemporary and historic, realistic and surreal – and does so in a bid to not only underline the intricacy of long-established and ongoing patterns of cultural and political flux, but also to . . . explore self-imaginings at home" (Byrne, Kirwan, and O'Sullivan 8).

connection did not influence Kennedy; rather, McDonald's baseball experience, and *not* his personal life, served as the inspiration for Francis.[72] Consequently, we can assign Francis an identity based within the sphere of baseball memory and myth; Kennedy uses the memory of his baseball-playing uncle to relate the hardships faced by Irish immigrants during the early part of the twentieth century as they attempted to create "home" within American society.

Like the journey to belong faced by Irish immigrants, *Ironweed* operates on a central journey motif that follows Francis over a three-day period of time, as he attempts to reconcile himself with the remaining members of his family and his home after twenty-two years of running from Albany. Consequently, *Ironweed* opens within a graveyard, a setting that opposes the idea of baseball as a creation of home and supplier of American identity. We are introduced to Francis through the absence of home, as the dead seem to belong more to Albany, and consequently to America, than him: "Riding up the winding road of Saint Agnes Cemetery in the back of the rattling old truck, Francis Phelan became aware that the dead, even more the living, settled down in neighborhoods" (2). This graveyard is also the place where Kennedy first makes his audience aware of the deeply personal connection he shares with the city: "FARRELL, said one roadside gravestone. KENNEDY, said another . . . PHELAN, said two small ones" (2). Like Kennedy, Francis' history is rooted within the city.

Coincidentally, the graveyard furthers the idea that Francis no longer belongs to Albany through introducing ghosts from Francis' past. These ghosts relate Francis' identity to baseball and ensure that we view the homeless man as a former member of the civic religion of baseball.

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[72] Kennedy notes the distinct influence that McDonald had upon his creation of Francis, even noting the areas where his character differs from his relative: "One of my great uncles was Eddie (Coop) McDonald, a third-baseman who was a maestro of the hidden-ball trick. He had three years (1911-1913) with Boston and Chicago in the National League that were respectable but less than stellar, and another ten or more great years with minor-league teams . . . [h]e was a beloved figure in the family, in my own memory, in Albany, and in the baseball world, and I drew on his baseball experience, but not on his personal life, when I created Francis Phelan, the derelict hero of *Ironweed*. Francis was a drunk, Coop a teetotaler" (476).

The first ghost to recall Francis' baseball past is Daddy Big, an individual whose alcoholism – again calling to mind Kennedy's distance from the personal details of Coop McDonald – eventually causes his death:

> Daddy Big remembered the shape of Franny's [Francis] mouth from the first day he saw him playing ball for Albany at Chadwick Park. [He] . . . watched Franny on the hot corner, watched him climb into the bleachers after a foul pop fly that would have hit Daddy Big right in the chest if Franny hadn't stood on his own ear to make the catch. Daddy Big saw Franny smile after making it . . . Franny smiled that same familiar way as he scattered fresh dirt on Daddy Big's grave. (5)

As Daddy Big's memory reveals, playing within Chadwick Park supplied Francis with a distinctly communal identity and belonging. He is remembered by those within the graveyard as primarily a baseball player, as the "smile" (5) Francis showed on the baseball field echoes within the care that Francis shows towards the dead man's grave. Essentially, the description indicates that Francis, though a bum for twenty-two years, still carries elements of his baseball identity, creating the possibility that he might be reconciled to his family and society.

Coincidentally, as Francis briefly moves out of the graveyard in the pages immediately following Daddy Big's description, we are informed that Chadwick Park is the *same location* as Hawkins stadium. However, this changing of stadiums is one of the initial signs that Francis' baseball identity has been lost: "They [Francis and another bum] walked past Hawkins stadium, hell of a big place now, about where Chadwick Park was when Francis played ball. He remembered it when it was a pasture. Hit a ball and it'd roll forever, right into the weeds" (11). Francis' association with the non-existent Chadwick Park signifies his disassociation from the present civic religion of baseball within Albany; Hawkins Stadium has been constructed in the

years of Francis' absence, positioning him as domestic *other* within his former hometown. His removal from baseball– literally realized in his life as a homeless man – marks him in need of restoration to the civic religion and to America.

His next encounter with ghosts represents the initial step in his return to baseball, as Francis' encounter with his dead father, Michael, and son, Gerald, begins to reconstruct the baseball imagery that once dominated his life. While working in the cemetery, Francis visits his dead son for the first time; the description of the scene establishes that we are to view Francis as a ballplayer: "Michael signaled to his neighbors that an act of regeneration seemed to be in process, and the eyes of the dead, witnesses all to their own historical omissions . . . silently *rooted* [italics mine] for Francis as he walked up the slope toward the box elder" (16-7). The idea that the dead Irish within the graveyard "root" for Francis as he approaches the most important event of the past twenty-two years establishes that these ghosts, each with a distinct baseball identity and connection to Francis, will confront and accompany Francis as he attempts to atone "for the abandonment of the family, for craven flight when the steadfast virtues were called for" (17). His conversation with his dead son, the first of the ghostly confrontations, acknowledges that Francis' journey as one of the homeless – a journey distancing him from belonging within baseball – must end. In one of the novel's most stirring passages, Gerald forgives and commands his father to reconcile himself to his former belonging within the Albany community:

> Gerald, through an act of silent will, imposed on his father the pressing obligation to perform his final acts of expiation for abandoning the family. You will not know, the child silently said, what these acts are until you have performed them all. And after you have performed them you will not understand that they were expiratory any more than you have understood all the other expiation that has kept

> you in such prolonged humiliation. Then, when these final acts are complete, you will stop trying to die because of me. (19)

Gerald's words reveal that Francis must come to terms with the physical betrayal of his baseball identity before he can restore belonging to his society. Appropriately, Francis is commanded to begin a new journey that ultimately reconciles him with the imperialistic identity – a positive change – offered by baseball and the return home.[73]

In order to understand the significance of this second journey, we must understand that Francis' departure was caused by abusing the physical identity given to him through baseball. This abuse directly contradicts the physical prowess and perfection demanded by Muscular Christianity, as Francis' physical description throughout the narrative specifically references the wretchedness and grotesqueness of his hands:

> He rubbed his hands together. Were they the enemies? How could a man's hands betray him? They were full of scars, calluses, split fingernails, ill-healed bones broken on other men's jaws, veins so bloated and blue they seemed on the verge of explosion. The hands were long-fingered, except where there was no finger, and now, with accreting age, the fingers had thickened, like the low-growing branches of a tree. (Kennedy 143)

Unsurprisingly, the betrayal and misuse of his hands compels him to run from his identity within Albany. Instead of using his hands as the greatest Irish third baseman within Albany, Francis'

[73] Several critics have noted the obvious parallels between Francis' journey and Dante's journey to expunge himself of sin within *The Inferno* and *Purgatorio*; the connection is undeniably strong, yet I believe that my approach to the text ultimately bases itself upon Kennedy's own life and passion for the sport, whereas the Dante comparison strictly deals with the symbolism present within the text. Both analyses are valid, and I hope that this interpretation illuminates a historical and cultural interpretation of *Ironweed* that has been noted yet underappreciated.

journey ensures that his hands further his distance from the acceptance offered by baseball.[74] Apart from causing the death of his son, Francis' original journey from Albany is caused when, during a riot, he murders a train conductor— Harold Allen. The description of Harold's death is one that instantly draws attention to Francis' identity as a ballplayer: "Francis pulled back, wound up his educated right arm, and let fly that smooth round stone the weight of a baseball, and brained the scab . . . [t]hat scab was the first man Francis Phelan ever killed . . . he was a single man from Worcester, Massachusetts, of Scotch-Irish stock" (25). Francis' physical identity, given worth within the civic religion of baseball, is responsible for Harold's death; consequently, the reconciliation of that physical identity becomes the means through which Francis is restored to American society. However, Kennedy's approach to the civic religion leaves no doubt that this reconciliation must not come through a sacrifice of communal and familial identity, but must *coincide* with an individual's preexisting identity to grant him belonging to America. When Harold confronts Francis about his death, he accuses Francis of not only distorting his physical identity, but also wrongfully seeking to belong to baseball apart from his Albany community. After asking Francis "[w]hy did you kill me" (26), Harold attacks Francis' claim that he "'deserved what you got'" (26), forcing Francis to accept responsibility for his abandonment of home: "Odd logic coming from a man who abandoned his own family not only that summer but every spring and summer thereafter, when baseball season started. And didn't you abandon them completely in 1916 . . . [a] coward, he'll run . . . [y]ou have no serious arguments to justify what you did" (26). Harold correctly points out that desertion of not only home, but the proper relationship to baseball causes Francis to forgo his belonging within Albany.

[74] Lois Zamora's and Wendy Faris' *Magical Realism: Theory, History, and Community* provides an excellent discussion of Kennedy's depiction of hands within *Ironweed* (480).

Harold's phantasm is the first of several ghosts that confront Francis during the course of the story, and each subsequent encounter displays Francis' physical abuse or failure of his identity within baseball. The description of the second death echoes the failure of Francis' baseball identity, as he rejects the physical forgiveness offered by the Italian immigrant Aldo Campione. The initial description of Aldo is one that calls to mind the consequences of one failing to adhere to the standards of American imperialism within Albany's community: "He'd come to America to seek his fortune and found work building the Barge Canal. But as a *country* soul he was distracted by an equine opportunity in the town of Coeymans, was promptly caught, jailed, transported to Albany for trial, and shot in the back escaping" (28). Aldo's thievery marks him as domestic other, and his death comes as a result of Francis' physical failure to secure the man as they attempt to journey away from Albany together. The parallel between the two domestic others is clear, yet Aldo's status as a victim of Francis' abuse of his baseball identity positions him as unnecessary:

> Francis can still remember what Aldo's face as it came toward him. It looked like his own, which is perhaps why Francis put himself in jeopardy: to save his own face with his own hand. On came Aldo toward the open boxcar door. Out went the hand of Francis Phelan. It touched the curved fingers of Aldo's right hand. Francis's fingers curved and pulled. And there was tension. Tension . . . [t]he man was in the air, flying toward safety on the great right hand of Francis Phelan. And then whango bango and he let go. (28)

Francis' failed attempt to save Aldo emphasizes Francis' "great right hand" (28) as an example of how powerful his hand might have been during his baseball days; the image is one of an outfielder, catching a fly ball as if there is nothing more natural for Francis.

The difference in the two men, however, is that Aldo has never truly achieved a sense of belonging while Francis journeys away from his responsibility and place within American society. Aldo is of "low birth, low estate, and commit[s] a low crime that earn[s] him the lowliest of deaths in the dust" (29), yet Francis physically rejects Aldo's offer of forgiveness by refusing to shake Aldo's hand: "He reached out his hand in a gesture to Francis that was ambiguous . . . [i]t might have been an offer of belated gratitude, or even a show of compassion for a man like Francis who had lived long . . . [i]t might have been a gesture of grace, urging, or even welcoming Francis into the next. And at this thought, Francis, who had raised his hand to meet Aldo's, withdrew it" (29). Francis mistakenly interprets Aldo's handshake as an acceptance of death and, like Aldo, eternal domestic otherness; rather, the handshake offers release from the failure of Francis' hands and his rejection of baseball as a civic religion. This refusal keeps Francis from the possibility of returning home and from absolving his status as a domestic other. His resolution to home will begin with the recognition and accepted responsibility of his misused physical baseball identity. After Francis moves through Albany and encounters the other specters from his past, one of the ghosts mentions to him that "[i]t's those traitorous hands of yours you'll have to forgive" (142). Forgiveness for Francis comes through reconciling his hands with their proper baseball identity, restoring them from their position as "artificers of some involuntary doom element in his life" (145) to signifiers of his belonging within American society.

Consequently, the reconciliation of Francis' hands accompanies the construction of Francis' home as imperialistic sacred space. When Francis returns home to see his wife Annie, the immensity of overcoming his rejection of the imperialistic identity offered at home is easily viewable: "Everything was easier than coming home, even reducing yourself to the level of

social maggot, streetside slug. But then he came home. He is home now, isn't he?" (160). The return home signifies a return to both Albany and baseball, as the completion of his journey home correlates his baseball identity with his communal identity. Within Annie's home, he is both father and third-baseman, husband and former ballplayer: "'Are you Grampa Phelan or Grampa Quinn . . . '[y]ou're the ballplayer,' Danny [his grandson] said. 'The big-leaguer. You played with the Washington Senators'" (165). Shortly thereafter, his hands, and his physicality, are restored to their proper role: "Daniel ran into the kitchen, then the pantry, and emerged with a ball and glove, which he handed to Francis" (166). The sight of the glove kindles Francis' memory, and his thoughts turn to the "'trunk of . . . things in the attic'" (166). Within the trunk, Francis finds a photograph that shows him at Chadwick Park, restoring his belonging to the civic religion and to his Irish family:

> He lifted the picture . . . and saw himself . . . tossing a baseball from bare right hand to gloved left hand . . . [w]hat the camera had caught was two instants in time: time separated and unified, the ball in two places at once, an eventuation as inexplicable as the Trinity itself. Francis now took the picture . . . for achieving the impossible: for he had always believed it impossible for him, ravaged man, failed human, to reenter history under this roof. (169)

The picture reflects the completion of Francis' journey; he has been "inexplicabl[y]" (169) restored to a sphere of baseball that he had abandoned, and the reference to the trinity establishes that his home functions as a religious, sacred sphere. He has, in essence, been born again as a member of the civil religion of baseball, and his home becomes a sacred space of imperialism. The ghosts of Francis' past embody this newfound identity; they begin to construct "a wooden structure that Francis . . . recognize[d] as bleachers" (172), transforming the home into a sacred

stadium. The description of the yard's transformation into a stadium blends the memory and myth that characterizes Kennedy's novel: "[A] great sunburst entered the darkening skies, a radiance so sudden that it seemed like a bolt of lightning; yet its brilliance remained, as if some angel of beatific lucidity were hovering outside the bathroom window. So enduring was the light, so intense beyond even sundown's final gloryburst [sic]" (172). Consequently, when the ghosts begin chanting "Dies Irae" (181), we interpret their song not as a song of judgment, but of grace.[75] Though Francis grows fearful hearing the ghosts sing, we must view this song as the resolution of his journey; the day of wrath has come for Francis Phelan, and it finds him at home, once again belonging to the civic religion of baseball. This song must be accounted for in any serious study of *Ironweed*; though the moment appears sentimental, O'Donnell mentions that "[f]or all that is legendary and 'magical' in *Ironweed*, Francis' Phelan's experiences and world are not sentimentalized" (81). As a result, we must view the "day of wrath" as it is meant to be viewed: a creation of renewed baseball identity that will define the rest of Francis' life.[76] Though the novel ambiguously ends with Francis supposedly on a train car journeying away from Albany, the final lines reference the "morning light" (227); the light of the created stadium of home dominates his mind, and he will eventually permanently return to "Danny's . . . room" (227) and to an identity dually based within the civic religion of baseball and his Irish family.

Kennedy, an Irish-American, localizes his novel *Ironweed* in his hometown using the town as a backdrop to recreate memories of baseball through the eyes of a homeless Irish man desperately longing to return to his past. Religion and baseball interpose throughout the novel, creating a man whose respite arrives only after he understands how baseball shaped his past,

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[75] "Dies Irae" is a Latin chant that translates into "Day of Wrath."

[76] Appropriately, Kennedy's novel *Very Old Bones* displays Francis' ultimate and final reconciliation to baseball, as Francis passes away on the field while serving as a third-base coach. He is restored to family and society, fulfilling the imperialistic workings of *Ironweed*.

saves his present, and provides hope for his future. Blending the memory and myth of Albany baseball with his own Irishness, Kennedy reimagines the ethnic struggles of Irish-Americans to belong within American society in *Ironweed*. Kennedy allows Francis' Irishness and his status as a ballplayer to coincide with each other, creating an identity that maintains a measure of separation from the ideals of American imperialism, yet is fully integrated into American society.

Conclusion

For Irwin Shaw, August Wilson, and William Kennedy, the influence that the concept of American exceptionalism had upon their lives stems far beyond their childhoods as domestic *others* within American cities. Baseball, the civic institution of imperialism that influenced these three men, unites them across divisions of decades and ethnicity, illustrating that baseball serves as the common ground where American identity can be created. The concept of *home*, central in these examined works, is recreated through baseball, as each author's personal journey and experiences with baseball grounds his literary focus and method of determining social identity and worth for his characters. Their works are primarily focused on discussions of belonging, and baseball is the doorway for these men to approach their creation of home within American society. This focus upon baseball as an institution of belonging is one that can be applied to other authors who share similar passions and experiences with the sport; nonetheless, the specific manner in which these three men discuss and integrate the sport within their works suggests that they chose baseball *directly* because of its roots as an exceptionalist institution.

The interplay of personal history and the impact of baseball stadiums upon these men position them in a unique place within the canon of American literature. As baseball is the oldest and arguably most influential American sport, each man's experience with baseball stadiums as a child reveals that for these men, no greater avenue of coming to terms with their *otherness* and American citizenship existed than baseball. While the comparing of short stories, a play, and a novel may seem unorthodox, the various literary forms illustrate that regardless of an author's chosen medium, baseball allows him to claim belonging to American society. As the symbol of a stadium appears in each work within this study, studying how each author incorporates that symbol – along with other baseball imagery – reveals his approach and desire to belong to

America. For Irwin Shaw, the stadium consistently appears as a place where domestic imperialism reveals an individual's desire or inability to belong to American society. Shaw uses historically familiar stadiums like Ebbets Field in Brooklyn to reveal that he too experienced baseball as an imperialistic institution and accepts the level of belonging that the stadium offers. This belonging, as "No Jury Would Convict" illustrates, is the highest concern for any domestic *other*. Because baseball grants and reflects this belonging, a proper relationship with the symbol of a stadium and baseball is the most distinguishing factor of identity within his short fiction. In *Fences*, August Wilson draws upon the history of the Negro Leagues in his creation of a symbolic stadium— Troy Maxson's yard. The narrative of the rise and fall of Negro baseball is relived through Wilson's play; the idea of a domestic home is established apart from American society, revealing that Wilson's self-created space represents his belief that the black community should have embraced the Negro Leagues as the source of their identity within American society. Wilson's blatant refusal of American exceptionalism is deliberate, allowing us to see that domestic *otherness* is an identity Wilson welcomes upon himself and his characters. William Kennedy combines the views of Shaw and Wilson to reflect that baseball can and should be separated from its exceptionalist roots as a Puritan institution. By making Francis Phelan's home the place of his reconciliation with baseball and his family, Kennedy creates a stadium where the past lack of belonging and *otherness* of Francis are not simply forgotten; instead, domestic identity is created without the sacrifice of ethnicity, as Kennedy, like the Irish-community in Albany had already done, reconciles his Irish ethnicity with the domestic imperialism of baseball. Within Kennedy's construct, the creation Francis' stadium occurs because he returns home to his ethnicity, removing his *otherness* through the paralleling of baseball with his family.

Wilson, Kennedy, and Shaw use baseball as their main methods of determining, and creating, a means of belonging to American society that would have been ultimately unachievable through any other institution. Baseball trumps other methods of offered identity within their literature, as well as contrasting against the Protestant roots of American exceptionalism. Because baseball offered an identity otherwise largely unavailable through any other civil institution, each of these writers employs baseball to a different end: Shaw desires critical respect and Americanness, Wilson retells the story of African-American prejudice in American society, and Kennedy displays a man reconciling ethnic identity through a newly created American civil institution. The common thread between the three authors is their shared understanding of the unique place and power of baseball in American culture. This study examines that exceptional place, creating a proper comprehension of how baseball embodies the idea of domestic imperialism within their lives within any other institution.

While ethnicity may appear initially to serve as a dividing line between the three men, analyzing and connecting their ethnic backgrounds through the common identity of baseball reveals how *America's Pastime* shaped and directed these groups into various roles of American society. Jews, African Americans, and Irish Americans encountered hostile, and often violent, opposition from the greater American public when they attempted to participate in baseball. Because of their initial disconnection from the sport, these ethnic groups grew to regard baseball as an unattainable civil institution to which they most likely would never belong. While my writers are largely disconnected from eras of discrimination, they are still concerned with the correlation of history, identity, and locality. They choose baseball because it, as an institution whose roots stem from the Puritan movement, grounds their works in a history that can only be understood and labeled as American. No other institution can so powerfully reflect the message

within their works. These three authors employ baseball as foundation within the created realm because it acknowledges the struggles of their communities within their realities and firmly validates their own stories as distinctly American, granting their titles of American writers a more legitimate claim than any other institution could have done. This approach is one that can be extended to other writes, like the authors in this study, who encountered baseball at an early age within American society and have found a means to address their *otherness* through baseball and its symbols. Though examining baseball as an institution of domestic imperialism is one that does not seem to reflect positively on the sport, we must examine and not ignore its imperialistic workings if we are to ever truly understand its function as a means of belonging to American society. These authors display the importance of baseball as more than just a game, but an institution whose exceptionalist qualities must be considered an integral part of their social identities.

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