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A Less Than Perfect Game, in a Less Than Perfect Place: The Critical Turn in Baseball Film

Marshall G. Most and Robert Rudd

*He can't speak much English, but that's the beauty of baseball. If he can go to his right and hit the broad side of a barn, that'll do all his talking for him.— *Big Leaguer*, 1953*

This reassuring voice-over, in reference to New York Giants minor league prospect Chuy Ramon Santiago Aguilar, sums up nicely a fundamental tenet of baseball ideology: race, ethnicity, and cultural heritage do not matter. All are welcome to participate in the national pastime. All will be treated equally. All that matters is how one plays the game. Such has been the promise of America, as well, articulated in the values and aspirations of this, its national pastime.

Of course, this has not been baseball's true history, nor America's. With the exception of brothers Fleet and Weldy Walker's one season with Toledo of the American Association in 1884, no African American player was allowed to play major league baseball until Jackie Robinson broke the modern game's color barrier in 1947. Even today, the strains and tensions of racial differences and prejudices exist in baseball. While baseball has acknowledged the racism of its past — most notably through the annual honoring of Robinson — the full history of its racial and cultural conflicts past and present remains largely unspoken.

One might expect to see a fuller exploration of these distances between the ideals and practices of baseball and American in cinema. Film is one of the most important mediums through which we collectively examine and confront the demons of our past. For the most part, however, baseball films — much like the game and America itself — have been reluctant to broach the history of prejudice and inequality in America and its national pastime.¹ It

was not until the release of *The Jackie Robinson Story* in 1950 that any baseball film depicted the realities of segregation in baseball. Prior to that, racial issues—within the game itself or the larger American culture—were never acknowledged in baseball films. On the contrary, portrayals of racial minorities, particularly African Americans and Asians, were distorted and unflattering at best.²

As we discuss at length elsewhere, racial divisions strike at the very heart of baseball's core ideology, in particular the value of community.³ The game's supposed ability to bridge differences, promote equality, and construct a sense of community is mocked by its racial history. Baseball films, however, are not so much about the reality of baseball, as the myths of its ideological vision. For decades, baseball cinema consistently offered viewers idealized images of both the game and the culture in which it is played, rather than a critical view of their underlying realities, turning a blind eye toward issues of race and ethnicity. Although *The Jackie Robinson Story* does address the endemic racism in both the game and the larger culture, the film provides assurance of the transformative nature of Robinson's ascension to the major leagues.

It would be nearly a quarter of a century before another baseball film would so much as hint at the issue of racial divide. In a brief scene at the beginning of *Bang the Drum Slowly* (1973), an African American player stands at the edge of the dugout for the playing of the national anthem, holding his cap over his heart with his middle finger extended, and his disdain for the ceremony apparent in his expression. Since then, only a handful of baseball films have addressed in any way the racism of baseball and the culture in which it is played, and certainly not as substantively nor as critically as might be expected, given the deep and lasting impact of racial and cultural prejudices not simply on the game of baseball, but on all of American culture. *The Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars and Motor Kings* (1976), for example, which tells the story of a barnstorming black baseball team during the era of baseball's segregation, does feature scenes depicting the racism the team endures from white fans. In one segment, the team must resort to showboating and clowning in order to appease militant white fans. And, unlike *The Jackie Robinson Story*, the film does not assure us that racism is now part of America's—and baseball's—past, rather than present. At the same time, however, the film's central plot line and narrative tension are not constructed around these racial issues. The film's protagonists and antagonists are all African American, and racism—either within American culture or the game itself—is not the principal theme of the film. In addition, the film's comedic elements often overshadow the critical message in those scenes which do portray the racism the team endures in Jim Crow America.

Pastime (1991) also offers a more honest—though understated—acknowledgment of the continued existence of racial prejudice in baseball, which is

rare in the baseball cinema. However, the issue of racial discrimination, as in *The Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars and Motor Kings*, is not the central theme of the film. And while *Hardball* (2001), the story of a Little League team from the Cabrini Green housing project in Chicago, does represent very graphically the effects of years of racial discrimination in America in its depiction of the life of America's impoverished black underclass, this film's central theme is also not about racism. In fact, the issue of racism, even as an underlying cause of the poverty the film so powerfully depicts, is never directly addressed. At the same time, the film offers much the same false, reassuring message as *The Jackie Robinson Story* of 50 years earlier — the simplistic platitude that baseball offers a way to overcome the devastating consequences of years of inequality. In this case, it's the poverty, the drugs, and the gang violence of an inner-city slum.

As noted, even these few films are rare exceptions in the baseball genre. Until recently, baseball films have typically presented audiences portrayals of teams such as the Cleveland Indians of *Major League* (1989). A wildly diverse team, the Indians are rife with virtually every tension — religious, class, and generational — that diversity can create, save one: despite their racial diversity, the Indians of *Major League* are somehow remarkably, singularly, utterly free from racial tensions, playing baseball in an American culture that is equally diverse, equally tolerant, and equally welcoming to all. Through such representations of baseball communities characterized by tolerance, equality, and solidarity, baseball films depict a game and a culture not necessarily as they are, but as we would like them to be.

It is in light of this historical, deeply ingrained ideological consistency in the baseball film genre that the release of three recent films, within the space of just three years, is particularly striking. In these three films—*The Perfect Game* (2009), *American Pastime* (2007), and *Sugar* (2008)—we see a very different perspective on the game of baseball and the culture in which it is played. In these films, baseball is a less than perfect game, played in a less than perfect place.

The Perfect Game

At first glance, the 2009 film *The Perfect Game* seems to offer a very traditional Hollywood treatment of baseball. The story of Mexico's 1957 Monterrey Industrial Little League team, the first international team to win the Little League World Series (and still the only team to record a perfect game in the Series final), the film employs long-established conventions as old as the baseball film genre itself. A motley, rag-tag group of underdogs, led by protagonists seeking the redemption the game has to offer, form a tight-knit com-

munity. Together they overcome overwhelming odds and triumph in dramatic fashion on one of baseball's biggest stages. In this regard, Monterrey Industrial is little different from the New York Knights of *The Natural*, *The Bad News Bears*, or the Cleveland Indians of *Major League*.

What sets *The Perfect Game* apart is its treatment of racial and ethnic discrimination. As we have noted, such honest, graphic depictions of racial tensions are rare in baseball films. However, in a film about children's baseball, they are without precedent.

The issue of discrimination emerges in the film's first scene. The film's protagonist, Cesar Faz, is employed by the St. Louis Cardinals organization, and has just learned he's been passed over for a coaching job promised to him by former Cardinals player-manager Eddie Stanky. In a heated argument with Tanner, a Cardinals executive, Cesar is told, "This is the majors and we need to bring in someone who's..." Cesar cuts off Tanner's explanation, blurting out, "Who's what? Not Mexican?" An angry Tanner shoots back, "Look amigo, when Stanky found you, you were a bat boy in San Antonio." His dream of coaching in the big leagues shattered, Cesar angrily quits and returns to his hometown of Monterrey, Mexico. Once there, he goes to work in a steel mill and begins drinking heavily.

The film portrays Monterrey more like a tight-knit, dusty village than the industrial city it was. Although the real Monterrey Industrial team was drawn from a metropolitan area of hundreds of thousands, the boys who play on *The Perfect Game's* Monterrey team all appear to live in the same working-class neighborhood where they play ball under the watchful eye of the local priest, Father Esteban, who sees baseball as a way to give these boys hope. Perhaps not surprisingly, their favorite major league team is the integrated Brooklyn Dodgers.

Fate throws Cesar, Father Esteban, and the boys together and on short notice they gather a team of Monterrey's best players, including rich kid Pepe Maiz (who plays left and provides the team's equipment), the speedy base thief Fidel Ruiz, power hitter Baltazar Charles ("the strongest kid in town"), and ace pitcher Angel Macias. Cesar has four weeks to whip the Monterrey Industrial team into shape before their first Little League tournament game in the U.S.

Upon crossing the border on their way to McAllen, Texas, for their first game, the boys' "luggage" is inspected — one pair of clean underwear carried in paper lunch sacks (they assume they'll lose their first game and return to Monterrey the next day). Cesar is sternly warned by a U.S. border official, "See ya don't leave no one behind." The team learns they will not be allowed to take their team bus into the U.S. so they must walk the ten miles to the ballpark.

Their first game is against the Mexico City All-Stars, a team described by one of the Monterrey players as "the sons of Gringo businessmen." It is the

first in a series of opponents who are all whiter and wealthier than Monterrey Industrial. After dispatching Mexico City, Monterrey faces the local McAllen team. The editor of the local paper assigns a reporter to cover the game, telling her, “We got some boys come up from Mexico. Thought we’d play the invasion angle. You know, our boys defending what their grand-daddies fought for.” It is a sentiment taken to heart by at least one McAllen fan who mutters, “Ain’t no Mexican team gonna take our flag.” As Monterrey begins to dominate the game, a frustrated McAllen coach yells at his players, “You can’t be serious, letting a bunch of wetbacks get the better of ya!” After the Monterrey victory, the satisfied *Gazette* editor gloats to his reporter, “The wetbacks winning sells more papers.”

Monterrey Industrial’s winning streak propels them into the regional tournament in Fort Worth — and to levels of racial discrimination unknown to them. In a bus station, they are baffled by the “Whites Only” sign on the restroom. Upon arriving in Fort Worth, they find themselves having a meal in a diner along with their next opponents, the team from Houston. When a waitress asks one of the Houston players if he wants the house specialty, fried chicken, he replies, “I’ll stick with the cheeseburger.” Then, pointing to a black teammate sitting alone in a distant booth, he adds, “Maybe Cleon will want to get the fried chicken,” and one of the Monterrey players asks Father Esteban, “Why is that kid sitting alone?” The priest replies, “Well, Enrique, some people don’t believe we are all His children.” One by one, the Monterrey players pick up their plates and join Cleon at his table, introducing themselves and sharing milk and cookies. Meanwhile, a customer at the counter reads a newspaper featuring the headline “Fort Worth Little League Digs In — Texas Teams Prepare for the ALAMO!”

Undefeated in Fort Worth, Monterrey travels to Louisville, Kentucky, for the Southern Regional Tournament. The team receives an invitation to tour the Louisville Slugger bat factory. As fate would have it, two members of the St. Louis Cardinals team are on site to sign bats. One of the major leaguers recognizes Cesar from St. Louis and exclaims, “It’s the Mexican! Hey, Chico! Bring us some towels.” Laughing, the other says, “And while you’re at it, my jock strap needs a washin’.” It is at this point we learn that Cesar wasn’t a coach in St. Louis, but a clubhouse attendant.

At the ball field in Louisville, the pitcher for Monterrey’s next opponent, Biloxi, is warming up. An elderly African American groundskeeper tries to explain to Biloxi’s pitcher he is tipping his pitches. The Biloxi coach intervenes, telling the man, “Why don’t you mind your own business, huh? Last thing I need is my boys takin’ baseball advice from some old groundskeeper.” As it turns out, the “old groundskeeper” is Negro League star and Baseball Hall of Famer Cool Papa Bell. Bell shows the Monterrey players how the Biloxi pitcher is telegraphing his pitches, information they use in beating Biloxi. “We’da won

this game if it hadn't been for that nosey colored guy," the Biloxi coach mutters.

After beating Owensboro, Kentucky, the Monterrey team advances to the World Series in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. At a press conference for the World Series teams, a reporter asks if the players have passed their physicals. The Little League official replies that they have and the reporter asks somewhat pointedly, "Even the Mexican team?" When Cesar asks if his team's scheduled game at 2:30 the next day can be switched, as that's their siesta time, his request is met with laughter from the assembled reporters and World Series officials. After the press conference, Cesar expresses anger at this slight in a conversation with the Reverend Clarence Bell, nephew of Cool Papa Bell, who has accompanied the Monterrey team to Williamsport. Cesar recalls that his best friend was killed at Iwo Jima but couldn't be buried in his hometown cemetery because he wasn't white. Clarence replies that his own father was lynched, and counsels Cesar, "You can't run away from that Cesar, but also you can't pick a fight every time someone calls you a name. You and your boys are making a difference — even to white folks."

Monterrey Industrial advances to the Little League World Series final against La Mesa, California. Monterrey takes a commanding lead on a grand slam, and Angel Macias pitches a perfect game. In a concluding black and white montage with newsreel narration and actual footage and stills, we see the Monterrey team traveling to Ebbets Field, where they are honored by the Brooklyn Dodgers, and to the White House where they meet President Eisenhower. They are then flown back home to Monterrey. More actual footage of the players' welcome home is shown while titles recount the fate of many members of the team — Angel Macias would play professionally in the Angels organization, Pepe Maiz would be drafted by the Giants but attend college instead and build Monterrey's baseball stadium, and another star player would leave school after the tenth grade to support his family. Half the Monterrey Industrial players would die by the time of the film's release.

The harsh, graphic portrayals of racial and ethnic divisions in *The Perfect Game* are, by themselves, a significant departure from the treatment of those issues in the baseball film genre. And while this tale of the triumph of underdog outsiders may evoke comparisons to *The Jackie Robinson Story*, there is an important distinction between the two films. Although the Mexican team is honored by the Dodgers and invited to the White House, the grudging respect and even admiration shown to Jackie Robinson by his early detractors—fans and teammates alike — never emerges in *The Perfect Game*. While the film suggests Monterrey Industrial has harnessed some of the redemptive quality of baseball to advance the cause of equality, we are offered no guarantee American society will take a good, hard look at itself in the wake of Monterrey's triumph as we are in the epilogue of *The Jackie Robinson Story*. Although the films are

set in the same era, *The Perfect Game* is a more critical, less optimistic — and we would argue more realistic — vision of America at the outset of what would prove a wracking, painfully extended struggle for civil rights that lingers into the twenty-first century.

American Pastime

Released in 2007, *American Pastime* tells the story of Lyle Nomura and his family who, along with nearly 120,000 other Japanese Americans, were interred in prison camps by the U.S. government during World War II. The film is unrelenting in its graphic representations of the abuse and humiliation these prisoners suffered at the hands of their own nation. In one scene after another, viewers are confronted with the ugliness of a racist American nationalism at its worst. In the opening minutes of the film, for example, a photo montage is used to visualize the uprooting of the Nomuras and other Japanese Americans from their homes and their “evacuation” to the Topaz Relocation Center near Abraham, Utah. The evacuation montage includes a sign on a business with the message “JAPS, KEEP OUT, YOU RATS” as well as a house sign that warns, “JAPS KEEP MOVING. THIS IS S WHITE MAN’S NEIGHBORHOOD.” Once they arrive in the camp, encircled by tall fences topped with razor wire, the internees are housed in large, barren barracks. Giant spotlights sweep across the barracks as they sleep, and the contempt expressed toward them by their guards and the local townspeople is constant.

One of the internees’ principal antagonists is Ed Tully, the local barber. Tully plays on the local semi-pro baseball team, the Abraham Bees, as does camp guard and Army Sergeant Billy Burrell. When the internees, under the leadership of Lyle Nomura’s father Kaz, get permission to improve their barracks—provided they use their own money—Sergeant Burrell takes the Nomuras into town to purchase supplies. When asked by a store owner how they will pay for them, Kaz tells him they will pay cash. Hearing this, Tully, who has been sitting in the store reading fan magazines, exclaims, “Now we’re giving these people cash, too? Sure, bring ’em here, we’ll take care of ’em, we’ll feed ’em, we’ll house ’em, and you know what, while we’re at it, why don’t we give ’em some extra cash, just to go along with it?” In a later scene, Ed and one of his friends confront Lyle Nomura when they catch him alone, after he wanders off to buy a hamburger on another supply trip into town. Tully screams at Lyle, “This town is sick to death of you people. Why don’t you go back where you came from?” When Lyle responds that he is from Los Angeles, Tully and his friend beat him severely. Lyle’s brother, Lane, volunteers to serve in the U.S. Army’s Japanese American 442nd Infantry Regiment, and is commissioned a lieutenant and sent to fight in Europe. When he returns “home” to

the camp after losing a foot in battle, Tully refuses to give him a haircut, telling him, "I don't cut Jap hair."

Burrell, too, goes out of his way to make sure the Japanese Americans know their place. In one scene, he and his corporal — not realizing Lyle Nomura had been given a baseball scholarship to San Francisco State University before the war began — bet Lyle \$10 he cannot strike Burrell out. After Lyle gets Burrell to swing and miss badly on two quick pitches, Burrell takes the next four pitches, several of which are clear strikes, insisting they were balls and informing Lyle he has lost the bet. When Burrell learns his daughter Katie has struck up a relationship with Lyle, Burrell, whose own son was killed in action, vehemently tries to put an end to it. In one scene, he angrily demands of her, "You've been seeing some Jap, you've been seeing some Jap? I know you would never do anything like that. Not to me, not to your family, not to the memory of your brother." He later prohibits her from going back to the camp at all, where she had been teaching music to the internees' children, telling her she has been fired from her job and that if she tries to go back into the camp the guards will stop her.

As a way of coping with the incredible hardship inflicted on the internees by their own government, Kaz Nomura, a former semi-pro ballplayer himself, forms a camp baseball team. When the Abraham Bees agree to play an exhibition game against the Topaz team in the Abraham ballpark, the game becomes another opportunity for the local community to express its contempt. As the Japanese team takes the field — which has of course been decked out in patriotic red, white, and blue bunting — the public address announcer proclaims over the stadium public address system, "These guys are little. And I mean *little*! It's almost like looking at a bunch of midgets out there. Personally, I always get a kick out of midgets. You see a midget, you just gotta chuckle." Later, in announcing Topaz player Kale Takeshita coming to bat, the announcer refers to him as "take-a-shit-a."

In predictable baseball film fashion, the underdog Japanese team wins the game. And there is the anticipated moment of redemption, at least on the part of Billy Burrell. At the end of a hard fought game, he demonstrates the grudging respect he has developed for his adversary with an act of sportsmanship. Lyle, attempting to score the winning run by stealing home in the bottom of the ninth with two out, slams into Burrell at the plate and knocks the ball out of his glove. Burrell quickly scoops the ball back up. The umpire, who had not seen him drop the ball, calls Nomura out. When the Japanese team begins to argue, Burrell quietly asks Lyle if he touched home plate. When Lyle tells him he did, Burrell responds, "Of course you did," then proclaims the game over, telling the umpire and his teammates, much to their anger, that he had dropped the ball. The Japanese team has won.

There is another small victory here as well for the imprisoned Japanese

Americans: there was a bet on the game, and the internees had raised \$2500. If the local pro team won, they would get the money. If the Japanese American team won, Ed Tully, who had earlier refused to do so, had to give Lt. Lane Nomura a haircut. The final scene of the film shows the racist barber finally getting his comeuppance in his barbershop, cutting Lane Nomura's hair. The faces of the men, women, and children from Camp Topaz are pressed against the window, watching Tully's well-deserved humiliation.

In the end, however, these victories are small satisfactions. Unlike *The Jackie Robinson Story* (1950), there is no assurance that America is now a different place. Nor is there any attempt to justify the mistreatment of Japanese Americans. Following the scene in the barbershop, the film ends with a graphic:

The last of the ten Relocation Camps closed on March 20, 1946, four years after the first of 120,000 persons were incarcerated. In World War II, the Japanese-American 442nd Regimental Combat Team suffered 9,486 dead and wounded in some of the fiercest fighting in Europe. Man for man, no American unit in any war this nation ever fought took greater casualties or earned more commendations of honor.

During the entire war, there was not a single incident of espionage or sabotage reported in America involving any person of Japanese descent.

As the film makes so clear, there are no excuses. What lingers most, long after the final out, and long after the film's credits roll, are not Billy Burrell's modest redemption, nor the satisfaction of Ed Tully's comeuppance, but rather the images of a truly ugly racist and nationalistic spirit that represents not the best of America, but the worst. In *American Pastime*, not even baseball can atone for American racism.

Sugar

Driven perhaps by an irresistible journalistic impulse to seek out metaphorical allusions inspired by the film's title, more than one reviewer has described *Sugar* as a "sweet" film.⁴ What Miguel "Sugar" Santos finds in his journey into professional baseball and American culture, however, is anything but sweetness. Rather, it is a painful lesson in the bitter realities of both. While *The Perfect Game* and *American Pastime* explicitly and critically examine the racism of American culture, *Sugar* presents a more complex and in many ways more subtle critique of the American promise of equality and acceptance for all. It illuminates the ways in which not only racial differences, but also differences in language and culture serve to isolate and disqualify many from the promises of America, and of its national pastime. Although on the surface *Sugar's* critique of both American culture and baseball seems less strident and less explicit than those of *The Perfect Game* or *American Pastime*, it is no less critical, as it deconstructs the deeply imbedded myth that, through baseball,

players and fans alike will create shared, nurturing communities built upon values of tolerance, solidarity, caring, and compassion.

Recruited by the American League Kansas City Knights, Sugar begins his odyssey at the team's "Professional Baseball Academy" in the Dominican Republic. Sugar and countless others from professional baseball's impoverished colony share the dream of major league success and a better life. Sugar is scouted, groomed, and processed with calculated efficiency in baseball's equivalent of the clothing manufacturing sweatshop where his mother works in his hometown of San Pedro. The Kansas City Knights' baseball academy is not about the *game* of baseball, it is about the business of baseball.

The players themselves live at the baseball academy, going home to their families only on occasional weekends. Indeed, in one of the many lectures on what it takes to make it to the U.S. and the major leagues, the recruits are told that while they may be concerned about their families, they must forget about that and everything else. "To succeed," they are told, "you've got to be like a racehorse, focused only on your final goal." It will not be sweetness in Sugar's voice, but bitterness, as he recalls this message some weeks later, when his best friend Jorge is cut from the Bridgetown Swing, the Iowa Single-A club he and Sugar were sent to out of spring training. "They owe him another chance," Sugar tells his girlfriend in a call back home, "He's worked too hard. I mean ... he's not a horse."

Along with incessant admonitions that they must work always harder, Sugar and the other recruits are taught other things they must know if they are to survive in the big leagues. They are taught a modicum of English—phrases such as "fly ball," "home run," and, for times when they may be told their performance is not as good as it was last year, "I want to give it a chance," "thank you," and "I'll do my best." When being lectured for getting drunk the night before with a teammate who has been released, Sugar and his best friend Jorge are warned, "Nobody's going to take this shit from a pair of Dominican rookies when you get to the U.S."

The baseball world of Miguel "Sugar" Santos is not the joyful, carefree community of baseball seen in so many baseball films, in which grown men play the game with child-like innocence simply for the love of it, and then inevitably succeed both on and off the field. Sugar's baseball world is comprised of business, ceaseless competition just to survive, and never-ending pressure. At Spring Training in Phoenix, Sugar and the other pitchers in camp are warned there is always someone above them looking to keep them down, and someone below them looking to take their place. "We've got 200 pitchers in camp, and less than 50 positions to fill in the organization," they are told. The message is clear, and constant: only a few will survive.

It is the pressure—the pressure to work hard, to succeed, to make his family proud, and to keep sending them money—which eventually gets to

Sugar; the pressure of knowing that if he cannot make the grade he will simply be discarded. Although his career in Bridgetown begins with the sweetness of success, Sugar's dream of making it big in the States is, like his friend Jorge's, brought to an end by injury. After some weeks on the disabled list following a foot injury, Sugar pitches poorly upon his return. From that point, his descent is quick and steep. It is not merely the injury to his foot which ends Sugar's career, but the deeper injury to his confidence, to his mind, and to his soul. As the fear of not making it, the fear of not succeeding, and the fear of being discarded, eats away at him, Sugar withdraws—from his team, from the game, even from his family back home, whom he has been assuring that everything is going fine rather than admit his injuries and failures. When he finally sees his spot in the rotation taken over by the newest rising phenom in the Kansas City factory system, his loneliness, his depression, and his growing isolation from the game become more than he can bear.

It is the business of baseball, *Sugar* tells us, that drove Miguel "Sugar" Santos away from the game—but not that alone. In addition to being thrust into the highly competitive business of baseball with the incessant fear of not being good enough to make the cut, Sugar is suddenly immersed in a new and completely alien culture, in which the pressures to fit in, and the fear of failing to do so are equally intense. To a significant degree, the difficulties Sugar encounters when he comes to the U.S. are related to not being able to speak the language. For example, on his first night in Phoenix, he and several other players go to a café for dinner. When Sugar's friend Jorge, the only one among them who can speak and read English, orders French toast, all of the other players order the same. From then on, unable to read the menu or order anything else in English, and clearly embarrassed by this inability, all Sugar eats when he goes to the café is French toast, until finally the waitress who served him French toast night after night brings him some scrambled, over-easy, and sunny-side-up eggs, and teaches him the English he needs to order them.

A central theme of the film is the difficulty that Sugar faces in daily life from not being able to speak the language. Language barriers leave Sugar with feelings of embarrassment and humiliation. After he is sent to the Single-A club in Bridgeport, Iowa, Sugar lives with a host family, Earl and Helen Higgins and their daughter, Ann. As Helen shows him through the house, and later, as she and Earl give him the rules of the house, they speak to him as if he were a child. The first night at dinner, the family engages in a debate about whether or not Sugar has ever eaten meat loaf. The discussion clearly leaves Sugar feeling awkward and out of place; for while he cannot understand what they are saying, he clearly understands they are talking about him. A similar incident takes place later in the film, as Earl and Helen are driving Sugar home after a bad pitching performance. The two engage in a debate about what Sugar's problem was in the game. When Helen tells Sugar she thinks the problem began when he started

dropping his arm in the third, Earl snaps at her: "He lost control of his breaking pitches. And they just zeroed in on his fastball, which isn't as fast as it used to be." This interchange takes place as if Sugar were not even there, as Sugar sits alone in the back seat staring out the car window.

Although the language barrier is a key reason for Sugar's sense of isolation and alienation from the culture around him, it is not the only barrier. There is also the issue of race. While early in the film it is suggested by one of his teammates in the Dominican Republic that Sugar earned his name because of his sweetness with the ladies, he quickly learns after joining the club in Bridgeport that white women are off limits for a black man from the Dominican Republic. When Sugar and some of his teammates go to a local night club, he and Jorge begin dancing with a couple of white female patrons. The angry glares from the white men in the club and the ensuing, inevitable brawl result in Sugar and his teammates being expelled from the club. Although his teammates are laughing as they walk across the parking lot, Sugar looks back at the club with a look of hurt and sadness. It is apparently the first time he has been told certain things in America — at least the America of Bridgeport, Iowa — are off limits. It will not be the last. As the film progresses, Sugar develops a fondness for the Higgins' daughter, Ann. When he arrives at a meeting of a church social group which she heads, Sugar brings her the ball with which he pitched his first strike-out. He clearly is developing a fondness for her. However, when they finally kiss in a later scene, she quickly pulls back, apologizing, and saying she has to leave. It is clear there will be no romantic relationship and Sugar knows why. Later, when the newly arrived Salvador Torres proudly shows Sugar the ball from his first strikeout, Sugar tells him, "Just do me a favor. Don't give it to the first white girl you see."

Confronted with the barriers of race, language, and culture, Sugar encounters a world which is different from the one he left in almost every respect. As the film progresses, he becomes more withdrawn and distant from his teammates and the game of baseball, particularly after the injury. He also becomes increasingly isolated from the entirety of the American culture that surrounds him. Perhaps no scene captures his experience of complete isolation more powerfully than one in which, after leaving his hotel room, he walks through the hotel. As he drifts through the lobby, the bar, and other public areas, it is as if Sugar is in a bubble. The dark lighting, the hand-held camera following him as he walks, and the oppressive sound of the music, with the hotels sounds muted and distant, all create a powerful sense of confusion and isolation. When he enters the bowling alley, Sugar sees Brad Johnson and another player, along with two women, bowling, laughing, and having a good time. Sugar turns, and heads back to his hotel room. This is a world which he knows he is not and will never be a part of. At the end of the scene, Sugar is sitting alone, whittling on a piece of wood with his pocket knife.

Later in the film, Sugar's withdrawal and isolation is mirrored later on the baseball field. After long struggle to come back from his injury, Sugar illegally obtains some pills from a teammate that he is told will really "amp him up." Although he pitches very well for the first couple of innings, Sugar quickly comes undone as the effects of the drugs become more severe. He begins talking to himself on the mound. And when, after giving up a home run, he throws at the next batter's head in frustration, a brawl breaks out between the two teams. As the players fight in the background, the camera focuses on Sugar; he is alone, completely isolated in his own desperate and fear-filled bubble. By now, both the game and the American culture in which he had invested all of his dreams are completely alien to him. He has neither baseball, nor family, nor friends. A few days later, as he is about to board the team bus for a road trip, Sugar tells his teammate (and replacement) Salvador that he needs to go back to the locker room. As he will later tell his friend Jorge when they meet in New York, "I wasn't gonna wait for them to throw me out." Sugar walks away from the nightmare that baseball — and America — have become and boards a bus to New York City.

When he arrives in New York, Sugar takes the subway into the city, getting off at the Yankee Stadium exit. He takes a room at a flophouse hotel, finds a job washing dishes at a diner, and begins to rebuild his life. After being taken in by Osvaldo, the owner of a small carpentry shop, and reconnecting with his friend Jorge, Sugar gradually finds peace with himself and a home in the Dominican community of New York City.

The film ends with Sugar joining Jorge's baseball team, which plays in a league composed of former professional ballplayers; most of them are Latinos who, like Sugar, began their baseball careers in the U.S. with a major league organization and were eventually discarded. After pitching a strong first inning and getting a strikeout for the third out, Sugar receives the congratulations of his teammates and heads for the bench. Sitting with his teammates, Sugar smiles briefly looking at the people in the stands who have come to watch, including the people he works with at the diner, his new girlfriend, and Osvaldo. A look of reflection and sadness crosses his face for a few moments as he contemplates all that has happened and all that might have been. Then he smiles again as he laughs with his new teammates. The lyrics of the closing soundtrack, a Moby song titled *In this World*, sum up what Sugar has been seeking and what he has at last found: "Lordy, don't leave me all by myself." At long last, Sugar is no longer all by himself.

Discussion

As we noted earlier, the typical theme of baseball films since the 1930s has been that of those who play baseball and their fans coming together to

form caring communities of tolerance, equality, and nurturance.⁵ Baseball, these films suggest, serves as the means for the creation of such communities, not merely by bringing players and their fans together to play and cheer for the game they love, but more importantly through the core values which baseball is said to represent. These are idealized visions of community, to be sure, but compelling nonetheless. They reflect both a game and an American culture as we wish them to be, assuring us that baseball is the perfect game and that it is played in a perfect place.

It is in light of this long history of baseball cinema that Ryan Fleck, one of *Sugar's* co-producers, commented about his film: "Baseball fans tend to think of baseball movies as having a certain trajectory and a certain arc, and I think they were disappointed that it didn't have that arc — that obvious clichéd journey that they were hoping to find going into the movie."⁶ Indeed, *Sugar* is very much the opposite of those often sanitized journeys that are so reflective of the baseball film genre. In the end, Miguel "Sugar" Santos finds neither success nor happiness, nor community, through professional baseball. It is not until he walks away from the game of baseball — or at least the business of baseball — that he finds any of these. Nor does he find them in the idealized American melting-pot, the America that presumably does not care about the color of your skin, or the language you speak. Where he does find them is in a small diner washing dishes, in a carpentry shop owned by a Puerto Rican named Osvaldo and, eventually, playing on a sandlot team composed of castoffs like himself from the major league factory system — all in a Latin borough of New York City. For Sugar, professional baseball and American culture, both so often idealized, brought him isolation and despair.

On the surface, both *American Pastime* and *The Perfect Game* appear to be unlike *Sugar*. *American Pastime* and *The Perfect Game* initially seem to share much with the triumphant journeys common to most baseball films. In *American Pastime*, the racist, oppressive guards and local townspeople are put in their place by a superior baseball team of prisoners at the Japanese American internment camp. And one of the guards, at least, appears to have experienced a degree of consciousness-raising in the process. In *The Perfect Game*, the victorious Little League World Champions from Mexico are in the end cheered by an adoring American public. In both of these films, however, unlike those of most baseball films, these "happy" endings appear all the more implausible and unconvincing in light of the harsh, often virulent racism that has so dominated these films right up until their clichéd resolutions. In *American Pastime* and *The Perfect Game*, it is evident that the predictable endings ring false; indeed, their attempts at resolution through evocation of a tolerant and nurturing American are hollow.

American Pastime, *The Perfect Game*, and *Sugar* present powerful critical visions of both the game and U.S. culture. Although it seems unlikely that *The*

Perfect Game, *American Pastime*, and *Sugar* reflect a pivotal critical turn in baseball films, they represent a departure from the preceding canon. None of the three found a large following among American movie audiences.⁷ However, it is not insignificant, nor coincidental, that these films emerged when they did, within a three year span from 2007 to 2009. For even at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, social justice in America remains elusive.

Nativist perceptions continue to promote distrust and intolerance toward ethnic, racial, and religious minorities. These tensions are not new to American culture. *The Perfect Game*, *American Pastime*, and *Sugar* however, offer critical visions that break with tradition of baseball cinema. In contrast to earlier movies, these three films differ significantly from “the obvious clichéd journey(s)” that have long been part of the baseball film genre.⁸ These revisionist films portray the American journey toward tolerance as incomplete.

Notes

1. Marshall Most and Robert Rudd, *Stars, Stripes and Diamonds: American Culture and the Baseball Film* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006).

2. Robert Rudd and Marshall Most, “Portrayals of Racial Minorities in Baseball Film,” in *The Cooperstown Symposium on Baseball and American Culture 2002*, ed. William Simons (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003).

3. Most and Rudd, *Stars, Stripes and Diamonds*.

4. Claudia Puig, “In ‘Sugar’ Baseball Is Only the Grain of the Dream,” *USA Today*, April 17, 2009, accessed May 5, 2012, http://www.usatoday.com/life/movies/reviews/2009_04_16_sugar_review_N.htm; Alan Whyte, “Sugar: Baseball and Struggle,” *World Socialist*, April 2009, accessed May 5, 2012, http://www.wsws.org/articles/2009/apr2009/suga_a16.shtml.

5. Most and Rudd, *Stars, Stripes and Diamonds*.

6. Mayer Nissim, “Ryan Fleck, Anna Boden (‘Sugar’),” *Digital Spy*, June 2, 2009, accessed May 1, 2012, http://www.digitalspy.com/movies/interviews/a157553/ryan_fleck_anna_boden_sugar.html.

7. *Sugar* grossed just \$1,144,438 at the box office and its widest theatrical release was 51 screens. *The Perfect Game* fared worse, grossing a mere \$1,089,445 despite opening in 417 theaters nationwide (a particularly disappointing showing given its \$12.5 million production budget). With a theatrical release limited to Los Angeles, Berkeley and Fresno, California, Salt Lake City, Utah and Tokyo, Japan, *American Pastime* attracted even smaller audiences and was in theaters only days before it was released on DVD. The film’s box office gross has not been revealed by the film’s distributor, Warner Bros., but it is doubtful the theatrical run came close to recouping the film’s modest \$4 million production budget.

8. Nissim, “Ryan Fleck, Anna Boden.”

Filmography

American Pastime, Dir. Desmond Nakano, ShadowCatcher Entertainment/Warner Bros., 2007.

The Bad News Bears, Dir. Michael Ritchie, Paramount Pictures, 1976.

Bang the Drum Slowly, Dir. John Hancock, Paramount Pictures, 1973.

Big Leaguer, Dir. Robert Aldrich, Metro-Goldwyn Mayer, 1953.

- The Bingo Long Traveling All Stars & Motor Kings*, Dir. John Badham, Universal Pictures, 1976.
Hardball, Dir. Brian Robbins, Paramount Pictures, 2001.
The Jackie Robinson Story, Dir. Alfred E. Green, Jewel Productions/Eagle-Lion Films, 1950.
Major League, Dir. David S. Ward, Paramount Pictures, 1989.
The Natural, Dir. Barry Levinson, Tri-Star Pictures, 1984.
Pastime, Dir. Robin B. Armstrong, Bullpen Productions/Open Road Ltd./Miramax, 1990.
The Perfect Game, Dir. William Dear, Prelude Pictures/HighRoad/IndustryWorks, 2009.
Sugar, Dir. Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, HBO Films/Sony Classics, 2008.