Perez, Richard

Remembering my father's face: Latino baseball, Roberto Clemente, and an ethics of hospitality

The City University of New York
New York, Estados Unidos

Available in: http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=37719213
REVIEW ESSAY

Remembering my father’s face: Latino baseball, Roberto Clemente, and an ethics of hospitality

RICHARD PEREZ

Playing America’s Game: Baseball, Latinos, and the Color Line
By Adrian Burgos Jr.
Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007
384 pages; $21.95 [paper]

Clemente: The Passion and Grace of Baseball’s Last Hero
By David Maraniss
New York: Simon & Shuster, 2006
416 pages; $26.00 [cloth]

The Team that Changed Baseball: Roberto Clemente and the 1971 Pittsburg Pirates
By Bruce Markusen
256 pages; $25.00 [cloth]
Ethics, hospitality, and Latino baseball

Two years ago my father, to whom I was extremely close, my best domino partner, sports and music teacher, life counselor, died of cancer. To some extent this review, and my ongoing reflections on Latino baseball, are indebted to him and are, moreover, a way for me to eulogize his absent presence. He was especially an avid Roberto Clemente fan. Each time he spoke about him his face would light up, as if possessed by an Afro-Latino god, learning from Clemente’s life and spirit, lessons that exceeded the poetic, socially neutral rules of the baseball field. He was more than a baseball player, my father always insisted, trying to get me to look beyond the legend, beyond statistics, in some ways beyond the game itself and into the human qualities that made Clemente an ethical and political example. My father also predicted as early as 1975 that one day Latinos would predominate baseball.

The three texts this review examines looks at the significant history of Latino participation in baseball throughout the hemisphere but especially in the Major Leagues: Playing America’s Game: Baseball, Latinos, and the Color Line by Adrian Burgos Jr.; the story of the Pittsburg Pirates’ 1971 season, when they won the World Series with more Latinos than any team before, is the subject of The Team that Changed Baseball: Roberto Clemente and the 1971 Pittsburg Pirates by Bruce Markusen; and a detailed biography on the most important Latino player on and off the field, Clemente: The Passion and Grace of Baseball’s Last Hero by David Maraniss. The movement here is from the general (history) to the specific (biography). Yet all three books have at their core a philosophical stance that promotes an ethics of hospitality. Latinos, I will argue, are the embodiment of a national dilemma, wherein the very limits and possibility of a democratic ethos are defined in relation to its variegated population. In no place, as these texts document, is this tension and development of democracy more publicly played out than on the imaginative terrains of the baseball field where hospitality is reluctantly offered and arbitrarily denied.

Un/Democratic explorations: Baseball, Latinos, and race

Latino participation, both in the United States and in Latin America, is evident since the inception of baseball. Adrian Burgos’s text Playing America’s Game brilliantly details the assorted Latino attempts to play professionally in North America; the first Latinos to break through the racially guarded blockades set up to protect white players; the creation of competitive leagues in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Santo Domingo; and a reciprocal relationship with the Negro Leagues that contributed to the advancement of players of color throughout the Americas. The text is broken up into three substantive parts, beginning with the interplay between the emergence of baseball in the late 19th century and the color line that became part of its rigid and fearful constitution. It then, in Part Two, explores the slow and cautious inclusion of lighter skinned Latinos or Latinos with assumed Indian ancestry. It is in response that Cuban, Caribbean, and Negro leagues begin to grow, producing a sophisticated brand of baseball, pressuring North American owners to incorporate some of the blatant talent developing in the other leagues. Finally, Burgos concludes in Part Three with the complex afterlife of the full integration of baseball. Throughout the text Burgos emphasizes the concomitant relationship between racial politics and baseball’s mythic status as an expression of white privilege. What becomes clear is the color line in the United States, so avidly held by pervasive markers of exclusion like train tracks and “for whites only” signs, by random and legalized violence,
was buttressed by an ideology brittle at its core. Latino baseball players, as Burgos chronicles, were among the first to expose its fragile logic and constitution.

Particularly poignant is Burgos’s work on early Latinos and the humiliating role they were forced to occupy. “Holding the line” was not to completely exclude Latinos but to make sure there was ample evidence of their racial pedigree while also undermining their participation by presenting them as spectacles of difference. The Chinese-American cultural critic Rey Chow provocatively argues that the “politics of ethnicity” has a “visual emphasis” or a “condition of out-of-focusedness” that is analogous to a caged animal in a zoo. She goes on to say: “Wouldn’t it be more accurate to say that, however benevolent and complimentary the visitor might be, the image produced of the animals—in this case, the third-world cultural workers, the ethnics caught in the plight of postimperialist nationalisms—is bound to be out of focus because they are the products of a certain kind of gaze to which they are (pre)supposed to play as, to act like, to exist in the manner of something? This something may be an idea, an image, or a stereotype, but the point remains that the objects under scrutiny are dislocated and displaced to begin with, and subordinated even as they appear as themselves.” The Mexican Vincent Nava, who played for the Providence Grays from 1882 to 1886, is one example, among many in Burgos’s text, who entered the league “subordinated even as” he appeared as himself. His exoticism immediately boosted ticket sales everywhere he went. In order to keep his racial ambiguity hidden the team advertised him as a Spaniard and displayed him in the same way teams today use mascots and other “curiosities.” Burgos explains:

A few minor league teams signed ambiguously white ethnics or, in rare instances, African Americans. Still other teams hired mascots or featured other curiosities to draw fans. It was in this vein that the Providence board agreed to sign Nava, not as a challenge to the gentleman’s agreement or the color line, but rather as an exotic drawing card (2007: 38).

What is interesting here is the fact that Providence realized their team needed to be supplemented by otherness in order to make themselves more of a “draw” to fans. Even as baseball spent the next half-century trying to degrade the process of integration, constructing a series of racial alibis (they are like mascots; they make us money; a few of them are naturally talented, etc.), it became impossible to deny that the best baseball was a racially and ethnically heterogeneous mix of the most gifted players. This insight, however, would be realized incrementally with violent resistance to inclusion taking place every step of the way: which meant, the players, like Vincent Nava, who were allowed to play were forced to compromise their own humanity.

Yet these compromises, Nava and other Latinos understood, were with an eye toward the future. It was as if some cosmic battle were taking place between the democratic sensibilities of the game and the white-only imperative anxiously enforced by owners, players, media and fans. Latinos would continue to seep into the league and when they were prohibited, they performed in their own leagues, as did the Cuban Stars and Cuban Senators, with a magnificence too brilliant to be ignored. Excellence, these players showed, created its own legitimization and
Perhaps Burgos’s most significant accomplishment in Playing America’s Game is the way in which he traces this dynamic between humiliation as participatory requirement and, conversely, a Latino conviction for baseball that transcends the sport and transforms it into an allegory of justice and democracy. At its center baseball was a flexible space, a “contested terrain” (Burgos 2007: 7), where ideologies were articulated and transfigured. Its inherent flexibility would prove to be inconsistent with “America’s” rigid ideology of race. Latino players would continually enter the Major Leagues shaking its foundations: Osvaldo “Ozzie” Virgil and Roberto “Bobby” Estrella, Orestes “Minnie” Minoso and Luis Aparacio, Vic Power and Al Lopez, Orlando Cepeda and Juan Marichal, Felipe, Matty and Jesús Alou, and, of course, as the culmination of an era and a new beginning and consciousness, Roberto Clemente.


What characterizes, as Burgos shows, the ultimate inclusion of Latinos into baseball is a dazzling set of players and a belligerent relationship with the media. From Roberto Clemente to Sammy Sosa the media honed in on Latino players finding fault in all aspects of their difference: questioning their desire, work ethic, style, language skills, and intelligence. These baseball attacks mask the racist attitudes that underlie the media’s “concern” for the game and how it is played. As Burgos explains, “The sportswriter’s goal of creating good copy meant emphasizing for readers the lines of cultural and racial difference” (Burgos 2007: 224). Pedro Martínez describes Latino anxiety of the press: “Sometimes, knowing as much as I know and understanding as much as I understand, I am afraid of the media” (Burgos 2007: 255). Confronting and manipulating the media or existing in virtual silence became the only viable options for Latinos. Clemente dealt with the media with a resistive candor unprecedented in baseball history, answering questions about “his injuries, his views on race relations, or paternalistic beliefs held by some of those he encountered while playing America’s game” (Burgos 2007: 225). Make no mistake, his honesty was deliberately subversive, a confrontation of truths and difference. Sosa, on the other hand, in a kind of postmodern gesture, strategically used an overwhelming affability in order to enhance his own marketability. Burgos interprets Sosa’s interaction with the press to express his subtle understanding of the racial knowledge. “Hidden in the subtleties of Sosa’s performance was his use of racial knowledge to possibly extract financial gain by endearing himself to fans and marketers” (Burgos 2007: 252). Perhaps here Burgos misses a chance to critically interrogate this apolitical position that many players
today take in order to both prosper financially and be treated better by the press. The distinction between Clemente and Sosa, it seems to me, is a difference in political emphasis. If Clemente was concerned with questions of fairness and justice, Sosa, who wore Clemente’s 21 and called him his idol, went out of his way to be enamored by the league, media, and fans. This often meant withholding commentaries on race relations. His relationships to Mark McGuire and Barry Bonds best exemplified his distance from racial problems that pervade baseball. Sosa, almost obsequiously, praised McGuire in the press and in several strange instances openly criticized Bonds. Indubitably, Sosa understood the two players’s symbolic significance to the media and, in an attempt to stay on the media’s good side, found it necessary to speak out against Bonds. While Burgos does a brilliant job early on narrating the interconnected plight of Latinos and African-Americans, he, particularly in his analysis of Sosa, neglects their ongoing importance.

In the end, Adrian Burgos Jr.’s *Playing America’s Game: Baseball, Latinos, and the Color Line* is a groundbreaking work. It seamlessly records the history of Latino participation in baseball, interweaving the political and epistemological crises that accompanied their presence. Latinos, as Burgos recognizes, are the racialized foreigners that bravely put into question claims of democracy and justice. America’s game, this text makes clear, is, and has always been, a Transamerican endeavor.

**Roberto Clemente: El Ejemplo**

I will argue that the three things my father admired about Clemente are determined by an ethics of racial difference: first the scene of address, for Clemente this is best exemplified by his relationship to the media, and his incorrigible need to say how he felt, to express his ideas no matter how controversial or provocative to white supremacist myths. It is clear that Clemente was obsessed by questions of justice. Second, borrowing from Spivak, is Clemente’s post-colonial singularity, an attribute my father saw in masculine terms, explaining that Clemente was “his own man” and thus *el ejemplo*. For Spivak this notion of subaltern singularity leads to a crisis in cultural translation unhinging the interpretive necessity and narcissistic reflection of power (see Spivak 1999). And lastly, Clemente embodied a politics of hospitality, which my father explained by asserting that “he [Clemente] loved everyone.”

With these three points in mind I will consider David Maraniss’s thorough biographical exploration *Clemente: The Passion and Grace of Baseball’s Last Hero*. This detailed biography chronicles Clemente’s baseball life from his high school days to his death twenty years later, also delving into aspects of his personal life. The text’s most important contribution, however, is its examination of Clemente’s fluctuating relationship to the press throughout his career.

Gloria Anzadua says in *Borderlands*, “If you want to hurt me talk badly about my language.” In the 1960 season, which saw a young Clemente help his team win the World Series, defeating the mighty New York Yankees, the public gets their first glimpse of a forthrightness yet to be seen in a Latino player. As Maraniss points out throughout his biography, Clemente never considered himself an underdog. That same year Clemente was not given the MVP of the league. It went instead to Dick Groat, a white player on his team whose statistics were dwarfed by Clemente’s. Interestingly, Branch Ricky, the famous general manager who had signed Jackie Robison, told Clemente that he was to play without complaint or without retaliating for racial abuse by the fans, other players, or the media. In essence Clemente was to be an invisible presence performing his baseball duties while accepting persistent
injustices that circumscribed his life inside and outside the field. Clemente was incapable of this kind of subservience. Despite the World Series win he immediately began to complain about being slighted for the MVP, which, of course, was an example of larger ontological slights and social elisions. The MVP was not just an award but a signifier of presence and worth. The press, ever masked in objective reporting, was politely furious at Clemente’s daring complaint. In order to humiliate him they began to write his quotes phonetically, highlighting at once Clemente’s status as a foreigner, his class and race. So he would be quoted: “I get Heet” or “he peetch me inside” or “I ope to get peetch outside” etc. (Maraniss 2006: 155). By deforming his language, the press abdicates its responsibility refusing to take his critiques seriously. They render him barbaric. Interestingly, the word barbaric etymologically means one who speaks gibberish. The scene of address here, where a subject comes into social being through what Fanon calls reciprocal recognitions, is walled off by the media’s inability to create the discursive space for such unsettling racial questions. For such an openness to critique, to an ethics of self-questioning that Clemente’s outspoken otherness proposes, implies identity risks, specifically a destabilizing of the relation between whiteness and justice. As Judith Butler argues: “It also turns out that self-questioning of this sort involves putting oneself at risk, imperiling the very possibility of being recognized by others, since to question the norms of recognition that govern what I might be, to ask what they leave out, what they might be compelled to accommodate, is, in relation to the present regime, to risk recognizability as a subject or at least to become an occasion for posing the questions of who one is (or can be) and whether one is recognizable” (Butler 2005: 23) What is interesting here is that Clemente becomes more outspoken, driven by the hurt Anzaldua talks about, to relate a counter story to that told by the press. For Clemente then giving an account of oneself, while it risks social obliteration, is the first moment of an ethical response to his circumstances: I speak; therefore, I am. I speak and in speaking seek justice. His response to writer Myron Cope: “I know I don’t speak as bad as they say I speak. I know that I don’t have good English pronunciation because my tongue belong to Spanish. But I never in my life start a sentence with me. The sportswriters do that. Me Tarzan you Jane” (Maraniss 2006: 174). Interestingly, Maraniss, a sports writer himself for The Washington Post, attempts to objectively interpret Clemente’s relationship with the press, conceding that the press was cruel, while also suggesting that Clemente was “oversensitive.” Here Maraniss intimates Clemente’s temperament (“guarded and at times unapproachable”) added to his animosity with the media. Yet this simplifies, rather than complicates, Clemente’s rage and refusal to compromise his integrity as a player or human being.

Part of what made Clemente such a powerful social commentator was his extraordinary sense of strength and singularity. “You have to become what you want others to be” Ghandi once said, that is, you have to embody, not just preach, the very ethical persona responsive to a politics of difference. For Gayatri Spivak singularity is a subaltern specificity whose cultural translation is cryptic and resistant (Spivak 1999: 111). A reporter once asked him, “Is the face of your face such that you never smile

It is clear that Clemente was obsessed by questions of justice.
too often?” Clemente replied with an emphasis on respect for otherness: “This is
the way that I am. I am natural. Nobody can say Roberto is mean. I might look mean
but I really respect people” (Maraniss 2006: 172). The question, which aims both to
soften Clemente and translate him, fails to understand the deeper concerns of his
expression, which is how to “really respect people.” Clemente does not bother to
explain himself in detail because the work of translation, which literally means to
move across, must be done by the other side. Not only does Clemente “respect
people” but stands in as a figure to be respected. The question of how he looks is
important since his look of meaness is actually a way of taking people seriously,
while the reporters’s pleasant look may, conversely, hide a meanness that lurks
underneath. This is the differential gap that the media would not cross in order to
meet Clemente. Instead they searched for a passive smile, and the racial history
implied in that smile, that would keep the relation of power in place. Maraniss’s
text does an excellent job putting these confrontations with the press side by side,
giving the reader a sense of Clemente’s struggle for public self-definition.

“Clemente does not bother to explain himself in detail
because the work of translation, which literally means
to move across, must be done by the other side.”

The low point of Clemente’s relationship with the media, as Maraniss documents,
comes in a disturbing and fascinating profile done by *Sports Illustrated*. He is the
cover story and, in his eyes, finally getting the national recognition that he deserves.
The story, however, takes a strange turn, ignoring his exploits and leadership on
the field for a bizarre discussion of his multiple injuries. For forty-eight paragraphs
Clemente’s body is described in perverse anatomical detail, depicting him as a
hypochondriac, a complainer of the smallest bruise, and thus, not a reliable player,
person, or social narrator. Similar to his deformed quotations his body here becomes
symptomatic of a racial and class flaw, an immature and fragile body (and thus
intellect and history) that justifies its socially debased dislocation. Ironically,
Clemente would detail his injuries to anyone who asked him, in an attempt to
emphasize his unrelenting spirit and dedication to the game, but also because
he thought reporters really wanted to know. Yet, as Spivak reminds us, an ethical
singularity forces white supremacist discourse to go to desperate lengths precisely
because this figure of the subaltern “discloses” the protocols of power and its
incessant value coding. The article on Clemente’s body unwittingly calls attention
to itself as a violent narrative of mutilation and erasure, bringing us back to the
presentation of slave bodies on auction blocks. Clemente’s passionate emphasis
on respect sheds light on an ethical debt to the stranger not afforded to him by the
press. What is thrilling about Maraniss’s book is the way he presents Clemente's
unrelenting pride and dignity in the face of enormous media onslaughts. Where the
book troubles is in its neutral stance, only tentatively judging the racial politics.

I want to conclude here with a brief reflection on the notion of hospitality and
the stranger. In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Hamlet is told that a ghost that looks like
his father has been seen in the graveyards of Denmark. When Hamlet and Horatio
finally see the ghost, Horatio asks if he should attack the strange being with his sword. Hamlet's response is one that privileges hospitality as a reaction to the strange or stranger: he replies “therefore as a stranger give it welcome” (Act I.V. 165). According to Derrida the foreigner is the “question of being” and “the being that puts me in question” (Derrida 2000: 3). Hospitality then begins with a psychic anxiety, precisely because, as Butler argues the other puts us at risk, and asks us to oppose the laws of our identity, questions us with a mirroring difference. “Really respecting people” as Clemente describes the ethical intention expressed by the seriousness of his face, positions him, like Hamlet, as one who is poised to welcome the socially estranged. Hospitality for Clemente is the beginning and end point of an Afro-Latino ethics. The other is received, even as it threatens us, because it comes with a message about our own human limits. This, my father insisted on his death bed, his body broken by cancer, in accented English that contained his Puerto Rican Spanish embedded in every word, was Clemente’s greatness. He wasn’t afraid to be who he was and as a result let you be who are. This too is the abiding gift of Maraniss’s text. We realize that despite Clemente’s social injuries, he was always willing to open himself to make room for others. His death was the ultimate act of hospitality. Dying in an airplane crash trying to bring supplies to Nicaragua in the aftermath of an earthquake, Clemente died as he lived, “really respecting people.”

Changing players, changing teams, changing times

If Playing America’s Game looked at the variegated history of Latino involvement in baseball, and Clemente: The Passion and Grace of Baseball’s Last Hero presented the individually remarkable history of a player, then Bruce Markusen’s The Team that Changed Baseball: Roberto Clemente and the 1971 Pittsburg Pirates hones in on a singular season as another turning point in the racial history and politics of baseball. Markusen points out that the 1971 Pirates were groundbreaking in their racial diversity: “No one today would think there was anything unusual about these Pirates, but this was 1971, and no team in major league history had every attempted to win the World Series with such an even mix of black, Latino, and white players” (Markusen 2006: x). Led by their Afro-Latino superstar, Roberto Clemente, the Pirates embodied a fully integrated team. Their success was not coincidental, but predicated on assembling the best team possible. A standard of excellence through racial diversity had been set, reminiscent of jazz or salsa bands. The same principles applied: passion, polyrhythmic compositions, and a democratic sense of improvisation.

Markusen’s book begins by reflecting on the “unwritten rules” that permeated baseball and the very different approach the Pirates took assembling that team looking for the best players available. This marked an epistemological shift. It then documents the 1971 season month by month ending with that season’s playoffs and World Series. Written in a concise and controlled prose, The Team that Changed Baseball throws a daring spotlight on what might be termed baseball’s first postmodern team. By-postmodern I mean the Pirates were the first club to recognize the productive potential in heterogeneous forms. Isn’t this notion of heterogeneous forms baseball at its purest? Especially when one thinks of the conspicuous difference of its parts: sedentary catcher compared to a roaming center fielder; Infield, outfield, and pitchers; and the variety of hitters—power hitters, contact hitters and everything in between. As Markusen points out, after the success of the Pirates every team that won a World Series would have several players of color in...
important roles. This was the Pirates’s ultimate legacy: racial diversity, they showed, was not just a fluffy humanitarian ideal, but, more to the point, a necessity for success and excellence. Markusen writes (2006: 187),

The make up of the 1971 Pirates was a product of the organization’s aggressive search for winning talent of any color, and the willingness to play that talent at any position—even if it meant that in any given game a lineup might be black, white, Asian or Latino, or any combination of the four. This was the breakthrough that this Pirates team achieved—and their lasting contribution to the sport of baseball.

Perhaps the most dramatic moment in the book is Markusen’s chapter entitled “September,” wherein he discusses a seemingly insignificant game. Embedded in the middle of the book this chapter documents a game on September 1, 1971, that saw Pirates manager Danny Murtaugh put together the first all black line-up to play in a major league game. For Markusen (2006: 109) this was less an accident than the residue of design:

It was fitting that the Pirates had become the first National or American League team to employ a lineup comprised exclusively of black and Latino players. No team had been more aggressive in signing Latin American and African-American stars from the mid-sixties through the early seventies. Such aggressiveness involved recruiting minority players for positions that had traditionally been reserved for white players.

The team investment in black and Latino players was merit based, as Murtaugh admitted after the game. His only consideration in playing a player was that he have a Pirate uniform and that he deserve to play; otherwise, he was colorblind. While this day marked a watershed moment in the history of baseball, it nonetheless has not purged baseball of racial problems, which, albeit in different forms, continues to plague the game. Here Markusen fails to discuss not just how the 1971 Pirates changed the game, but how they also changed the vocabulary of racism from a blatant and outspoken disregard of players of color to a more subtle and polite version.

In the end, these three books find in baseball an analogue to the problems, potential, and accomplishments of U.S. society. What they suggest forces us to come to terms with our Transamerican connectedness, through the example of a sublime player who functioned as an agent of history and embodied a turning point in the team’s racial compositions. These books teach us that baseball, at its best, requires cultural diversity. Baseball in this sense sets a social standard, and often, Latino participation or exclusion is a measure for the ethical condition of the sport. Democracy is reflected, in part, in baseball’s complex image. As my father often said, “You only need to study baseball to understand where we are as people.”
NOTES
1 Chow’s (2002: 95–100) remarks come in a chapter entitled “Keeping them in Their Place: Coercive Mimeticism and Cross-Ethnic Representation.” The dynamic she discusses have some significant overlaps with Burgos’s observations of baseball’s desperate attempts to stay a white game, while continually looking to Latin America for players to refine the play of their teams. Ultimately, it became increasingly clear to owners that the best baseball product available was an integrated one.
2 In her chapter “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” Anzaldua discusses her refusal to meld into a “tradition of silence,” realizing that “wild tongues can’t be tamed, they can only be cut out.” Clemente similarly understood the value of speech (see Anzaldua 1987).

REFERENCES