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“We Average Unbeautiful Watchers”:
Reflexive Fans and the Readerly Stakes of American Sports Narratives

by

Noah Liljengren Cohan

A dissertation presented to the
Graduate School of Arts & Sciences
of Washington University in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

August 2015

St. Louis, Missouri

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“We Average Unbeautiful Watchers”:
Reflexive Fans and the Readerly Stakes of American Sports Narratives

by

Noah Liljengren Cohan

Doctor of Philosophy in English and American Literature
Washington University in St. Louis, 2015
Professor William J. Maxwell, Chair

“We Average Unbeautiful Watchers” traces the role of the American sports fan across literary genres from the novel to the memoir to the blog post. Representing mass-mediated athletics as fundamentally narrative-based entertainments, I argue that fans function as readers whether they realize it or not. Further, while it may seem that sports narratives are “written” by athletes and assigned meaning by journalists, my project demonstrates that fans appropriate those narratives in diverse ways to form their own sense of identity. Inscribed in Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997), Fred Exley’s *A Fan’s Notes* (1968), David Shields’s *Black Planet* (1999), and the blog writings of *FreeDarko.com* (2005-2011), among other texts, these fan narratives show the literary relevance of an influential realm of popular culture too long ignored by critics. In what we might call the literature of American fandom, sports become sites where authors theorize interpretation, historicity, and narrative. Just as importantly, these narratives demonstrate the readerly resonances between the interpretations of live entertainments and of imaginative narratives—connections that enhance our understanding of the way we incorporate a broad range of texts into our own life narratives.

“We Average Unbeautiful Watchers”:
Reflexive Fans and the Readerly Stakes of American Sports Narratives

INTRODUCTION

Here is a theory. Top athletes are compelling because they embody the comparison-based achievement we Americans revere—*fastest*, *strongest*—and because they do so in a totally unambiguous way. Questions of the best plumber or the best managerial accountant are impossible even to define, whereas the best relief pitcher, free-throw shooter, or female tennis player is, at any given time, a matter of public statistical record. Top athletes fascinate us by appealing to our twin compulsions with competitive superiority and hard data.

Plus they’re beautiful: Jordan hanging in midair like a Chagall bride, Sampras laying down a touch volley at an angle that defies Euclid. And they’re inspiring. There is about world-class athletes carving out exemptions from physical laws a transcendent beauty that makes manifest God in man. So actually more than one theory, then. Great athletes are profundity in motion. They enable abstractions like power and grace and control to become not only incarnate but televisable. To be a top athlete, performing, is to be that exquisite hybrid of animal and angel that we average unbeautiful watchers have such a hard time seeing in ourselves.

—David Foster Wallace, “How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart”

Frustrated with former tennis phenom Tracy Austin’s “breathhtakingly insipid autobiography,” David Foster Wallace tried to figure out just what it was that he had expected from her in the first place (142). In “How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart,” an essay first published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in 1992, the not-yet-famous novelist—himself once a promising teen tennis talent—reviewed *Beyond Center Court: My Story*, issued earlier that year, in a reflexive mode. Using Austin’s words in order to better understand his own status as a “rabid fan,” Wallace attempted to explain why “we average unbeautiful watchers” are both so compelled by athletic genius and so disappointed in athletes’ inability to explain their own profundity (141, 143). Regarding the latter, Wallace concluded that the lack of reflexivity among star athletes may be a requisite ingredient for achieving excellence. In a high-pressure situation,

he explained, thinking about what you are doing is a sure way to ruin it. The “cruel paradox” of sports stars’ excellence, then, is that “blindness and dumbness” seem to be the “essence” of their gift, leaving “we spectators, who are not divinely gifted as athletes, [as] the only ones able truly to see, articulate, and animate the gift we are denied” (155). Whatever transcendent athletic abilities Tracy Austin may possess, Wallace realized that their signification—the meaning assigned to competitive bodily movement—was both his gift and responsibility as a fan.

My work in this dissertation is animated by Wallace’s words. Leaving behind the question of whether excellence in athletic performance is necessarily marked by “blindness and dumbness,” a notion rather more complex than Wallace recognized, I too seek to better understand how “we spectators... see, articulate, and animate the gift we are denied” (155). In other words, in *“We Average Unbeautiful Watchers”* I analyze and theorize the behavior of American sports fans in order to understand this behavior’s cultural significance beyond mere consumerism.¹ I draw from a multidisciplinary body of scholarship on sports and fans in doing so, but mine is a work of literary criticism. I take from Wallace’s example two indelible characteristics of “unbeautiful watchers” that are rarely explored at the intersection of fan studies and sports studies—reflexivity and authorship—and use them to define a body of literature and argue for the importance of literary analysis in examining American sports fan culture (142). Critically reading reflexive narratives like Wallace’s, I argue, not only provides a better understanding of sports fans, but also demonstrates that their receptive and appropriative behaviors are fundamentally literary pursuits.

The critical stakes of this dissertation are three-fold. First, by establishing that sporting events are narratives and by proving that fans are readers of these texts, I demonstrate that the tools of textual analysis are not only appropriate but necessary if we are to understand the way

these games inform the identities of millions of Americans. Reading the literature of American sports provides insight into a realm of culture too often ignored by literary and cultural critics despite its wide ramifications. Second, by focusing my analysis on depictions of the *reflexive* readers of sports narratives—fans thinking about their own practices and motivations as they follow sports—I glean insights into the influence of sports on identity formation. Reading sports, I argue, is also an autobiographical practice: whether manifested in a text or merely in one’s sense of self, sports narratives and personal narratives are always intertwined. Reflexive fans thus demonstrate the vital role of sports in providing more than distractions from their “real” lives; rather, sports narratives provide a means of making sense of that reality. Third, I argue that reflexive sports fans have the capacity to change the stakes of sports narratives not only for themselves, but for others. If fans recognize the narrativity of sports and their own attendant interpretive authority as critical readers, they can change the way that other fans, the media, and even some athletes understand the games. By communicating the alternative aesthetic, political, or psychological ramifications they perceive, reflexive fans can subvert the patriarchal and corporate imperatives embedded in the broadcast and the box score. As I will demonstrate, this power is particularly evident in the era of internet communication.

Before I go into detail about the particular texts I’ve chosen to analyze, and then outline the critical imperatives of each chapter, I must first articulate what I mean by “fans” and then establish the fundamental narrativity of sport. Regarding the former, I share with Wallace a relative disinterest in drawing firm distinctions between “fans” and “spectators.” Some scholars, such as psychologist Daniel Wann and his co-authors in *Sports Fans: The Psychology and Social Impact of Spectators* (2001), have attempted to differentiate between “fans [as] individuals who are interested in and follow a sport, team, and/or athlete... [and] spectators... who actively

witness a sporting event in person or through some form of media” (Wann et al. 2). In other words, fans *like* sports, and spectators *watch* them. Wann and company recognize, of course, that most fans are also frequent spectators, but they want to create a separate category for those who watch sports with little interest in emotionally or analytically internalizing the proceedings. But Wallace’s notion that “we spectators... see, articulate, and animate” sports complicates Wann’s attempt at differentiation by emphasizing that the categorization of a spectator or fan cannot be static: each individual possesses a range of levels of engagement that can change at any moment (155). Like Wallace and literary theorist-cum-Stanford sports fan Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, I position sports engagement on a wide “spectrum” of behavior that includes rote observation, analytical focus, and emotional outburst (Gumbrecht 221), and I thus consider “fan” and “spectator” as fluid assignations rather than concrete ones. Within the temporal boundaries of a single sporting event, a fan’s level of investment can change drastically. And even those who dislike sports immensely can be said to have an emotional reaction to the games. So rather than rigidly define its limits, I use the term “fan” loosely to refer to anyone consuming (or “reading”) sports.

The ramifications of this indistinction are significant. Foremost, it allows me to emphasize that the distinctly reflexive engagements of the sports fans depicted in the texts I examine, while exceptional in some respects, are located on a common spectrum of fan behavior. Insofar as these reflexive fans are distinct from “average” fans, they are so as a matter of degree, not kind. To better understand what I mean, we might translate Wallace’s description of fan actions into influential fan theorist John Fiske’s terms for fan productivity: “semiotic,” “enunciative,” and “textual” (37, 39). “To see” sports is to participate in semiotic production (Wallace 155), to create meaning from sporting stimuli, and thus, as fellow fan theorist Cornel

Sandvoss paraphrases it, to operate “on an intrapersonal level” (29). All spectators must do this, no matter their perceived or stated disinterest. Enunciative productivity, or the ability “to articulate” sports (Wallace 155), involves communicating that meaning-making to others. It encapsulates the “social interaction” of fandom, however informal (Sandvoss 29). Textual productivity, or the ability “to animate” sports (Wallace 155), is to create something new from sports narrative and the fan’s experience with it; necessarily “manifested concretely,” such texts can take the form of visual art, recorded audio, or writing (Sandvoss 29). I focus on this last form of fan productivity in this dissertation because it reflects and re-enforces the fundamental narrativity of sporting events.

For sporting events are narratives, though they are not always recognized as such. Marked as “real” by the competitive participation of athletes and the lack of predetermination in their outcome, sporting events nevertheless feature all of the common elements of narratives: characters, plots, and a causal trajectory from beginning, to middle, to end. So construed, “everyone with any interest in sport ‘reads’ sport in some way,” as Susan Birrell and Mary McDonald put it (10). Reading sport encompasses much more than attention to that “daily site for the production of sport narratives called the [newspaper] sports page,” and includes multiple modes of interpretive activity (10). These modes can be casual—“attending an event or talking about it to friends and colleagues”—or critical, capable of “finding [those] cultural meanings that circulate within particular [sports] narratives or celebrities” with the potential to “uncover... counternarratives, that is, alternate accounts... that have been decentered, obscured, and dismissed by hegemonic forces” (11). As with any cultural text, then, the power structures that permeate sports can greatly affect, but not ultimately determine, the critical potential of their readership. And all fan-readers, including Wallace himself, bring to their readings of sports

narrative their own interpretive priorities. Part of the reason that Wallace's "theory" of sports attraction quickly becomes "more than one theory" is that fans are not a monolithic consumerist mob (142).² Despite their place in a real or metaphorical crowd, the team-based affiliations they may share in common, and the ostensibly limited range of on-field actions from which they make meaning, sports fans are no less idiosyncratic in their interpretations than novel readers or film watchers. Some fans do compulsively prioritize "competitive superiority and hard data," while others invest in the "transcendent beauty" of sports narratives, but these are just two options in an almost limitless range of interpretive possibilities (Wallace 142).

As prior scholars have demonstrated, the interpretive priorities of fans are also a matter of narrative. Building a coherent sense of self in what literary critic Paul John Eakin calls the "narrative identity system" of modern life (*Living Autobiographically* x), humans rely on the stories we consume as well as those we gather from our personal experiences. Especially when the latter "primary narratives leave [people] with a sense of alienation and inadequacy," as sociologist Robert Perinbanayagam puts it, such "secondary narratives" provide "elements with which a narrative of the self is constructed" (24, 29). John Fiske and fellow fan studies pioneer Henry Jenkins once categorized such appropriative identity-formation as the distinct provenance of particular cult-fiction media fans. But more recent work, including that of Sandvoss in *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* (2005), has demonstrated that "at the point of consumption fictional narratives and 'real life' icons are equally encountered as texts which are read and appropriated by their (fan) audience. Whether we find our object of fandom in Britney Spears, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or the Boston Red Sox, these are all read and negotiated as (mediated) texts by their fans" (8). Whatever the differences in the relative "reality" and cultural resonance of a cult

television show like *Buffy* and a sporting entity like the Boston Red Sox, fans integrate the narratives such texts provide into their own life stories in a similar manner.

Sandvoss's view of sports fans locates them on a continuum with other kinds of fans and helpfully positions the objects of sports fandom as texts similar to, rather than distinct from, other fan objects. His inclusive framing helpfully breaks down the scholarly boundaries diagnosed by Kimberly Schimmel, C. Lee Harrington, and Denise Bielby in "Keep Your Fans to Yourself: The Disjuncture Between Sports Studies' and Pop Culture Studies' Perspectives on Fandom" (2007). As the authors of "Keep Your Fans to Yourself" note, the analysis of sports fans has largely been pursued by those trained in quantitative research, while fans of television, movies, music, and other "pop culture" phenomena have mostly attracted attention from qualitative scholarly disciplines (589). The resulting lack of communication and paucity of common texts limits our broader scholarly understanding of fans. The consequences of this critical disjuncture are significant for a number of reasons, but they are particularly notable when considering the narrativity of sports and they underline further the need for literary methods in analyzing fan behavior.

Since the study of sports fans has become the provenance of academics in psychology departments and business schools, the textual productivity of these fans has been de-emphasized. Though sports fans certainly have been scrutinized through qualitative ethnography, a mode that produces reflexive narratives, the terms of such reflection are established by the researcher. Sociological scholarship—like Sandvoss's own insightful study of British soccer fandom, *A Game of Two Halves: Football, Television and Globalization* (2003)—thus recognizes the identity-building aspect of sports fandom, but has rarely taken the time to consider the fans' self-motivated textual production as a means of exploring that identity in depth. By contrast,

beginning with Henry Jenkins's influential analysis of "slash" and other fan fictions in *Textual Poachers* (1992), the textual expression of "pop culture" media fans has long been the subject of academic scrutiny. In effect, the critical under-appreciation of the narrativity of sports contributes to an equivalent lack of attention to the narratives that fans produce themselves.

In this project I address both gaps by reading and analyzing the stakes of reflexive fan narratives using literary methodologies. Literary study, invested as it is in understanding human experience through narratives, has largely ignored sports narratives despite the games' massive popularity. A few notable critical monographs exist, including Christian Messenger's two volumes on *Sport and the Spirit of Play in American Fiction* (1981, 1990), Timothy Morris's *Making the Team: The Cultural Work of Baseball Fiction* (1997), and Michael Oriard's *Dreaming of Heroes: American Sports Fiction, 1868-1980* (1982). A small professional organization, the Sports Literature Association of America, occasionally publishes critical work in its journal, *Aethlon*. Within this already limited body of scholarship on sports literature, however, even less attention has been paid to fans.³ This makes some sense given the fact that the players are the focus of most sports narratives. But while athletes may indeed drive the plot and demonstrate the metaphorical richness of many sports narratives, I contend that it is the fan-reader whose behavior is most urgently analyzed through a literary lens—both in texts easily recognizable as "literary" and those, such as blog posts, that are not usually analyzed by scholars in the humanities. As I will show, a myriad of innovations in literary criticism—from Linda Hutcheon's postmodernist idea of historiographic metafiction, to Rita Felski's concept of readerly double consciousness, to Paul John Eakin's aforementioned notion of narrative-based identity, just to name a few—shed important insight into the reading practices of sports fans. Positioning reflexive sports fan narratives as a neglected literary genre with popular influence

and ontological resonance, I employ such literary methods in order to elucidate the means by which fans both construct their own identities and use sports to make sense of the world around them.

My study is not a survey. Each chapter examines a small number of reflexive sports fan narratives as they relate to particular thematic concerns including historicity, race, mental illness, and technology. What's more, I have purposefully selected texts that not only reflect particularly compelling subjects of existential concern to the fans depicted but that also manifest aspects of that concern in the form in which they are expressed. From the novel to the blog post, the genres of reflexive fan writing analyzed in each chapter are of as much concern and relevance as the subject matter featured. *How* sports fans write about what it means to be a sports fan matters too. The choice of genre in many ways reveals as much about the experience of constructing a fan identity as the content of such depictions. The form of these narratives conveys important insights into the phenomenology of fan experience—an experience far more complicated than the stereotypical responsive binary of cheers and boos would indicate. The form reflects the fans' need to “articulate... and animate the gift [they] are denied” not merely with regard to the narrative specifics of the games and athletes they covet, but also with regard to those narratives' liminal potency (Wallace 155). Simultaneously real and contrived, sports narratives are so compelling in part because they are so ontologically ambiguous. The choice of literary genre reflects or addresses that ambiguity in each of the reflexive fan narratives I examine.

Furthermore, though reflexive sports fans narrativize their experience the world over, I restrict my dissertation to American writing in order to better understand the culturally distinct, if hardly unique, circumstances surrounding fan narratives based in the United States. I also limit my project temporally, examining literary work published between 1950 and the present. This

periodization is imposed to reflect the immense influence of television on fandom, which complicates the reception of athletic performance by both facilitating the fans' self-identification with particular teams and athletes and by undermining their sense of the competition's "liveness." Contributing to what Philip Auslander calls the "diminution of previous distinctions between the live and the mediatized," television furthers the cultural "blending of real and fabricated situations" (*Liveness* 7, 33). In light of this experiential blending, my dissertation will necessarily grapple with scholarly notions of cultural postmodernism, and consider to what degree the narrativizing behaviors of sports fans realize, as Fredric Jameson famously put it, a "new and historically original dilemma, one that involves our insertion as individual subjects into a multidimensional set of radically discontinuous realities" (*Postmodernism* 413). Jameson's sense of radical discontinuity amid the overlapping, mass-mediated experiential modes that blur reality and fiction is particularly relevant to my project because fan renarrativizations are predicated on the translation of "live" bodily performance into terms of personal significance through the application of fictive—even if culturally accepted—interpretive stakes. The "real" terms on which sporting events are conducted allows for a purported clarity in their interpretation that belies their narrative construction and protects their validity as legitimate objects of interest from those who would debase popular fictions. Founded on a kind of hyperreality, spectator sports can thus be considered postmodern narratives, and fans their multidimensional readers.

My first chapter, "Baseball Fan Behavior as Postmodern Praxis in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*," examines DeLillo's novelistic portrayal of the deciding game of the 1951 National League playoff between the Brooklyn Dodgers and New York Giants. The event was famously punctuated by Bobby Thomson's game-winning homerun for the Giants, known colloquially as "The Shot Heard Round the World." But *Underworld* (1997) sheds little light into the inner

workings of Thomson and the other players. Rather, DeLillo chooses to inhabit the consciousness of several fans in attendance, ranging from an imagined African American teenager to FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover.⁴ Focusing on the fans in order to emphasize their flexible ability to make idiosyncratic meaning from the event, DeLillo also affirms the potency of the novel as a mode of inquiry into human behavior that stands in contradistinction to historical methods. Reading *Underworld* alongside “The Power of History,” an essay DeLillo wrote for the *New York Times Review of Books* in advance of the novel’s publication, I examine DeLillo’s fan readers and the reflexive ways in which they incorporate the on-field happenings—what we might consider the event’s official history—into their personal narratives. Declaring in the *Times Review of Books* essay that “against the force of history, so powerful, visible and real, the novelist poses the idiosyncratic self,” DeLillo aligns the novel and the sports fan as counters to prevailing notions of historical objectivity (“The Power of History” 62). In doing so, I argue, he effectively positions the fans as practitioners of “historiographic metafiction,” literary critic Linda Hutcheon’s term for a postmodern fiction that reflexively and often parodically realizes the power of subjective interpretation over purportedly objective events. DeLillo demonstrates in his portrayal of fans the means by which we all, as Hutcheon puts it, “give meaning to the real within... signifying systems” (*A Politics of Postmodernism* 230, emphasis in original).

That all of DeLillo’s reflexive fan narratives in *Underworld* are the stuff of fiction only further demonstrates his point, in “The Power of History,” and mine, in this dissertation. Without denying the empirical reality of a mushroom cloud or an athlete’s body in motion, we can and should recognize that their significance is a matter of narrative fabrication. People can, and usually do, co-create such meaning-making narratives in collaboration with others. Whether such mutual narratives position the USA and the Soviet Union as great geopolitical rivals or the

Giants and Dodgers as National League foes, we must recognize that our perpetuation of such shared tales does not prohibit or necessarily inhibit our ability to personalize and creatively recontextualize them. In emphasizing “the small anonymous corners of human experience” through *Underworld*'s fictional fans, rather than focusing on “history's flat, thin, tight and relentless designs” in the form of the recorded on-field action, DeLillo champions idiosyncratic narrative truths rather than mutually-agreed-upon meanings or empirical facts (“The Power of History”). To consider those personal insights invalid or inauthentic for being novelistic imaginings is to impose limits on the interpretive possibilities of fandom, and to underestimate the narrative richness of sports. Imagined though they may be, the reflexive narratives of J. Edgar Hoover, Cotter Martin, and indeed all of the fans depicted in *Underworld* present potential readings of “The Shot Heard Round the World” that reveal the urgency, potency, and resonance of sports narratives in the quest for self-definition.

While novelists like DeLillo can be said to write from the outside in, accessing identity by transmuting narrative into psychic possibility, memoirists seem to write out from within, using language to refine and communicate their inchoate senses of self. It is with this seeming reversal of field in mind that I examine the genre of the fan memoir in my second chapter: “Race in the Basketball Memoir: White Fan Identity and the Eros of ‘a Black Man’s Game.’” As the title indicates, I analyze here the life writing of three white men who choose to articulate their identity through both basketball fandom and racial difference. Rather than accept what critical race scholar David Leonard has called “the efforts of the NBA to obscure or mediate racial difference—to deny or minimize the existence of racism both inside and outside its arenas”—Scott Raab, David Shields, and Bill Simmons all recognize, in one way or another, that racial difference inescapably informs their fan reception (11). Raab’s *The Whore of Akron* (2011),

Shields's *Black Planet* (1999), and Simmons's *The Book of Basketball* (2009) are not anti-racist works by any means, but their authors attempt to understand their attraction to a game that, at the professional level, is played by mostly black players for a mostly white audience. Focusing on the racial difference between themselves and the athletes who drive the basketball narrative they covet, Raab, Shields, and Simmons each consider an erotics of fandom based on the exoticizing of black culture and black bodies.

The form of the memoir, considered distinct from the autobiography by virtue of its focus on a subject external to the author-narrator (Pascal 5), usefully frames the reception mechanics of fandom. Writing the self in reading another's narrative is, after all, the core activity of sports fans. Articulating who they are via basketball fandom, the three memoirists address their own insecurities and passions not merely through the games they love, but also through their attraction to its performers. And though they manifest the unreliability of memory and the fancies of their imaginations in writing memoir, Raab, Shields, and Simmons also recognize the empirical reality of the athletes they fetishize. Whatever the memoirists choose to make of athletes-as-characters in sports narratives, the performers reside—off the court, at least—on the same plane of existence. The distance between the narrator and the author, like that between the role of the NBA player and the athlete who inhabits it, is all but invisible. Memoirs, like sports themselves, are narratives that seem to reflect reality such that their artifice is often minimized and their social relevance emphasized.

When one's sense of reality is perpetually clouded, however, the logic of expressing the experience of the reflexive sports fan through the genre of the memoir breaks down. In my third chapter, "'It was My Fate, My Destiny, My End, to be a Fan': Football, Literature, and Mental Illness in *A Fan's Notes* and *The Silver Linings Playbook*," I examine two novels whose form

reflects the psychological disorientation of their fan narrators. Since they are based in part on their authors' experiences with mental illness and football fandom, Frederick Exley's *A Fan's Notes* (1968) and Matthew Quick's *The Silver Linings Playbook* (2008) can be considered autobiographical in many respects, but they are also intentional fictions. Presenting their protagonists as fictional characters—and unreliable narrators—obsessed by athletes and books that their readers will recognize as “real,” Exley and Quick use the form of the novel to trouble the distinction between a routine blurring of reality that we all experience in constructing coherent identity narratives and a crippling version of it that has been deemed psychotic. Coping with the latter, the recently-institutionalized narrators, Fred Exley and Pat Peoples, search for the stability of the former in reading sports and literary narratives on similar terms. By connecting their own life narratives to the exploits of Frank Gifford, Hank Baskett, Hester Prynne, and Jay Gatsby alike, the two fan protagonists make sense of their place in a society that has deemed them mentally unsound. When “society’s reality” is at odds with one’s own, these novels demonstrate, the similarities between the consumption of purportedly objective sports narratives and of fictional literature are laid bare (Exley 76). Both provide common stories that Exley and Peoples use to reconstruct their identities and reconnect with the outside world.

Positioning football and American literature as readerly equivalents, Exley and Quick demonstrate the relevance and urgency of literary methods in analyzing sports and sports fan behavior. But they also question the notion that the critical close reading of literature should be prized for a rigor based on the analyst’s suspicious removal from the text. As with football, Exley and Peoples’s connection to literature is mutually predicated on analysis and emotional investment. Even as they “root” for Gifford and Prynne alike, the fan-readers reflexively contextualize and analyze their underlying motives. In other words, they recognize that most

readings of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) or a New York Giants-Philadelphia Eagles football game will be different than their own, and attempt to account for that difference. In part because they make no distinction between reading sports and reading literature, Exley and Peoples thus exemplify Rita Felski's notion of textual "enchantment" and the attendant readerly "double-consciousness" of analytical and emotional imperatives (*Uses of Literature* 74). Exley and Peoples demonstrate both that motivated readings can be insightful and that they provide "a richer and more multi-faceted [experience] than literary theory has allowed" (76). While sports fans are often denigrated by anti-sport critics for an emotional involvement so overwhelming that it renders them incapable of analysis, aficionados of high cultural forms like music, art, and literature are usually credited with analytical capacities based in aesthetic remove and emotional distance. As Felski argues and Exley and Quick demonstrate, such binaries are false; the reality of our interaction with any text is much blurrier.

Moving literature forward to the internet age, my fourth chapter considers a widespread form of twenty-first century sports fan writing: the blog post. Juxtaposed to the printed novel and the memoir, the medium of the blog post may seem ethereal for being unpublished and electronically-mediated. Yet those attributes are in fact determining elements of its technogenetic dynamism. In the chapter "Reimagined Communities: Web-Mediated Sports Fandom and Technogenetic Narrativity," I argue that internet technology, in addition to fundamentally changing the form and pervasiveness of the reflexive sports fan narrative, has enhanced its creative and critical potential. Building on literary scholar N. Katherine Hayles's reconceptualization of "technogenesis" as a means of understanding the coevolution of humans and digital technologies (10), I read three particularly notable sports blogs and examine the ways in which web interactivity and digital tools influence their notion of what it means to be a sports

fan. *FreeDarko*, *Fire Joe Morgan*, and *Power Forward* were twenty-first century blogs with distinct fan perspectives, analytical methods, and writing styles—not to mention different primary sports of interest—but they all shared an interest in reading sports narratives beyond the limitations of conventional media coverage.

Accessible to anyone with a computer and an internet connection, the blogosphere welcomes writers both to share their work and to seek out others with similar interests. For sports fans, the democratic aspects of the platform are particularly compelling because they allow them to share their readings of sports narratives beyond their immediate circle of friends. Where accredited journalists once held the media megaphones, ordinary sports fans are now able to analyze, recontextualize, and personalize sports narratives for a broader audience without the assistance and approval of a newspaper editor or a book publisher. While it may be true that many of those fan narratives are not particularly well-written or insightful, those blogs that present compelling analysis—*FreeDarko*, *Fire Joe Morgan*, and *Power Forward* included—can and do gain significant online readerships. Integrating hyperlinks, images, videos, and social media into their writing not merely as a practical matter but as an essential one, it is no coincidence that the three blogs also read sports narratives through the lenses of art, music, politics, mathematics, feminist theory, and a myriad of other topics from “outside the sports world.” Emphasizing the intertextual potential of sports narratives in part because the digital tools of the internet naturalize intertextuality, *FreeDarko*, *Fire Joe Morgan*, and *Power Forward* each created a body of sports literature whose form and content emphasized the richness of sports narratives and their urgency for fan-readers beyond the games themselves. Though fan considerations of sports and their narrative ramifications for personal identity long predated the web, the internet both amplified them and fostered their critical potential. Throughout the

chapter, I trace the ways the blogs' authors manifested that potential through three analytical frameworks: modes of fan attachment, narrative reconceptualization, and identity politics. In each area, I argue, *FreeDarko*, *Fire Joe Morgan*, and *Power Forward* reoriented what it means to be a sports fan in a manner that demonstrated the distinctive influence of digital interconnectivity.

From the popular and critically acclaimed novels of Don DeLillo to the eclectic intertextual musings of sports bloggers, reflexive sports fan narratives have made meaningful contributions to our understanding of American society and popular culture, and literary methods are necessary to draw out much of that meaning. But what does this conclusion really mean, back on campus? Given the prominent role of athletics at so many American universities and the role of students as fans it demands, how might literary critics teach reflexive sports fan narratives in order to better contextualize the cultural stakes of spectator sports? My coda addresses those questions, using Howard Nemerov's little-studied novel *The Homecoming Game* (1957) as a lens. Nemerov's novel depicts Charles Osman, a reflexive sports fan and professor of history who becomes embroiled in a football scandal at an unnamed Midwestern college. Though it is almost 60 years old, the work addresses still-relevant concerns about the significance of sports on campus and its effects on faculty, students, alumni, and university administrations. Remarkably, the work also connects big-time athletics to the philosophical incorporation of business ethics into the development of the university, and the incumbent marginalization of adjunct faculty. In addition to these topical echoes, *The Homecoming Game* reemphasizes the capacity of fans to read, critique, and internalize sports narratives on a level of sophistication beyond winners and losers. In doing so, as Albert Lebowitz put it in his afterword to the 1992 edition, "*The Homecoming Game* reminds us of the many possible ways there are of conceiving

a problem that has a life of its own beyond the imperative of plot”; the novel suggests that sports narratives, like our lives, are enriched by “the multiple curious ways of imagining how things might turn out” (252). On campus, this means neither ignoring sports narratives nor unthinkingly embracing them, but engaging them so that we simultaneously understand that their cultural ramifications are significant and that we can affect those ramifications by assessing the way we read them. If students bring the interpretive agency of the literary classroom to the stadium and the TV-room, then they—like the reflexive fan authors examined in this dissertation—can use the stories of sports to better understand both themselves and the wider world.

For his part, David Foster Wallace often used sports narratives, and tennis narratives in particular, to make sense of his complex world. From “Tracy Austin,” to his accounts of his own junior tennis career, to his famous essays on the brilliance of Roger Federer, to the importance of tennis for the Stice family in his masterwork, *Infinite Jest* (1996), the notion that “great athletes are profundity in motion” was a cornerstone of Wallace’s remarkable literary career (“Tracy Austin” 143). No literary critic would characterize him primarily as a sports writer, nor should they. But Wallace’s desire “to get intimate with all that profundity, [to get] the Story” of sports speaks to the games’ narrative richness and critical potential on par with literature, film, and other highly esteemed cultural narratives (143). Though most athletic “geniuses-in-motion” are not “geniuses-in-reflection,” nor are many fans, the ability of Wallace and other reflexive sports fans “to see, articulate, and animate the gift we are denied” is ultimately less a “cruel paradox” than an enlightening one (153, 155). Examining their articulation and animation, I demonstrate the readerly significance of sports in intellectual as well as popular terms. In explicitly framing sports as narratives, I reclaim the games for literary consideration of their interpretive imperatives. “We average unbeautiful watchers” may not be the ones “carving out exemptions

from physical laws a transcendent beauty that makes manifest God in man” (143, 142-3), but without reflexive fans like Wallace to signal it, that beauty would not transcend or make manifest anything at all.

¹ A note on pronoun usage: throughout this dissertation I use “he” and “him” to refer to the generic sports fan only to avoid the clunkiness of the “he/she” construction. I considered using “she” and “her,” and I certainly don’t mean to imply that the generic fan is necessarily male. This decision is based on quantity only: in its 2013 “Year in Sports Media Report,” Nielsen reported that women make up from 30-35 percent of American sports fans.

² Some groups of fans do *act* like a mob, of course. As editor Dan Nathan points out in his introduction to *Rooting for the Home Team: Sport, Community, and Identity* (2013), understanding “sports as community” always has positive *and* negative ramifications, collective dynamics *and* personal ones: “It’s not an either/or issue. Playing together, playing apart, and rooting for the home team are complicated, multilayered lived experiences” (6, 8).

³ Two novels that are notable exceptions to this are Robert Coover’s *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop* (1971) and Frederick Exley’s *A Fan’s Notes* (1968), both of which have received some attention from critics, but haven’t been comprehensively considered in relation to other fan narratives. Both are analyzed in the latter mode herein.

⁴ Contextualized by the Russian nuclear test that occurred on the same day, Thomson’s “Shot” takes on a distinct destructive resonance for Hoover, who in DeLillo’s imagining receives news of the test at the game but stays to enjoy the company of his celebrity friends: Jackie Gleason, Frank Sinatra, and Toots Shor.

CHAPTER ONE

Baseball Fan Behavior as Postmodern Praxis in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*

The term *postmodernism*, when used in fiction, should...best be reserved to describe fiction that is at once metafictional *and* historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past...Historiographic metafiction works to situate itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction.

—Linda Hutcheon, “Historiographic Metafiction”

In investigating how fans read sports as narratives, there is no more auspicious yet predictable place to start than the baseball novel. The “national pastime” is, after all, the preferred sporting provenance of American literary types, both producers and interpreters, because of its nostalgic association with a pastoral imaginary. As Timothy Morris puts it, “baseball fiction, and more generally the whole culture of baseball, is about assimilation to an American way of life” (3). The “American way of life” that baseball represents is conventionally an idyll of country pastures and simpler values that belie the game’s urban origins and long association with cheating, gambling, and other forms of iniquity. Whether naively nostalgic for or caustically critical of that pastoral idyll, however, most authors and critics agree that the game has metaphorical importance for the national self-conception of Americans in ways that other, and indeed often more popular, sports do not.¹ In representing baseball’s claim to that importance, writers almost always focus on its players. They do this not only because those players are the obvious agents in this pastoral fantasy—running about in green space playing a “child’s game”—but also because their actions are easily quantified and historicized. Befitting the rhetoric of “American functionalist meritocracy,” Morris asserts, “baseball offers a spectacle of the pure work of statistical meritocracy” (6). The “American way of life” can thereby be both idealized and rendered pseudo-historical through the quantifiable actions of baseball players.

In contrast with this player-centric model, Don DeLillo attempts to render the baseball *fan's* interpretive efforts as complicating—and complicated by—a sense of group historicity that Americans crave. In “The Power of History,” a 1997 essay published in *The New York Times Book Review*, DeLillo explains the origins of “Pafko at the Wall” (1992), a short story originally published in *Harper's Magazine* that would become the prologue to his critically acclaimed novel *Underworld* (1997):²

Front page of The New York Times. Oct. 4, 1951. A pair of mated headlines, top of the page. Same typeface, same size type. Each headline three columns wide, three lines deep.

Giants capture pennant—this was the dramatic substance of the first headline.

Soviets explode atomic bomb—this was the ominous threat of the second.

What did I see in this juxtaposition? Two kinds of conflict, certainly, but something else, maybe many things—I could not have said at the time. Mostly, though, the power of history. (60)

Two contemporaneous events, one of the most dramatic in baseball history and one of the most significant in Cold War history, become the powerful subjects of DeLillo's fiction in “Pafko.” But by representing the latter event via the former—rendering a nuclear detonation through the lens of a baseball game—and by exploring both through the minds of spectators rather than players, DeLillo also asserts the power of fiction to explore spaces beyond history. The official record of events may seem static or objective, yet “against the force of history, so powerful, visible and real, the novelist poses the idiosyncratic self. Here it is, sly, mazed, mercurial, scared half-crazy. It is also free and undivided, the only thing that can match the enormous dimensions of social reality” (62). Social reality, whether represented through a home run or a mushroom cloud, may function as a kind of master narrative, DeLillo seems to say, but it cannot encompass humankind's infinite subjectivities. It is rather the protean capacities of language, which “lives in

everything it touches and can be an agent of redemption, ...that delivers us, paradoxically, from history's flat, thin, tight and relentless designs, its arrangement of stark pages, and that allows us to find an unconstraining otherness, a free veer from time and place and fate" (63). Against "history's flat, thin, tight and relentless designs," *Underworld's* fan narratives describe a baseball-mediated American way of life that is personal, contingent, quotidian, and resolutely postmodern.

More specifically, in realizing the potential of fiction to explore spaces within history via the fans, *Underworld* is manifestly representative of the postmodern genre Linda Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction." Distinct from historical fiction, Hutcheon's genre "works to situate itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction" ("Historiographic Metafiction" 4). This autonomy is maintained by reflexivity: as Kathleen Fitzpatrick puts it in "The Unmaking of History: Baseball, Cold War, and *Underworld*," historiographic metafiction "self-consciously reminds us that, while events did take place in the real empirical past, we name and constitute those events as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning" (151). DeLillo's newspaper discovery aligned Thomson's "Shot Heard Round the World" and the Russian nuclear test for him, but his constitution of the two events in *Underworld* does more than merely remind us that their meanings are neither static nor determined by their place "in the real empirical past" (Fitzpatrick 151). DeLillo demonstrates that a reflexive historicity is not the postmodern privilege of writers and intellectuals, but in fact incipient in the way humans prioritize and assign personal meaning to the events happening around them. That he chooses to inhabit the consciousnesses of baseball fans to do so is not coincidental. The act of "nam[ing] and constitut[ing] events as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning" is the qualifying characteristic of sports spectatorship (Fitzpatrick 151); in

the stands the actions of living humans are quantified and assigned collective value even as they are perpetually afforded a distinct value in each fan's personal narrative. The sports spectator, then, is always also a practitioner of historiographic metafiction.

There are three distinct groups of fans in *Underworld* that demonstrate the manner in which DeLillo complicates the mythologized, player-centric view of baseball narrative and provides powerful metafictional possibilities for our understanding of history. In order of their introduction to the reader, the groups are: outfield fans Cotter Martin and Bill Waterson; radio broadcaster Russ Hodges and his producer, Al; and public figures Frank Sinatra, Jackie Gleason, Toots Shor, and J. Edgar Hoover. When they address the prologue at all, literary critics of *Underworld* tend to focus on the last fan, Hoover, because he is the lone spectator able contemporaneously and consciously to connect the Giants' pennant-winning home run to the Russian nuclear test that would accompany it on the front page of the following day's *New York Times*. But to do so is to impress a narrative preferred by critics of postmodernity—the incomprehensibility of total annihilation at a time of American prosperity—onto the limitless alternate histories and personal narratives unfolding for each spectator. Which is not to say that DeLillo does not intend to convey a Hoover-centric nuclear narrative, but that he understands that “the small anonymous corners of human experience” are not subsumed by “the magnetic force of public events and the people behind them” (DeLillo, “The Power of History”). Knowledge of the mushroom cloud illuminates the potency of one fan's capacity to make meaning from the game, but that potency should not obscure the richness and complexity of the other fans' self-narration.

In this chapter I examine *Underworld's* spectators in order to demonstrate the way sports fans signify “real” events on fictive narrative terms. I broaden Hutcheon's notion of

“historiographic metafiction” beyond its ascription to postmodern literature and reorient it in order to consider it as a phenomenological practice in lived experience. I argue that DeLillo not only self-consciously realizes the power of his own narrative to give new meanings to history, but shows us that fans realize the same power in reflexively considering how a baseball game will figure into—and is reciprocally affected by—their own life narratives. In so doing, I also claim for *Underworld*’s prologue a significance beyond the false binary constructed by anti-sport critics who would position DeLillo’s baseball tableau as a mere rendering of the Cold War opiate of the masses and those who would view it nostalgically through an American nationalist pastoral lens. Both historically-attuned interpretive tracks, I argue, are “flat, thin, tight and relentless designs” (DeLillo, “The Power of History”), and the power of “Pafko at the Wall” lies in its refusal to endorse either one. Like Bobby Thomson’s home run ball, whose famous disappearance DeLillo reimagines, *Underworld*’s rendering of fans as idiosyncratic readers of baseball narrative is both undeniably resonant and impossible to definitively locate. The novel and its depiction of sports fans give ontological resonance to Hutcheon’s literary framework such that we can better understand the construction of identity through narrative, both within sporting arenas and outside of them.

Cotter and Bill: Race and Masculinity

Befitting the massive scope of the novel, which spans five decades and a continent, *Underworld* opens by invoking a national readership: “He speaks in your voice, American, and there’s a shine in his eye that’s halfway hopeful” (11). The person who speaks for each “American” is Cotter Martin, a 14-year-old African American from Harlem willing to skip school and jump the turnstiles in order to watch his beloved Giants win a pennant. In addition to

being the first character introduced, Cotter is particularly significant for two reasons. For one, he is the most obvious protagonist in a prologue that renders the larger novel's lead character, the young Nick Shay, a radio listener alluded to in passing. But Cotter ultimately speaks for each American, some critics have argued, because he demonstrates both the obscurative capacity of popular entertainments and one of the principle injustices—racial intolerance—that they are commonly said to obscure. *Underworld's* prologue, asserts John Duvall in *Underworld: A Reader's Guide* (2002), “examines baseball as an aesthetic ideology that participates in masking the hidden costs of America's Cold War victory and in erasing race and class difference” (29). When Cotter “runs up a shadowed ramp and...sees the great open horseshoe of the grandstand and that unfolding vision of the grass,” as DeLillo describes, it “seems to mean he has stepped outside his life” (*Underworld* 14). But when he meets Bill Waterson,³ a white adult man with whom he is at first a friend and then a foe, such a seeming escape from grim reality is proven pure folly.

Or so John Duvall reads it. But Duvall, who is seemingly the only academic literary critic to have written at length about the *Harper's Magazine* version of “Pafko at the Wall” before the publication of *Underworld*, ignores one of the most significant discrepancies between that version and its incarnation as “The Triumph of Death”: the opening line itself. Instead of “He speaks in your voice, American” (11), the original “Pafko” begins with a slightly different version of what is the quotidian second sentence of *Underworld*: “This is a school day but he is nowhere near the classroom” (“Pafko” 35).⁴ In “Pafko,” the reader is directed to focus on Cotter Martin, but he is not immediately asked to identify with him or his national affiliation. Furthermore, after Cotter jumps the turnstiles with a group of other boys, runs from the stadium police and “step[s] outside his life,” the first section of the text ends as the reader “lose[s] him in

the crowd” (*Underworld* 14). In *Underworld*, it is “you” (14)—the American singular reader in whose voice he “speaks” (11)—who loses Cotter, but in the original “Pafko” it is “we” who lose him (37). These differences are significant because they effectively situate the reader as operating in distinct fan-reading contexts. The readerly gaze in “Pafko” is anonymous, pluralized, and easily aligned with the narrator. In *Underworld*, the reader, if he is American, is forcefully identified by the narrator and assigned a voice synchronous with a character.⁵ This national assignation represents fan readership as de facto and based on regional and political affiliation—a mode that is most familiar in an Olympic context. But since said assignation is also singular (“American” rather than “Americans” or “America”), it positions the reader as operating on a personal register within this externally-assigned signifier. Recognizing the reader as a distinct individual in a sweepingly broad context calls attention to the dichotomous fan modes Cotter Martin represents and occupies: first, that of the baseball fan absorbed into the crowd such that he feels he can leave his life behind, and second, that of an African American male whose life experience leads him to view the presence of a fellow black man—the peanut vendor—as an existential threat to his peaceful immersion amid the mostly-white spectators (*Underworld* 20). In *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), Linda Hutcheon’s notion of historiographic metafiction accomplishes something similar, insofar as it “challenge[s] the humanist assumption of a unified self and an integrated consciousness by both installing coherent subjectivity and subverting it” (xii). Via Cotter, DeLillo forcefully assigns the reader a coherent subject with which to identify, but also emphasizes that such subjectivity cannot escape, and indeed is contingent on, group identification.

Cotter’s experiences are thus every American’s and no one else’s. His story line does not represent American racial strife smoothed over by the masses’ opiates, but rather the inevitable,

interpersonal, and idiosyncratic interpenetration of the two. In the first few paragraphs of *Underworld*, in contrast to “Pafko at the Wall,” DeLillo manages, in the terms of historiographic metafiction, “to satisfy...a desire for ‘worldly’ grounding while at the same time querying the very basis of the authority of that grounding” (“Historiographic Metafiction” 5). Via Cotter, DeLillo positions the reader at an event widely recognized as having historical significance, and then subverts the terms of that recognition by personalizing this reader’s perspective. Cotter’s narrative, like those of the other fans DeLillo personates, is about the Giants, Dodgers, and Bobby Thomson, to be sure, but it is firmly subjective in its orientation to those figures. After all, “it is fiction’s role,” DeLillo writes in “The Power of History,” “to imagine deeply, to follow obscure urges into unreliable regions of experience—the child-memored, existential and outside time. The novel is in the dream release, the suspension of reality that history needs to escape its own brutal confinements” (62). A “complete” record of anything is impossible; only fiction can render the idiosyncratic experiences that go undocumented in the regimes of history.

Though history and fiction can seem to be at odds, DeLillo is not constructing a binary of strict opposition. In writing historiographic metafiction as he does, in rendering history even as he subverts it, DeLillo presents Cotter and other fans not merely as idiosyncratic individuals or anonymous members of a massive brainless mob, but also in relation to one another in small groups. Cotter’s interracial connection to Bill Waterson is forged by proximity and delimited by gender. Amid the initial dialogue between the two, which documents their expectations as fans of the Giants, their concerns about the ominous-looking weather, and their desire for peanuts,⁶

DeLillo inserts a tableau of overwhelming maleness:

Men passing in and out of toilets, men zipping their flies as they turn from the trough and other men approaching the long receptacle, thinking where they want to stand and next to whom and not next to whom, and the old ballpark’s reek and mold are consolidated here, generational tides of beer and shit and cigarettes and

peanut shells and disinfectants and pisses in the untold millions, and they are thinking the ordinary way that helps a person glide through a life, thinking thoughts unconnected to events, the dusty hum of who you are, men shouldering through the traffic in the men's room as the game goes on, the coming and going, the lifting out of dicks and the meditative pissing. (21)

With a single stream of consciousness sentence, presented abruptly and without context, DeLillo's portrait of the men's room reminds the reader not only that the 1950s ballpark was an even more gendered space than today's sporting arenas, but also that it was unthinkingly so. By calling attention to "dusty hum of who [they] are" (21), DeLillo recognizes that the inner lives of these men are hoary—as they are for all of us, most of the time—and that our sense of self is built on a few moments of personal resonance that we mark as significant. As Kathleen Fitzpatrick puts it, *Underworld* "suggests that the traditional story of self-making is...mythic. Rather than being made, being self-determined in any sense, the individual is rather unmade, a tissue of lies constructed as a defense against the sludge in which the self is mired" (155). Mired in the bathroom sludge and meditative pissing of the male quotidian, Fitzpatrick suggests, Cotter and Bill must realize their homosocial, interracial relationship by "thinking the ordinary way that helps a person glide through a life" (*Underworld* 21).

The suggestion that the selves we recognize are necessarily a matter of self-construction or self-destruction is itself a binary opposition and a discredit to the complexity of DeLillo's rendering, however. Soon after Cotter and Bill meet, the older man frames their relationship on ancestral terms: "That's the thing about baseball, Cotter. You do what they did before you. That's the connection you make. There's a whole long line. A man takes his kid to a game and thirty years later this is what they talk about when the poor old mutt's wasting away in the hospital" (31). Bill's logic speaks to Fitzpatrick's notion of the "tissue of lies" constructed in lieu of self. But Cotter's interior monologue recognizes the simplistic relationship idiom Bill is

relying upon and, rather than merely refuting it, analyzes and embraces it to the degree that he finds it adaptable to his own distinct persona as a fan:

Cotter likes this man's singleness of purpose, his insistence on faith and trust. It's the only force available against the power of doubt. He figures he's in the middle of getting himself befriended. It's a feeling that comes from Bill's easy voice and his sociable sweaty gymnasium bulk and the way he listens when Cotter speaks and the way he can make Cotter believe this is a long and close association they share—boon companions goes the saying. He feels a little strange, it's an unfamiliar thing, talking to Bill, but there's a sense of something protective and enclosing that will help him absorb the loss if it should come to that. (31)

Cotter's relationship to Bill is not a mindless one, nor is it regimented by external filial constructions or implicit racial hierarchies. When Bill says, in an excerpt from the original "Pafko" that DeLillo removed from *Underworld*, "Who's better than us? I mean, we're here, aren't we? What else do we want? We have to love it, don't we?" (48), it is easy to see why Duvall asserts that DeLillo's work "double[s] as a commentary on contemporary American life and the ways it is implicated in authoritarian--indeed almost proto-fascist--urges" (288). But such an assertion fails to account for Cotter's capacity to resist such totalizing rhetoric.

Cotter knows, even before he and Bill fight over Thomson's homerun ball, that the Giants fandom that unites them does not bind them. As it appears the Giants will go down in defeat, Cotter

feels a mood coming on, a complicated self pity the strength going out of his arms and a voice commencing in his head that reproaches him for caring. And the awful part is that he wallows in it. He knows how to find the twisty compensation in this business of losing, being a loser, drawing it out, expanding it, making it sickly sweet, being someone carefully chosen for the role. (*Underworld* 33)

Though he takes solace in being "miserable in the house of misery" ("Pafko" 50), Cotter knows that the ultimate significance of the events transpiring in front of him is his to determine. In understanding how he can be "someone carefully chosen for the role" of "being a loser," Cotter recognizes that he also invests himself with that terminology, *he* "knows how to find the twisty

compensation,” not the fact of the team’s losing by itself. Like historiographic metafiction, Cotter effectively “espouses a postmodern ideology of plurality, and recognition of difference... There is no sense of cultural universality” (Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism* 114). To Bill’s notion that baseball’s processes and results dictate behavior (“we have to love it, don’t we?” (48)), Cotter’s internal monologue represents a resounding “no.” His narrative before Bobby Thomson’s homerun particularizes history and invests it with subjective agency such that the reader understands the interpretive flexibility of the “reality” of a sporting event. Their subsequent struggle over the ball, the prized object of historical significance, further demonstrates the malleable narrative structures that undergird and are so often unrecognized in official histories, whether those histories concern a ball game or a nation.

As Thomson’s homerun ball lands, Russ Hodges yells himself hoarse, and J. Edgar Hoover dreamily connects the chaotic scene to the prospect of nuclear destruction, DeLillo’s omniscient narrator focuses on floating paper detritus: “if the early paper waves were slightly hostile and mocking, and the middle waves a form of fan commonality, then this last demonstration has a softness, a selfness...it is happy garbage now, the fan’s intimate wish to be connected to the event, unendably” (*Underworld* 44-5). This progression of collective fan emotion, registered in wafting strands of garbage, neatly mirrors Cotter’s emotional progression to this point in the novel. Initially on edge because of his illicit entry into the ballpark, Cotter settled into comfort in his association with Bill. Being a Giants fan, he is of course thrilled that Thomson’s blast has won the pennant. And, by virtue of his location in the leftfield stands, Cotter has an opportunity to fulfill that “intimate wish to be connected to the event, unendably” (45) in a way that will powerfully demonstrate his own “selfness” (44).⁷

As the stadium celebrates, Cotter moves without thinking: “Next thing Cotter knows he is sidling into the aisle....The ball is back there in a mighty pileup of shirts and jackets. The game is way behind him. The crowd can have the game. He’s after the baseball now and there’s no time to ask himself why. They hit it in the stands, you go and get it” (45). On the one hand, Cotter’s movements are unreflective, instinctual—see ball, get ball—but on the other, they demarcate his impetus from that of “the crowd,” which rhapsodizes over the National League championship the ball has won. DeLillo’s description places Cotter scrambling beneath the seats, twisting arms and bending fingers until the “raised seams of the ball are pulsing in his hand.” When he looks up to see who has noticed, he catches “good neighbor Bill flashing a cutthroat smile” and their relationship is irrevocably recontextualized in terms of racial hostility (49).

Followed out of the stadium and into the streets by Bill, Cotter recognizes that “if he starts running...what we have is a black kid running in a mainly white crowd and he’s being followed by a pair of irate whites yelling thief or grief or something” (52). As they walk, Bill appeals to their bond as “budd[ies]...who won this game together” and recalls that his initial impression of Cotter was of “a baseball fan,...not some delinquent in the streets” (52, 56). Rebuffed, Bill’s implicit racial designations give way to explicit epithets in the original “Pafko,” as Bill excoriates Cotter for being so “almighty nigger-ish” before issuing a faux apology in which asserts that he would “never [have] said it if you hadn’t made me” (68). For Duvall, the scene confirms the inability of baseball nostalgia to serve as anything but an auratic, proto-fascist falsehood:⁸ “While ‘Pafko’ may create a way of seeing the mirrored relation of [racial and national] binaries, it cannot transcend these binaries merely by representing them. In other words, ‘Pafko’ does not offer an alternative to ‘us-them’ thinking, even though it attempts to map the limits of such reductions” (287). Fittingly, Cotter and Bill’s discourse ultimately breaks

down and the quarrel becomes a footrace. Only once the two cross into “unmixed Harlem” and Bill “realize[s] where he is,” does the chase end, with Cotter “running backwards, high stepping, mocking, showing Bill the baseball” (57).

Yet again, however, discrepancies between “Pafko” and *Underworld* yield insights that cast doubt on Duvall’s gloomy outlook. The word “nigger-ish,” so obviously inflammatory in “Pafko,” is nowhere to be found in *Underworld*. And without the word, there is no need for Bill’s blame-reassigning non-apology. Which is not to say that their exchange is not racially-charged, of course, merely that it is not explicitly so. Why does this difference matter? Not because *Underworld*’s version can be said to deny racism: it would be an oversimplification to assert, as baseball mythos apologist Donald J. Greiner does, that “DeLillo downplays the racial tension of the 1950s that Duvall stresses and features instead the absurd comedy of a grown man pursuing a kid to grab a scuffed baseball” (107). Rather, DeLillo declines to present racial conflict as the stark binary that Duvall pessimistically asserts. Bill still attempts to manipulate the structures of white male privilege to his advantage, but he need not say the n-word for Cotter to understand that. The chase still happens and the young African American still high-steps victoriously when he has reached a place where the power dynamics of racial inequality are altered. In a sense, Bill calling Cotter an epithet is racism’s equivalent of authorized history, a trigger that fosters oversimplified, “official” notions of race and racism, and by removing it in *Underworld*, DeLillo allows the reader to see that baseball neither exclusively “mask[s]” nor exposes “race and class difference” (Duvall, *Underworld* 29), but always contains the capacity for both in the idiosyncratic narratives of its fans.

Considering the historiographic metafiction that DeLillo presents, it is also notable that in escaping into Harlem with the ball, Cotter also removes it from the scope of any “official”

history as well—he has effectively “stepped outside” of life in a different way (14). Later in *Underworld*, Cotter’s father, Manx, steals the ball from his son and sells it to another Giants fan without providing authentication other than second-hand anecdote. By the time Nick Shay chases it down, the ball’s historical significance is incumbent on an oral history no more certifiably “real” than the novel in which it appears. Beyond the reach of Bill Waterson’s white male hegemony, the ball ceases to exist, at least as the “official” ball that Thomson hit. And yet, though the Thomson homerun ball is lost to official history, its narrative—and that of the person who discovered it—is no less real for being unauthorized. In “The Power of History,” DeLillo asserts that “language can be a form of counterhistory” (63), and, since “every narrative thread in the entire novel [of *Underworld*] can be connected to the ball in some way” (Mullins 283), the ball seems to be the signifier that represents those counterhistorical possibilities.⁹ When *Underworld*’s narrator opens by asserting that a young turnstile-jumper “speaks in your voice, American” (11), DeLillo thus allows the second person pronoun to trump the national signifier. Recontextualized as such, we Cotters can see that the “aesthetic ideology” of baseball may limit the terms of our engagement (Duvall 29), but not the narrative possibilities of our interpretation.

Russ Hodges: Language and History

But if Cotter and Bill provide a counter-narrative, who affords the official history? The game was televised live by NBC and covered extensively by print media, but the enduring public memory of the home run comes from an audio recording of Russ Hodges, the play-by-play announcer for the New York Giants. And it is for that reason, ostensibly, that DeLillo chooses to fictionally represent Hodges’s “fan” perspective in “Pafko.” I use scare quotes because, while Hodges is a spectator, his professional role at the game means that most would say he is

technically not a fan. But, as DeLillo's portrayal of the broadcaster makes clear, troubling such technical classifications is "Pafko's" narrative imperative. As in much other historiographic metafiction, DeLillo uses Hodges to "challenge... both any naïve realist conception of representation and any equally naïve textualist or formalist assertions of the total separation of art from the world" (Hutcheon, "Historiographic Metafiction" 6).

Hodges is introduced immediately after "you lose [Cotter] in the crowd," as "in the radio booth they're talking about [said] crowd" (*Underworld* 14), wondering "how [to] explain twenty thousand empty seats" (15). Rather than immersed in a collective mass of humanity that provides Cotter an escape in (seeming) collective anonymity, the reader's gaze is re-focused on a similar, yet distinct male milieu: the press box. Just as strongly gendered as the stands, the space of "crammed maleness" is neither less crude for its occupants' credentials (34), nor less overtly racialized: Hodges's white male engineers exchange dirty jokes about Speedy Gonzalez and conduct a conversation in "black dialect" (34-35, 26). And these men, while professionally invested in the Giants (or Dodgers), are clearly personally motivated by the team as well. But Hodges's concerns, unlike those of his booth mates, are far from ordinary.

As his tired vocal chords describe the action on the field, Hodges's inner monologue is concerned with matters of history: "he thinks everybody's who's here ought to feel lucky because something big's in the works, something's building" (15). DeLillo's character measures the feeling of being at this game against his first-hand experience at the 1919 heavyweight boxing championship match between Jack Dempsey and Jess Willard, remembering

what a thing that was, what a measure of the awesome...the greatness of the beating big Jess took in that white hot ring, the way the sweat and blood came misting off his face every time Dempsey hit him. When you see a thing like that, a thing that becomes a newsreel, you begin to feel you are a carrier of some solemn scrap of history. (15-16)

As Duvall reads it, this moment signifies the fact that “in the age of the electronic media... an event has not entered history unless it is represented by that technology” (“Baseball as Aesthetic Ideology” 301). Thus recognizing in his anecdotal account of the Dempsey-Willard fight that “the medium is the message,” Hodges, “clearly an artist figure, contemplates the constructive nature of his discourse” (Duvall 301). This reading is apt, but its pessimistic conclusion is unjustified. Duvall takes Hodges famous, and thus “authorized,” version of the game and Thomson’s “Shot” fascistically to dominate collective memory of the event, to participate in the Benjamin-ian “false aura of sport [that] masks not only the politics of Cold War America but also the most fundamental reality of life, personal mortality” (304). But Hodges’s remembrance of the Willard fight suggests to me just the opposite: while the attention of the newsreels may have marked the event as something everyone ought to remember, Hodges’s personal memory of small ringside details—the sweat and blood that the black and white footage couldn’t represent—are “a measure of the awesome” that provide him a “solemn scrap of history” all his own.

Hodges would thus recognize Cotter’s fan narrative as un-subsumed, and no less significant, than his famous play-by-play account or the famous newsreel footage of Thomson mobbed by fans after the game. Nevertheless, the broadcaster must also understand the resonant power of the latter simulacrum for an audience unable to be party to “the awesome” in person. Recalling his days in Charlotte “doing re-creations of big league games... the telegraph bug clacking in the background and blabbermouth Hodges inventing ninety-nine percent of the action,” the announcer describes his then-dream of broadcasting “real baseball... the thing that happens in the sun” (*Underworld* 25). In calling those “ghost games” from telegraph dispatches (26), Hodges recalls “construct[ing] the fiction of a distant city, making up everything but the

stark facts of the evolving game” (“Pafko” 44), including “inventing a kid chasing a foul ball...who retrieves the ball and holds it aloft...a priceless thing somehow, a thing that seems to recapitulate the whole history of the game every time it is thrown or hit or touched” (*Underworld* 26). Hodges’s fictional narrative of the foul ball-retrieving kid quite obviously conjures DeLillo’s creation of Cotter Martin.¹⁰ But the “fake” baseball narratives Hodges created, interspersing pure fictions among the “stark facts” to forge from the latter a more compelling narrative, ultimately differ little from “the thing that happens in the sun” insofar as both narratives are necessarily selective and subjective in their construction. For Hodges and his listeners, like DeLillo and his readers, “reality” is dependent on the narrator’s phenomenological limitations and selections of detail. The differences between historiographic metafiction and history, between telegraphically-mediated baseball and “real” baseball, then, are matters of degree, not kind.

While there is certainly a big difference between providing play-by-play of a baseball game and watching it from the stands, both require that the observer “name and constitute... events as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning” (Hutcheon qtd in Fitzpatrick 151). No matter how many millions of pitches have been thrown, homeruns hit, or base runners thrown out in the past, each play resonates somewhat differently with those who watch it. As DeLillo puts it in *Underworld*,

It's the rule of confrontation, faithfully maintained, written across the face of every slackwit pitcher since there were teams named the Superbas and the Bridegrooms. The difference comes when the ball is hit. Then nothing is the same. The men are moving, coming out of their crouches, and everything submits to the pebble-skip of the ball, to rotations and backspins and airstreams. There are drag coefficients. There are trailing vortices. There are things that apply unrepeatably, muscle memory and pumping blood and jots of dust, the narrative that lives in the spaces of the official play-by-play. (27)

In a sense, no play is any different than the ones described by Hodges after receiving pages from the telegraph machine in Charlotte. Even when the statistical result of a given play is clear—a run is scored, a strike is thrown, a walk is issued—there are endless narrative descriptors swirling “in the spaces of the official play-by-play” (27). In fact, the narrative potential of those “drag coefficients” and “trailing vortices” is amplified by the seemingly “stark” nature of the “facts” that surround those spaces (“Pafko” 44). Baseball is so readily narrativized, so richly textured, DeLillo and Hodges suggest, because there is so much room for interpretation. Neither what Hodges sees at the Polo Grounds nor what he imagined in Charlotte are absolutely real or completely fictional, and it is possible, if not likely, that the events described in the latter fictions could coincide with the “facts” of the former at any moment in any game.

Assuming for a moment that baseball “reality” and fictional accounts of the details that texture the bare facts of every play *never* coincide, what would the consequence be? Further, what if fictional imaginings were the only source of baseball narratives? Robert Coover explores this notion by pushing it to its limits in his critically acclaimed second novel, *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* (1968). Unlike the protagonists of most other baseball novels, the eponymous Henry is not a baseball player, but a rabid fan. Coover uses baseball statistics to historicize the players Henry follows and he certainly romanticizes them in green fields on sunny afternoons. The problem, or rather the spark, of the novel is that the baseball players Henry adores are not only unreal in the world of the reader, but in that of the protagonist. His league is entirely imagined, the players’ actions determined by the roll of three dice in Henry’s living room. Keeping a record of these dice rolls in his league’s “official archives” (Coover 55), Henry reveals “the way that written records create history, sliding as he does from numbers to texts to politics, with each seeming to lead automatically to the

next...present actions become history by being written down. The writer alters worlds” (Fitzpatrick 147). Imagined though it may be, this baseball history also has real ramifications for Henry, as his passionate commitment to his narrative’s ballplayers cost him friendships and, ultimately, his job. Ad absurdum, Coover demonstrates the means by which sports fans personalize and internalize the narratives they interpret. But by removing Henry from an interpretive context in which those narratives are shared with other fans, Coover also strips away the pseudo-objectivity of competition that gives sporting events the gravitas of purported “reality.” Which is to say that by pushing his account of sports experience from its conventional position as a record of non-fictional happenings to the opposite end of the narrative spectrum, that of purely fictional fantasy, he undermines the complexity of sports fan interpretation by removing the historicity that provide sporting events’ shared resonance.

Which brings us back to Russ Hodges and his understanding of the relationship between narrative and history. Imagining his audience huddled at the radio, Hodges remembers

How his family used to gather around the gramophone and listen to grand opera, the trilled *r*'s of old Europe. These thoughts fade and return. They are not distractions. He is alert to every movement on the field. ... He is hunched over the mike. The field seems to open outward into nouns and verbs. All he has to do is talk. (36)

Here is history, and not *any* history, but personal recollections of his own family, an idiosyncratic history contextualized by artistic historicity in “grand operas, the trilled *r*'s of old Europe” (36). But while these memories are present—part of his perceptions of the present moment—“they are not distractions”: they do not determine his understanding of the action on the field. Like Cotter and Bill, like Frank, Jackie, Toots, and J. Edgar, he is always both of the crowd and apart from it. Yet he is also a narrative conduit, a practitioner of the power of language that DeLillo espouses, that which “lives in everything it touches and can be an agent of

redemption, ... that allows us to find an unconstraining otherness, a free veer from time and place and fate” (“The Power of History” 63). In seeing “the field...open outward into nouns and verbs” (*Underworld* 36), Hodges seems to understand the potential for “unconstraining otherness” in the ostensibly straightforward actions he is tasked to describe, but also realizes that those possibilities must flow naturally from his language: “all he has to do is talk” (36). Coover’s producer of baseball narrative, Henry, understands his burden similarly: while he willfully fleshes in a tremendous amount of detail for his players—their names, ages, body types, families, and personal lives—this rich narrative of an imagined heritage must flow through the action-determining roll of the dice. When Henry’s desire for “unconstraining otherness” transcends that probabilistic determinism and he alters the role of the dice, effectively becoming the Godhead of the narrative landscape he has created, his external reality ceases to exist and only the baseball narrative remains. Were Hodges to do the same, to declare that Thomson’s homerun had been caught by Pafko at the wall, DeLillo’s story would escape history and exist in a similar imagined isolation.

Instead,

Russ says, ‘There’s a long drive.’
His voice has a burst in it, a charge of expectation.
He says, ‘It’s gonna be.’
There’s a pause all around him. Pafko racing toward the left-field corner.
He says, ‘I believe.’
Pafko at the wall. Then he’s looking up....

Russ feels the crowd around him, a shudder passing through the stands, and then he is shouting into the mike and there is a surge of color and motion, a crash that occurs upward, stadium-wide, hands and faces and shirts, bands of rippling men, and he is outright shouting, his voice has a power he’d thought long gone—it may life the top of his head like a cartoon rocket.

He says, ‘*The Giants win the pennant.*’ (*Underworld* 42, italics original)

More than perhaps any other in the novel, this moment captures the dichotomous fan experience.

On the one hand, Russ is of the crowd, an indistinguishable part of an stadium full of “bands of

rippling men” who “feels the...shudder passing through the stands.” On the other, his shouting is also always defined apart from this crowd—he reflects on the mike in front of him and the state of his own fragile vocal chords—and however authoritative his voice may be, it is always phenomenologically delimited to the perceptions of the first person, to what “I believe” is happening. As the mania becomes celebration, “Russ knows he ought to settle down and let the mike pick up the sound of the swelling bedlam around him. But he can’t stop shouting, there’s nothing left of him but shout” (43). The collective joy that overwhelms him is the same as the one pouring out of the fans in the stands—“He says, ‘The Giants win the pennant and they’re going crazy’”—but it is always also subjectively his own, “a holler from the old days—it is fiddlin’ time, it is mountain music on WCKY at five-thirty in the morning” (43). In writing passages like this, DeLillo demonstrates not merely the “inextricable interconnections of narrative and history [that make] the novel [*Underworld*]... ‘historiographic metafiction’” (Fitzpatrick 150), but also that historiographic metafiction is created in that moment by Hodges and every other reflexive fan in the stands. The narrative that Hodges creates is more obvious for being broadcast, perhaps, but it is no more real because it could be heard on the radio. Nor, obviously, do Hodges’s “official” words (as recorded by “history”) provide his complete story. DeLillo may have fabricated a representation of how Hodges personally felt in that moment of collective exuberance, but it is a fact no less real than that of Thomson’s homerun that Hodges felt some unspoken things all his own. Whether or not they involved remembering broadcasting folk music in Kentucky or not hardly matters. That detail, like Hodges’s own foul ball-retrieving boy, merely helps DeLillo’s audience flesh in the spaces in the play-by-play.

Having opened “the field...outward into nouns and verbs” that chronicled the Giants’ miraculous victory (36), Hodges walks across the outfield after the game, reveling in the moment. His producer, Al,

Points to the place in the left-field stands where the ball went in.

‘Mark the spot. Like where Lee surrendered to Grant or some such thing.’

Russ thinks this is another kind of history. He thinks they will carry something out of here that joins them all in a rare way, that binds them to a memory with protective power. ... Isn't it possible that this midcentury moment enters the skin more lastingly than the vast shaping strategies of eminent leaders, generals steely in their sunglasses-the mapped visions that pierce our dreams? Russ wants to believe a thing like this keeps us safe in some undetermined way. ... This is the people's history and it has flesh and breath that quicken to the force of this old safe game of ours. (60)

At the wall, where DeLillo’s narrative most potently intersects with history as we know it, Hodges seems to want to bifurcate the latter, to cover over the events happening outside the stadium with the gauzy joy of Thomson’s homerun. It is with good reason, then, that critics have identified this moment of nostalgic inclination as that in which DeLillo most powerfully reminds us of the obscurative dangers of mass media entertainments. In “From Hoover's FBI to Eisenstein's Unterwelt: DeLillo Directs the Postmodern Novel,” Timothy L. Parrish asserts that

To DeLillo, what is compelling about this moment is not merely the game, but how the game seems to be played in isolation from the cultural context that surrounds it. On the same day that Bobby Thomson hits "the shot heard around the world," the Soviet Union successfully detonates its first atomic bomb. Ironically, this cataclysmic event, which would ensure that the Cold War continued for another forty years, seems relatively insignificant in the context of an epic baseball game. Throughout the novel these two events become intertwined so that DeLillo can explore how nostalgic recollection of the baseball game seems to efface any historical consciousness of the Cold War. (700-701)

Hodges hope that this “old safe game of ours” can “keep... us safe in some undetermined way” (60) certainly reads as obscurative when directly counterpoised against the deathly stadium hellscape imagined by the nuke-obsessed J. Edgar Hoover (whose fan experience I will detail in the next section).

But it is an oversimplification to suggest that because Hodges thinks that Thomson's homerun represents a "different kind of history" from that of the Civil War or Cold War—because it "enters the skin more lastingly than the vast shaping strategies of eminent leaders" (60)—that the game and "history" are necessarily at cross purposes. It is more accurate to assert, as Donald Greiner does, that "rather than stress the potential for the bomb (politics) to dwarf the magic of the home run (myth), [DeLillo] acknowledges the juxtaposition and then celebrates the social connection that the Giants-Dodgers game affirmed" (105). But Greiner's reading is equally flawed insofar as he sanguinely believes that "the exploits of the gods that connect a society in the face of diminishment and loss. Myth counters death" (112): in effect, that the home run does dwarf the bomb, but that it is a good thing. Instead, Thomson's homerun and the Soviet Union's nuclear test should be seen as complementary factors in constructing American identities. Sports fandom is often thought to inform personal identity in merely supplementary ways, while national politics are more commonly seen as definitive, but both notions oversimplify. Though the geopolitical machinations of the Cold War may have been more likely to have a deadly impact on bystanders with varying degrees of investment in the conflict, they cannot be said to deserve overweening authority over one's sense of identity as a consequence. The fan, like the novelist as historiographic metafictioner, understands that "against the force of history, so powerful, visible and real, [is posed] the idiosyncratic self...the only thing that can match the enormous dimensions of social reality" (DeLillo, "The Power of History" 62). Thomson's homerun-as-history can keep us safe, Hodges's thoughts suggest, not by countering or obscuring the threats of nuclear annihilation and systemized societal injustice, but rather by reminding us that those oppressive factors, real as they are, do not get to determine who we imagine ourselves to be.

Sinatra, Gleason, Shor, and Hoover: Celebrity and Politics

Though the historical Frank Sinatra, Jackie Gleason, and Toots Shor were New Yorkers and known to be friends, DeLillo's pairing of these three entertainment figures with FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover is an odd choice, and he recognizes it:

What's the nation's number one G-man doing with these crumbums? ... Fame and secrecy are the high and low ends of the same fascination, the static crackle of some libidinous thing in the world, and Edgar responds to people who have access to this energy. He wants to be their dearly devoted friend provided their hidden lives are in his private files, all the rumors collected and indexed, the shadow facts made real. (*Underworld* 17)

Fame powers desire, and Hoover, both DeLillo's version and the actual man, thrills to the power of knowing and manipulating the desires of others.¹¹ But his association with these men is also motivated by more conventional tropes surrounding proximity to "movie idols and celebrity athletes" (17). In fact, in the original "Pafko," DeLillo included the sentence "He is a fan at heart" (39), before the line about friendship and private files. Such a phrasing can be taken to convey Hoover's baseball fandom, yet DeLillo makes it clear that the FBI Director cares little for the action on the field. Asked by Sinatra who he is rooting for, "a faint smile creeps across Hoover's face. 'I don't have a rooting interest. Whoever wins,' he says softly. 'That's my team'" (*Underworld* 29). For most sports fans, this answer would be utterly unsatisfactory and can be read as a vague indicator of Hoover's duplicitousness. When DeLillo writes that Hoover is "a fan at heart" in "Pafko," then, he means that the FBI Director is a fan of the men he is with, not baseball, both because he finds them entertaining and, presumably, because he has information that gives him implicit power over them. Hoover is also quite clearly a fan of the homosocial interaction baseball spectatorship engenders, of "smiling at the rude banter that rolls nonstop from crooner to jokesmith to saloonkeeper and back. He would rather be at the racetrack but is cheerful enough in this kind of company whatever venue" (17).

So prized is Hoover's time with these men that he feels little compulsion to leave them when he is discreetly given the news about the Russian nuclear test. After all, "no purpose [would be] served by his leaving. The White House will make the announcement in less than an hour. ... By announcing first, we prevent the Soviets from putting their own sweet spin on the event. And we ease public anxiety to some degree. People will understand that we've maintained control of the news if not the bomb" (*Underworld* 28). Callous and pragmatic in the face of what is potentially world-altering news, assessing nuclear proliferation in terms of narrative control, Hoover thus personifies for Duvall "DeLillo's consideration of proto-fascist impulses in American culture" (294). If a bit hysterical, Duvall is simpatico with DeLillo and the history books in characterizing Hoover as "the chief of what amounted to a kinder, gentler American Gestapo" (295). But Duvall's accompanying attempt to assert that, via the character of Hoover, baseball is implicated in a process by which "global politics become aestheticized, so much so that the history of the Cold War nearly disappears from American consciousness" (293) is an act of narrative manipulation no less reductive and crassly dehumanizing than Hoover's glib assertion that by announcing first "people will understand that we've maintained control of the news if not the bomb" (28). And there is no better evidence of the error of this conflation of the stadium crowd with "the herd" than the fan motivations of Sinatra, Gleason, Shor and Hoover themselves.

Among the foursome, DeLillo's Frank Sinatra is the most knowledgeable about baseball and the biggest fan of the Giants. He is also the most famous. This fame allows Sinatra to augment his knowledge of the game through insider access—"This is Willie's day. He's due to bust loose. Leo [DuRocher, manager of the Giants] told me on the phone" (18)—but also makes him the most self-conscious about himself as a fan object. As Gleason excitedly and obscenely

mugs for the fans around them, Sinatra is “uneasy [with] all these people lapping at their seat back. He is used to ritual distances. He wants to encounter people in circumstances laid out beforehand” (24). Like the baseball players he watches, he is accustomed to a spatial remove from fans while performing and to be able to better dictate the terms of engagement in other contexts. Hyper-aware of appearances, he is more upset at the fact that Gleason’s vomit—emerging at the moment of Thomson’s “Shot”—has stained his shoe than the fact that, as he tells Shor, “I saw part and missed part” of the momentous homerun (46). But he also enjoys the homosocial camaraderie coveted by Hoover. Combining both modes, Sinatra mercilessly mocks the equally sharp-tongued Gleason, the group’s only Dodgers fan, calling him “that porpoise with a haircut from Brooklyn” (29). Finally, as loose pages from magazines fall around them, Sinatra finds a picture of “himself sitting in a nightclub in Nevada with Ava Gardner and would you check that cleavage. Frank didn’t know he was in this week’s *Life* until the page fell out of the sky. He has people who are supposed to tell him these things” (39). Concerned with matters of sex, publicity, and power, Sinatra is represented by DeLillo so that we understand the narcissism and solipsism his carefully managed celebrity entails, and that nothing—not even an event as momentous as Thomson’s homerun—can distract him from it.

DeLillo’s Gleason is, by contrast, inattentive to the game—and his fame—for different reasons. His garrulousness ensures that he is the localized center of attention, the ballgame serving merely as the occasional butt of his jokes. His spewing rhetoric is accompanied by the expulsion of barely chewed food, as he first “begins to cough and choke, sending quidbits of meat and bread in many directions” (18) and later erupts, as Hoover puts it, in a “discharge of animal, vegetable, and mineral matter” (42) at the moment of Hodges’s blast. While Sinatra recoils from contact with his fellow fans, Gleason talks “to six people at once, [people who] want

to be offended...making sport of one man's ragmop toupee, ridiculing a second for the elbow patches on his tweed jacket" (23). Cartoonishly representing the celebrity as an attention-hog and denigrator of human worth, Gleason's sickness at the moment of mass signification is telling. Surrounded by the falling pages of *Life* magazine, of pictures of Sinatra in Vegas and Bruegel's "Triumph of Death," Gleason's magnetic personality is muted. He is rendered little more than "some mammal in distress" (44). In a sense, Gleason's capacity to distract, to personify the ugly stereotype of "low-brow" mass culture, is rendered powerless in the face of Thomson's "Shot," not merely because the latter is more historically significant, but because its narrative is more flexible. Rather than let their sense of self be influenced by the insults of a comic, the fans surrounding Gleason are able, in this moment, to draw in the collective meaning and personal signification of the homerun.

Complementing the wary particularity of Sinatra and the boorish gluttony of Gleason is Shor, a renowned socialite, who made his fame by putting himself in the company of the famous. Like Hoover, DeLillo's Shor certainly cherishes the ribald homosocial discourse around him. And like Hoover, he is also an arbiter of historicity. As Gleason guarantees a Dodger victory, "Shor says, 'Don't be a shlump all your life, Gleason. It's only one-zip. The Giants didn't come from thirteen and a half games back just to blow it on the last day. This is the miracle year. Nobody has a vocabulary for what happened this year'" (18). Signifying that the "vulgar saloonkeeper," as Greiner calls him, "intuitively understands that both history and fiction are narrative constructs" (107), the juxtaposition of "the miracle year" and the "vocabulary for what happened" (*Underworld* 18) certainly calls attention to the blurring of what Hutcheon calls "ontological line between historical past and literature," and, further, her notion that "the past really did exist, but we can only 'know' that past today through its texts, and therein lies its

connection to the literary” (“Historiographic Metafiction” 10). But Shor is wrong, Greiner argues, to assert that “nobody has a vocabulary” for the momentousness of the occasion, because, after all, “Hodges and DeLillo have the words” (107). Yet Greiner’s notion of “hav[ing] the words,” in the sense of their formal expression via radio broadcast or in published print, in fact limits the potential meaning conveyed by Shor (and, therein, by DeLillo). A vocabulary, after all, is inherent in every speaker’s language. Language, in turn, structures human existence by giving us the capacity to assign meaning to phenomenological stimuli. The fact that “nobody has a vocabulary for what happened this year” has nothing to do with any speaker/broadcaster/writer’s capacity, then, and everything to do with the awe-inspiring scope of “the miracle year” and the fact that its narrative has not yet concluded. When the narrative does conclude, Shor’s statement seems to imply, *everyone* will have the vocabulary to speak of it—at least everyone who paid it any attention—in his own idiosyncratic, self-identifying manner. As if to prove it, when Shor finds that Sinatra has missed much of the action surrounding Thomson’s homerun, he asks, “Do I want to take the time to ask which part you missed so we can talk about it on the phone some day?” (46). Shor suggests, in effect, that this moment’s historic importance will require that they return to it in future conversation. And when it does, he jokes, Sinatra’s vocabulary will be in a sense incomplete because he cared more about his designer shoes than the “Shot Heard Round the World.” I would suggest, however, that the relative incompleteness of Sinatra’s memory is what particularizes it for him, what gives him “the vocabulary” to speak of “the miracle year” on self-identifying terms. Odd as it might seem, the memory of vomit on his shoes allows Sinatra to capture, like the frantic pursuit of the homerun ball for Cotter Martin or Jess Willard’s sweat and blood for Russ Hodges, a piece of “the awesome” all his own.

Just as it is easy to subsume *any* individual fan narrative into a sense of the definitive communal experience, so too is it tempting for critics to subsume Sinatra, Gleason, and Shor within Hoover's *Life* magazine-mediated vision of nuclear holocaust, to make them, as Greiner does, "Bruegel's skeletons dancing on the backs of the living" (107). Tellingly, the FBI Director's sudden fascination with the Flemish painter's work intensifies this sense that "despite the humor surrounding this group, it is through the figure of Hoover that 'Pafko' suggests how global politics become aestheticized" (Duvall 293). Under these auspices, Bruegel's morbid art intensifies the sense of just how futile and inconsequential are the lives of the pop culture-addled masses. As he looks around the stadium after receiving the news of the test, but before the pages of *Life Magazine* float down from above, Hoover sees "people formed by language and climate and popular songs and breakfast foods and the jokes they tell and the cars they drive [who] have never had so much in common as this, that they are sitting in the furrow of destruction" (28). After the momentous homerun is struck, as Hoover "stands in the aisle and [the fans] are all around him cheering and he has the pages in his face[,] he begins to see that the living are sinners. ... The dead have come to empty out the wine gourds, to serve a skull on a platter to the gentlefolk at their meal. He sees gluttony, lust, and greed" (50). In the first quote, though "popular songs and breakfast foods and...the cars they drive" are mass mediated, they don't obscure "language and climate ... and the jokes they tell"—those esoteric characteristics that inform identity. And if the prospective nuclear war's "furrow of destruction" has imminent apocalyptic potential, as it did then and has since in every subsequent moment of human history, there's no reason to think that such a commonality limits the idiosyncrasies of identity or the capacity for critical thinking any more than common fan interests do. The second passage takes the "furrow of destruction" and renders it gruesome and pornographic, as Hoover revels in

the meatblood colors and massed-bodies, [the] census-taking of awful ways to die. . . . Death elsewhere, Conflagration in many places, Terror universal . . . and he thinks of a lonely tower standing on the Kazakh Test Site, the tower armed with the bomb, and he can almost hear the wind blowing across the Central Asian steppes, out where the enemy lives. (50)

Transposing the mania of Bruegel's orgiastic killing field onto the joyous stadium in front of him, Hoover implies that the spectators deserve the holocaustic specter they now face, cheapened as their existences are by mass culture, bound as they are to commercialized discourses of "gluttony, lust and greed" (50).

By "directly confronting the discourse of art with the discourse of history" (Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism* 20), DeLillo effectively baits an interpretive trap. He fulfills the potential of historiographic metafiction, as Hutcheon puts it, to "draw upon any signifying practice it can find operative in a society. [Historiographic metafiction] wants to challenge those discourses and yet to use them, even to milk them for all they are worth" (133). Milking the American obsession with nuclear annihilation, both popular and critical, via Hoover, DeLillo also simultaneously undercuts it. "As DeLillo and Hoover both recognize," Timothy Parrish rightfully asserts, "aestheticizing cultural processes is not necessarily coincident with anaesthetizing cultural processes" (707). Which is to say that mass cultural signifiers like Thomson's "Shot" could accompany or even temporarily overshadow the grim possibilities of the Cold War, but not "efface it from our consciousness" (Parrish 707). As for Hoover, amid his thrilling at the "genius of the bomb [and] the occasion it creates for new secrets," he wonders at the "connection between Us and Them, how many bundled links do we find in the neural labyrinth? It's not enough to hate your enemy. You have to understand how the two of you bring each other to deep completion" (51). Contradicting the binaristic terms "Us and Them"—made proper nouns to convey irony—within which he constructs consciousness, Hoover understands

their relationship as non-linear (“bundled” and “labyrinth[ian]”), overtly based in explicit opposition (“hate”) but ultimately complementary (“deep completion”). His juxtaposition of Brooklyn and Bruegel, of nukes and Don Newcombe, Thomson and test sites, does not speak to the occlusionary “power of history,” then, but rather “consciousness... extended and human truth... seen new” (DeLillo, “Power of History” 63).

Still, Matthew Mullins wonders, “since the Bruegel reprint appears in both the 1992 and the 1997 versions of the story, why change the title [from “Pafko at the Wall” to “The Triumph of Death]?” (277). The first title, metonymous as it is, situates the blast from an off-center baseball focus: that of the outfielder watching the momentous shot rather than the man who hit it. The second, also a metonymy but a much less obvious one, has the effect of orienting the reader to the macabre from the start. According to Mullins, “the most obvious answer to why DeLillo changes the title is also the most significant: the prologue serves a different purpose in relation to the novel than it does in the context of a periodical like Harper’s or as a novella” (277). Within the larger arc of *Underworld*, Mullins suggests, “The Triumph of Death” is a sort of big bang, a nuclear blast that launches a larger Cold War theme, as the Bruegel-ian title evokes its destructive force and milks it for all it is worth. When the story is read in a stand-alone context, rather than a signpost to one of *Underworld*’s most prominent concerns, Hoover’s FBI-cum-fan framing is just one of a panoply of interpretive perspectives on Thomson’s shot. Mullins’s “most obvious” answer is mostly correct, I would argue, but it is also limited for its strictly structural focus. The prospect of nuclear holocaust was and is certainly real, if not always palpable, but in reading DeLillo’s description of the action at the Polo Grounds on October 3, 1951 one must “not...deny the real, but...remember that we only *give meaning* to the real” (Hutcheon 230). Deriving meaning from the perspective DeLillo ascribes to Hoover during the game is not

wrong, but defining the game through his interpretation is necessarily incomplete. When Pafko is at the wall, he is seen from thousands of angles. He can be a witness to great triumph, a forlorn symbol of disappointment, or skeleton about to dance in nihilistic glee. Death does not triumph unless we determine that it should. From its title forward, *Underworld*'s prologue challenges the novel reader to assert those alternate interpretive possibilities in the face of grim circumstances—to see the baseball game beyond the nuclear war. For “Pafko at the Wall” and the baseball-oriented reader to which it was marketed,¹² the terms of the challenge are reversed. As with Cotter’s resistance to Bill’s tropes of baseball masculinity, Hodges’s ability to imagine the spaces between the “stark facts” of the play-by-play, Hoover’s vision of “The Triumph of Death” is neither a totalizing narrative for him nor for *Underworld*.

Conclusions Now, Conclusions Past

After initially making a convincing case for *Underworld* as historiographic metafiction, Kathleen Fitzpatrick reverses direction, asserting that ultimately

in *Underworld* myth is lost; the novel instead acts to dismantle the genre of historiographic metafiction and its preconceptions, working not to create the past out of its narratives but instead to excavate and deconstruct the traces a reified history has left in the present. In doing so, the novel undermines all narrative processes, both the realist and the metafictional. Although Hutcheon claims for historiographic metafiction the “deliberate contamination of the historical with didactic and situational discursive elements, thereby challenging the implied assumptions of historical statements: objectivity, neutrality, impersonality, and transparency of representation.” (92), DeLillo performs the same kind of contamination-and-challenging of *narrative* representation, calling the possibility of the accurate telling of any story into question. (151)

In large part, this critique centers on Nick Shay, the larger novel’s protagonist, who wants to believe he “lived responsibly in the real” (*Underworld* 82), but ultimately finds not only that “history turned to fiction” (459) but that, as Fitzpatrick puts it, “his life has in fact been

constructed as a fiction, a narrative, one from which he is largely excluded” (157). The mass mediation of historical facts—whether or not the engines of popular news narratives are “proto-fascist” (Duvall 288)—is thus not what renders history ontologically unstable. Instead, it is the fact of relying on narratives to construct it. Secure in the knowledge not only that history and narrative are inextricably entwined, but also “that many of those narratives are lies” (159), Fitzpatrick asserts that all that remains is DeLillo’s obsession with garbage in the larger text *Underworld*, asserting that “the new locus of the sacred is in the landfill” (159).

Dramatic and critically clever as this flourish may be,¹³ Fitzpatrick is just as wrong to turn away from historiographic metafiction as she was right to identify it in DeLillo’s writing in the first place. She is correct, of course, to suggest that DeLillo recognizes, via Nick Shay, that the notion of identity as “self-making is...mythic. But as with Duvall and others who would privilege Hoover’s holocaustic vision, for Fitzpatrick to cast such a negative pall on the role of unreliable narratives in informing our sense of identity is either naïve or disingenuous. As Paul John Eakin puts it, “despite our illusions of autonomy and self-determination—‘I write my story, I say who I am’—we do not invent our identities out of whole cloth. Instead, we draw on the resources of the cultures we inhabit to shape them” (*Living Autobiographically* 22). The way in which sports fandom informs individual identity is a perfect example of Eakin’s characterization, as the actions that take place within a purportedly objective competition are necessarily and overtly communally narrativized even as they are assigned personal significance. But such a “tissue of lies,” of narratives necessarily contaminated in their accuracy and their origins, are not wrong for being such—they are “a defense against the sludge in which the self is mired,” after all—nor are all (or even most) sports fans unaware of terms of the bargain. As the adult Nick Shay, puts it in embarrassedly explaining why he sought out and purchased the ball believed to

be Thomson's "Shot": "I didn't buy the object for the glory and drama attached to it. It's not about Thomson hitting the homer. It's about Branca making the pitch. It's all about losing" (97). Nick understands that his consumerist desire is driven by personal narrative significance within the larger, communally-mediated narrative surrounding the event. He also knows that both sets of narratives—whether cast in the broad rhetorical strokes of "glory and drama" or the phenomenological vagaries of "losing"—are inherently unreliable.

In an odd way, Fitzpatrick's critique fails to recognize that the ontological blurring enacted in historiographic metafiction—both the formal literary incarnation outlined by Hutcheon and the self-narrative form inherent in sports fandom that I've represented here—works both ways. Since there is no such thing as purely objective history, critiquing the narrative basis through which historical "truth" is constructed—as historiographic metafiction forces us to do—allows readers to invest this history with deeper intellectual and ontological resonances. So too, when we realize that narrative representation is necessarily unreliable, "calling the possibility of the accurate telling of any story into question" (Fitzpatrick 151), we can use the tools of historical inquiry to redeem these narratives. DeLillo argues in "The Power of History" that the moment resonates in the case of Thomson's "Shot" because of the difficulty in documenting it:

Newsreel footage of Bobby Thomson's home run resembles something of World War I vintage. But the shakier and fuzzier the picture, the more it lays a claim to permanence. And the voice of the announcer, Russ Hodges, who did the rapturous radio account of the game's final moments, is beautifully isolated in time -- not subject to the debasing process of frantic repetition that exhausts a contemporary event before it has rounded into coherence. (62)

Echoing Fredric Jameson's notion in *Postmodernism* (1991) that the "sheer mechanical technique [of] instant playbacks...borrowed from commercial sports, expertly emptie[s] events of their content" (355), DeLillo suggests that the relative scarcity and low quality of the recordings

documenting the historical “facts” surrounding Hodges’s homerun preserve its meaning such that, paradoxically, “Thomson and Hodges are unconsumed” (62), ripe for renarrativization in work like his own. As a result, Fitzpatrick claims, “the problematic nature of history...arises when the picture becomes too clear, when the historical event and its recorded traces become almost identical” (148). But in taking a dystopian Jamesonian position on the extensiveness and ubiquity of mass-mediated recordings, Fitzpatrick and DeLillo evince a kind of technological nostalgia which they would scorn in a baseball context. The similarity—or “recontainment,” as Jameson might say—of these recordings does not “debas[e]” or “exhaust” the narrative potential of their historical rendering (DeLillo, “The Power of History” 62). Quite the contrary.

Instead, like Hutcheon, we should understand that “postmodern intertextuality challenges...both closure and single, centralized meaning. Its willed and wilful provisionality rests largely upon its acceptance of the inevitable textual infiltration of prior discursive practices” (127). No less than the narrativization of history, we cannot ignore the historicization of narrative. If we feel that technological advances in the mass mediation of events reduces their interpretive possibilities, that is only because we ignore or disregard the ways in which modern narratives are interpenetrated by assumptions made in previous discourse and vice versa. Which is to say, then, that if “The Shot Heard Round the World” seems to have permanence because its documentation is fuzzier and shakier than modern recordings of baseball games, that is only because DeLillo underappreciates the degree to which subsequent sharper narratives determine the Thomson’s homerun’s capaciousness for renarrativization. Technology is a scapegoat. An expanded, more comprehensive base of historical texts can only enhance the possibilities for interpretation and renarrativization, not limit them.

Interviewed by ESPN subsidiary Grantland.com upon the 60th anniversary of Bobby Thomson's "Shot" in 2011, DeLillo had this to say about writing *Underworld*:

Every so often I am asked to answer questions from translators and these glimpses of the novel tell me that my feelings about the book have deepened through the years. It seems more ambitious to me now than it did when I was working day to day: five years that now seem compressed into the folds and bends of daily routine. It seems new to me, filled with passages that I'd forgotten. I guess it's the response of a man to the culture and literature of a country that never fails to be astonishing. (Interview with Rafe Bartholomew)

Realizing in this case the congruence between the unreliability of memory and narrative, DeLillo—the person with greater access to the novel's textual resonances than any other human on the planet—recognizes his estrangement from those recordings, complete as they may be, and that historicity informs his enriched perspective. Like a fan watching the baseball team he knows, loves, and has watched play in literally thousands of statistically similar games, DeLillo sees newness in a text intimately familiar to him, freshness in writing he not only recorded, but—like Jameson's replays—pored over countless times. So, too, he sees how contemporary culture, “astonishing” as it is, has altered his perspective on Thomson's homerun. Asked

If you were going to write a novel of similar scope about post-Cold War America and begin it with a scene at a sporting event, what do you think it might be?

To portray America over the past twenty years or so, I would think immediately of football, probably the Super Bowl in its sumptuous suggestion of a national death wish. (Interview with Rafe Bartholomew)

Hoover's holocaust informs DeLillo's view on football's nihilistic excesses and promise of destruction, and is inflected by it upon re-reading. Still, like the Bruegel-ian reading of “Pafko,” football's “national death wish,” though sumptuous, is but a suggestion.

Which brings us, finally, to the last and perhaps most significant textual difference between “Pafko” and “The Triumph of Death.” The final lines of *Underworld*'s prologue, an example par excellence of its status as historiographic metafiction, read:

All the fragments of the afternoon collect around his airborne form.¹⁴ Shouts, bat-cracks, full bladders and stray yawns, the sand-grain manyness of things that can't be counted.

It is all falling indelibly into the past. (60)

Here are historical minutiae, facts no less "real" than that of Thomson's homerun, Pafko's gaze upward, or Branca's anguish, unrecorded by history and yet present in DeLillo's entirely unreliable narrative. They are "falling," have fallen, "indelibly into the past," and yet they are present for the reader. Tellingly, the original version of "Pafko" recorded them as such:

All the fragments of the afternoon collect around his airborne form. Shouts, bat-cracks, full bladders and stray yawns, the sand-grain manyness of things that can't be counted. It is all falling indelibly into the now. (70)

Like the difference in titles between "Pafko at the Wall" and "The Triumph of Death," this difference in tense is ostensibly grounded in context. Since "falling into the past" is immediately followed by Nick Shay's present, "driving a Lexus through a rustling wind" (63), we can understand its pastness directly in relationship to his character and indirectly to our own. Since there is no larger *Underworld*, no Nick Shay to follow "Pafko," the realization of historicity and narrativization in "The Shot Heard Round the World" has no immediate context external to that of the reader herself. But the most significant aspect of the direction in which "The Shot" falls may lie in the tense change itself. All human actions, sporting events and nuclear tests, racist fan interchanges and famous broadcasts, vomiting comedians and the falling pages of *Life* magazine, are past. And they are also now. Such is the implicit power of narrative, reliable or not, and the realized burden of historiographic metafiction.

¹ This agreement largely stems from perceptions of baseball’s domestic origins (which are now much disputed) and historical breadth. Rising to prominence around the time of the Civil War, the game rode the wave of the nation’s subsequent military-industrial growth.

² Later, in 2001, it would be published as a novella by Scribner. Since the text of the novella is identical to that of the *Underworld* prologue, I will refer only to the *Harper’s* (referred to as “Pafko”) and *Underworld* (referred to as the prologue or “The Triumph of Death”) versions in this chapter.

³ As far as I can tell, the similarity of this name to that of Bill Watterson, famed cartoonist of the wildly popular “Calvin and Hobbes” comic strip, is entirely coincidental. Nevertheless, it is at least worth noting that both “Pafko” and “Calvin and Hobbes” feature an imaginative boy and his physically larger, seemingly-more-worldly friend who is (sometimes) also a foe.

⁴ As opposed to “it’s a school day, sure, but he is nowhere near the classroom” (*Underworld* 11).

⁵ Readers who are not American, obviously, are excluded from this designation and must read the section from an outsider’s perspective. Which does not remove said readers from a fan context, of course, but rather assigns to them the perspective of cultural outsiders—a common trope in fandom. Fans who operate at a geographical or cultural remove from the objects of their attention often use said affiliation to inform and modify their identity in a local context. (See Sandvoss, *A Game of Two Halves*, 67-100)

⁶ As mentioned earlier, the desire for a snack is complicated for Cotter by his feeling that the African American peanut vendor “is making him visible” (20).

⁷ For David Evans, one of the many literary critics who have focused on the role of garbage in *Underworld*, the word “selfness” suggests “it is as though the particularity of garbage, ‘personal waste,’ were the last refuge of individuality, expressed in a gesture that momentarily creates an

ideal community of self-recognition involving all members, players and fans, and realizes, if only for the miraculous space of an instant, the Whitmanian promise of the novel's opening line: 'He speaks in your voice'" (118). While the connection of this moment of "selfness" to the "Whitmanian promise of the novel's opening line" is astute, the notion that sports fans (not to mention players) can constitute a "community of self-recognition" only "momentarily" and in a moment of such magnitude, is reductive. Only if we consider, as DeLillo puts it, "the dusty hum of who [we] are" (21)—the fact that simultaneous self-recognition on the scale of a stadium full of people is practically impossible even in a moment of such magnitude—does Evans's assertion avoid the implication that sports spectators are somehow less capable of such self-recognition than other groups of people.

⁸ As Duvall explains it in "Baseball As Aesthetic Ideology: Cold War History, Race, and DeLillo's 'Pafko at the Wall,'" "people's desire to experience religious transcendence through baseball can be named by a shorthand term—aura. An important discussion of the dangerous implications of aura is Walter Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in which aura is a negative concept because it cloaks the work of art in its cultic and ritual function... In DeLillo's postwar America, there is no Führer figure attempting to manipulate the masses; nevertheless, there operates what might be termed a postmodern, decentralized totalitarianism in which the mass media—often linked to advertising—constructs an aura around popular culture events" (285-6).

⁹ As Matthew Mullins further puts it, while the crowd's community of fans in the Polo Grounds dissipates as soon as the game (and the prologue) is over, "the community that grows up around the 'Shot Heard Round the World' [baseball] does not flag or die out regardless of what direction the narrative takes" (283).

¹⁰ Or, as David Yetter puts it in his contribution to *UnderWords*: ““By juxtaposing Cotter’s language with that of Hodges, Cotter’s yearning becomes part of a continuum, an essential element of the game’s collective soul. Attached in this way to the language of baseball myth, Cotter becomes a part of it, he is Hodges’s imaginary [foul ball-retrieving boy], part of that ‘thing that seems to recapitulate the whole history of the game’” (31).

¹¹ As Curt Gentry puts it, "Given Hoover's public persona of strict morality, it was assumed that those he honored with his friendship were models of probity. On the contrary, according to a top aide, 'Hoover didn't associate with people unless he had something on them'" (qtd in Duvall, *Underworld: A Reader's Guide* 6).

¹² If not necessarily in its incarnation in *Harper's*, then at least in its republished form as the 2001 novella *Pafko at the Wall*.

¹³ The role of garbage in *Underworld* is one of the principal foci for literary critics of the novel. What’s more, entropic understandings of human existence are a widely recognized theme of postmodern literature, particularly in Pynchon studies.

¹⁴ The “his” in question is a drunk fan in a raincoat, observed rounding the bases in jubilation by Hodges long after the game is over.

CHAPTER TWO

Race in the Basketball Memoir: White Fan Identity and the Eros of “a Black Man’s Game”

Of all literary genres, it is the autobiography that seems most richly and strikingly American, offering as it does three features that are endemic to the American national character: private confession as public narrative; the invention or reinvention of the self; and personal history as salvation dramaturgy.

–Gerald Early, “A Reading of *The Greatest: My Own Story*”

If the novel allows Don DeLillo and others to position fans as witnesses to history and re-articulators of what is “real” within it, then the fan memoir internalizes this blurring of seemingly authentic experience.¹ The novel provides insight into the inner lives of characters, of course, but the existential stakes of self-creation via memoir yield reflexive insights into the interpersonal rewards of fan behavior. Though literary critics such as Paul John Eakin have demonstrated that autobiographical accounts are only superficially more “real” or “true” than those of fictional characters,² such autobiographical representations of the ontological uncertainty surrounding the reality of sporting events are amplified by the authors’ existence on the same plane as their readers and the athletes about whom they write.³ Put more simply, the flexible narrative bases by which athletes and fans are connected are more potently demonstrated and readily analyzed when the athletes, fan author, and reader can be said to breathe the same air.

The genre of memoir is increasingly popular. In *Memoir: A History* (2009), Ben Yagoda asserts that the publication of memoirs in America “increased more than 400 percent between 2004 and 2008” and that the form has consequently “become the central form of the culture: not only the way stories are told, but the way arguments are put forth, products and properties marketed, ideas floated, acts justified, reputations constructed or salvaged” (7, 28). An obstinate believer in autobiographical reference based in fact, Yagoda also contradictorily admits that

memoir is a genre “defined and determined by its subjectivity,” thanks to its foundation in the famously unreliable faculty of memory (239-240). The form’s veneer of “documentary truth” (239), while sating American readers’ thirst for supposed objectivity, also necessarily subverts that desire. Memoir is, in other words, an extended written representation of the subjective narrative ordering of purportedly objective experiences inherent in human identity construction.⁴

Like identities themselves, which “despite our illusions of autonomy and self-determination...we do not invent...out of whole cloth” (Eakin, *Living Autobiographically* 22), memoir is also inherently relational.⁵ Classically understood as a “reminiscence of others” via the lens of the authorial persona (Pascal 5), memoir is frequently used to remember or recontextualize someone prominent in its author’s life, like a family member or a mentor. Though technically this narrative is not focused on but facilitated by author’s persona, the form inevitably engenders the articulation of his own identity in the process. Complicating the narrative construction of the self as it attempts to encapsulate the other, memoir is thus perfectly suited to the reminiscences of those purportedly passive denizens of the crowd: the fans.

In this chapter I will examine three memoirs that demonstrate both the many opportunities for self-reflection and the active identity construction that the form allows, and that do so at the intersection of sports fandom and racial difference. Notably, the authors of all three memoirs are fans of basketball, and, in particular, the United States’ premier professional basketball league: the National Basketball Association. The NBA is recognized among the “Big Four” American professional sports leagues⁶ as having the biggest racial disparity between its athletes and fans: most of the former are black and most of the latter are white.⁷ This demographic paradigm holds true for authors Scott Raab, David Shields, and Bill Simmons, and each of these three white males is acutely aware of this difference in constructing his memoir.

The form's value as a tool for the exploration of race relations is immense because it is so ontologically slippery: like race and sporting events themselves, memoir's veneer of objective reality gives it a gravitas that its underlying narrative fabrications do not justify. At its core is an "inherent and irresolvable conflict between the capabilities of memory and the demands of narrative" (Yagoda 109). In telling their story of the NBA from the stands, Raab, Shields, and Simmons articulate and identify themselves via the actions of others. They watch their white selves watching the mostly black men whose physical abilities power their attraction and attempt to forge a compelling narrative from it.

In examining Raab's *The Whore of Akron* (2011), Shields's *Black Planet* (1999), and Simmons's *The Book of Basketball* (2009), then, I mean to demonstrate the ways in which memoir's formal instability reveals the unstable reality of race and sports for these fans as individuals and as representative fandoms. As Gerald Early remarks in *A Level Playing Field* (2011),

High-performance athletes are not merely social roles or a collection of habits and customs; they are mythologies. On a certain level, athletes are a special sort of socially-constructed mirror that reflects a romanticized version of cultural honor and cultural virtue. Athletes can be heroic and celebrated for their heroism in their performance in the way no artist or worker in another line of work can, for the athlete can symbolize the honor of a group or nation in dramatic, even melodramatic, terms. High-performance athletics is perhaps the most theatrical and emotional form of ritualized honor that we have left in the world. (2-3)

In other words, every fan's experience of a sporting event functions as a kind of memoiristic enterprise—the signification of another through the self—and one that easily subsumes athletes within familiar narratives of group, nation, and race. The ways in which Raab, Shields, and Simmons write these African American athletes into their memoirs is a natural extension of their actions as a sports fan and reflects their desire to be identified as such, but it also calls attention to the narrative nature of sporting events. Recognized as characters in memoir, the broad range

of things that “real” athletes can be made to signify—such that they can be rendered not merely dramatic but melodramatic—is readily apparent. Consequently, interpretations of sporting outcomes, rather than being limited by scores and statistics, are freed from the bounds of empiricism and afforded a full range of narrative potency.

Though white males make up the majority of NBA fans in America (see endnote 7), it is not merely a probabilistic coincidence that I have chosen to examine white, male, and ostensibly heterosexual authors who often espouse less-than-enlightened racial views. Doing so addresses power lines that are often ignored in conventional sports discourse: the distinctions between fan and player are multiple, and discussions regarding the attraction of the former to the latter usually leave assumptions of hegemonic whiteness, maleness, and heterosexuality unexamined. In part, this is because such discourse is predicated on the purportedly objective measurement of athletic merit, which “is the very thing,” as Gerald Early puts it, that “dehumanizes the athlete” (16):

Merit is so pure in high-performance athletics that only the best athletes survive, no matter who they are. Athletics is such a perfect thresher that everything social seems subordinate or irrelevant or a form of adversity that the athlete has to overcome. On the one hand, we pretend that only the making of the athlete matters, but of course this is not true in the end. What athletes are, both socially and individually, has a great deal to do with how we respond to them. (16)

As Early recognizes, the notion that fans form attachment to athletes solely on the basis of competitive merit is laughable, but it is perpetuated because it obscures messy social realities and ostensibly depoliticizes the terms of that attraction.⁸ Colorblind racism, omnipresent in contemporary American culture at large, has long been inherent in sports discourse, but it is a particularly pressing matter in the modern NBA. In *After Artest* (2012), his definitive account of the NBA’s “systemic assault on blackness” in the wake of the infamous 2004 Palace Brawl, David Leonard details the means by which commissioner David Stern and the league office have

“focused on deracializing the league, on facilitating colorblindness, which they have considered key to [their] success” (10). This emphasis on colorblindness, Leonard demonstrates, effectively aligns league policy with the paradigm of “New Racism,” which ignores systemic inequalities impacting people of color, particularly African Americans, and blames “personal failures and deficiencies all while denying the importance of race” (6). Leonard argues that the NBA’s attempt at deracialization is effectively disseminated by the sports media to the league’s consumers, who replicate it in their own discourse.

In contradistinction to Leonard’s blanket assertion, however, Raab, Shields, and Simmons each make a point of recognizing the league’s blackness as both broadly and personally significant. Though sports critics have long argued that the sports fan’s “yearning to be someone else, or at least, a very small part of something else” reflects his “dark desire for deindividuation” (Barash, “The Roar of the Crowd”),⁹ such a negative view of fan communities as brain washing oversimplifies the matter. As fan studies scholar Matt Hills puts it in *Fan Cultures* (2002), the factors that foster fan association “are neither rooted in an ‘objective’ interpretive community or an ‘objective’ set of texts...nor are they atomised collections of individuals whose ‘subjective’ passions and interests happen to overlap. Fan cultures are both found and created” (113). Fans follow favorite individual athletes, both with and without regard for their interpretive communities; moreover, they identify particular aspects of those athletes’ on- and off-court abilities and personas that personally attract them. In “seeking a coherent identity narrative,” as Eric Simons puts it, sports fans—consciously or not—articulate themselves individually and by association with others (161). Shaping such an identity narrative in the public forum of memoir, Raab, Shields, and Simmons’s assertions of racial awareness are meant to distinguish them even as they assert their place within the collective body of NBA fans.

Attuned to race though they may claim to be, Raab, Shields, and Simmons nevertheless problematically characterize black athletes as they attempt to humanize themselves via memoir. Race not only influences the way in which these fans read basketball meta-narratives, but also powers their desire to write, and write themselves into, those narratives. Their reasons for loving basketball may be multivarious and egocentric, but their reflexive recognition of racial difference is motivated by an underlying erotic fascination with black athletes. Despite its purportedly level playing field, notes Michael Eric Dyson in *Reflecting Black* (1993), “for much of its history, American sports activity has reflected white patriarchal privilege” (66). Part and parcel of that privilege, the commodification and sexualization of sweating black bodies drives popular consumption of the NBA. Raab, Shields, and Simmons do not transcend these consumptive frameworks any more than they ignore them. In constructing “selves” on which to build their memoirs, they bend the NBA’s malleable on- and off-court narratives in order to render the athletes they admire racialized fan-objects—characters they can ventriloquize—that aid in their self-articulation.

**“My favorite sport was black [and] it pissed me off that I was white”:
Identifying the Object of Fandom & Recognizing Racial Difference**

In *Black Planet* (1999), David Shields credits his childhood speech impediment with stoking his passion for basketball. Growing up as a stutterer, Shields found in basketball a mode of expression that speaking could not provide. As he writes in another memoir, *Body Politic* (2004), “my whole life was structured around the idea of doing one thing so well that people forgave me for, and I forgave myself for, my ‘disfluency’” (20). Though recognized as such in childhood, a connection between race and basketball is never more apparent to Shields than when he finds himself in “Seattle the Good,” one of the whitest cities in the country and one

whose “ruling ethos” is obsequious politeness to the point of “forlorn apology for the animal impulses” (10, 5). But his new passion, the Supersonics, called the “NBA’s most impudent team” by *Sports Illustrated*, are “not like this at all” (5, 6). They realize for Shields sociologist Richard Majors’s notion of the “cool pose,” wherein black males’ “unique, expressive and conspicuous styles of demeanor, speech, gesture, clothing, hairstyle, walk, stance, and handshake [are designed to] offset an imposed invisibility and provide a means to show the dominant culture (and the black male’s peers) that the black male is strong and proud” (211). The racialized basis of the Sonics’ appeal is clear to Shields, and is, in fact, the intended theme of *Black Planet*. After all, as Shields explains in his prefatory remarks, in the NBA “white fans and black players enact and quietly explode virtually every racial issue and tension in the culture at large. Race, the league's taboo topic, is the league's true subject” (Author’s Note). As the word “explode” suggests, *Black Planet* is a book that denies the possibility of a tidy resolution. It is a work worthy of the Public Enemy homage that is its title, unflinchingly and often uncomfortably examining the racial discourses that simmer beneath the NBA’s veneer of colorblindness.¹⁰

Still, *Black Planet* is not an anti-racist study, nor a broad-ranging one. Shields’s work is a memoir, after all, and the fandom he represents is as particular as any fan’s. His favorite player, the fulcrum of his interest in race and basketball, in blurring verbal and physical expression, is Gary Payton. Payton was an All-Star, one of the best defenders in the league, and notorious for his trash-talking. The first two factors contribute to Shields’s interest, of course, but the last drives it. Describing himself as “the bad link in the whole thang[,] the fucked-up crew” and “the Problem Child” in an *Esquire* profile titled “The Joy of Yap,” Payton actualized this self-conception on the court, constantly attempting to aggravate his opponents with his words as he played fierce defense against them (qtd in Shields 10). Of this attitude, Shields exults,

“*Language* is what’s most alive and dangerous—Gary Payton knows this; so, qua stutterer, qua writer, do I”—and later: “Gary’s game is better than everyone else’s because his language is better than everyone else’s. My identification with him is total” (105, 146, emphasis original). Carried away by the author’s self-reflexive obsession, race and language invigorate every page of *Black Planet*, with Payton the memoir’s touchstone of both desire and interpretation.

By contrast, Scott Raab’s *The Whore of Akron* records basketball fandom, and the role of race within it, quite differently. For the former, Raab takes an oppositional affective tack. His is not primarily a book about fandom, but *anti*-fandom. The subject of Raab’s dispassion is LeBron James, the eponymous “Whore of Akron” in the author’s estimation. James, an Ohio native drafted first overall by Raab’s beloved Cleveland Cavaliers, led the team to the NBA Finals in 2007, only to fall short in his next three seasons. Following the 2009-10 season, James, perhaps the most coveted free agent in NBA history, left the Cavs to sign with the Miami Heat, joining Dwyane Wade and Chris Bosh as a member of the so-called “Big Three.”¹¹ James announced this news via an ESPN special titled “The Decision,” which aired nationally and featured James answering questions about his future in front of a community center full of kids in his hometown of Akron, just 40 miles from Cleveland.

Raab, a native Clevelander, supports the Cavaliers because of his regional affiliation, of course. But he also cherishes a deeper connection to the NBA franchise’s futile history. “Being a Jew and being a Cleveland fan are inextricably entwined to me,” he asserts, remarking that a “standard of fearful gloom [is] endemic to both the average Cleveland fan and the average Jew” (59, 29). Having witnessed in person Cleveland’s last professional sports championship, the Browns’ 1964 NFL title game victory over the Baltimore Colts,¹² Raab declares that the city’s 47-year championship drought,¹³ the longest in the nation, has rendered “Cleveland fans [a]

veritable nation of Job, whose love burns yet through all the heartache and scorn” (9). To transform Raab’s identification with an ethos of suffering—civic, religious, sporting, and personal, via tales of his own broken childhood and subsequent drug abuse—came James:

What made [him] matter so much... was that he understood all of this and more. His pride in being a son of this soil was our own pride; his history, too, was ours. He hungered, like all of us, for affirmation and respect. He could rewrite history and restore our pride and finally, after half a century, make *us* matter. (23, emphasis original)

Dubbed “The Chosen One” by *Sports Illustrated* as a high school junior, James seemed poised to live up to that nickname for Cleveland fans. As Raab’s italicized use of “*us*” indicates, it was supposed that James could transcend the notion, made famous by Jerry Seinfeld, “that fanhood is a matter of rooting for laundry..., that loyalty...is not integral to the business of pro sports” (qtd in Raab, 22). James would redeem Cleveland fans because he was one of them. But he left.

That departure cues Raab’s animus, and motivates his anti-fan memoir. Media fan theorist Jonathan Gray explains this type of transformation and its manifestations:

Fans can become anti-fans...when an episode or part of a text is perceived as harming a text as a whole. ...Behind dislike, after all, there are always expectations—of what a text should be like, of what is a waste of media time and space, of what morality or aesthetics texts should adopt, and of what we would like to see others watch or read. (“New Audiences” 73)

James’s departure “harmed” the NBA text for Raab, fractured it, and with it a fundamental aspect of his identity: “those teams [that] remain a psychic rock, an anchor for my wobbling, fretful soul” (4). But as Gray posits, it is not merely the fact of “The Decision” that fuels Raab’s anti-fandom, but the details of James’s behavior, the way the media portrayed him, the aesthetics of disloyalty he exhibits, and the way Raab’s fellow fans reacted to the star’s actions. All are tinged by race and racial difference. As Raab existentially wails,

What then can I read upon the stone heart of LeBron? What can I learn from the odyssey of a black kid, sprung from the loins of a teen mama, fatherless save for the seed of himself, who was a rock star at the age of fifteen, with girls lining up to lay naked with him just so that years later they could boast to their boyfriends that they boffed King James? (108)

As these comments about James's "teen mama," his fatherlessness, and supposed profligate teenage sexuality suggest, Raab's desire is based in schadenfreude and jealousy—in joy at James's failures and shortcomings—and those shortcomings are imbued, whether Raab consciously intends them to be or not, by racial stereotypes.

Like Raab's, Bill Simmons's parents divorced, and sports fandom was his psychic salve. Young Bill would end up going to a lot of Celtics games on his father's lap, and the team became a focal point of bonding between them. Though the Celtics had already been wildly successful in the 1950s and 1960s, winning an unprecedented eleven championships thanks to the excellence of Bill Russell, Simmons retrospectively considers the 1973-74 season, his father's first as a season ticket holder, as "the perfect time" to buy into "Celtic Pride" (4). Boston was especially excited about these Celtics because of stars John Havlicek and "reigning MVP Dave Cowens, a fiery redhead who clicked with fans the way Russell never did" (5). In attempting to understand why, Simmons recognizes racial difference as an important factor:

The Celtics were suddenly flourishing in a notoriously racist city. Was it happening because their best two players were white? Was it happening because of the burgeoning number of baby boomers like my father, the ones who fell in love with hoops because of the unselfishness of Auerbach's Celtics and Holzman's Knicks, who grew up watching Chamberlain and Russell battle like two gigantic dinosaurs on Sundays, who were enthralled by UCLA's win streak and Maravich's wizardry at LSU? Or was Cowens simply more likable and fan-friendly than the enigmatic Russell? The answer? All of the above. (5)

Typical of Simmons, the paragraph's explicit reference to others' racism coexists with his own racially troubling language that attributes two teams' unselfishness to their white coaches and metaphorizes two of the NBA's greatest post players, both black, as "dinosaurs" (5).¹⁴ But on the

surface, at least, Simmons asserts a racial sensitivity that was present even in his childhood fandom. He recalls his “racial identity crisis in the first grade,” when he insisted on calling himself “Jabaal Abdul-Simmons” because “my favorite sport was black” and “it pissed me off that I was white” (8). The anecdote, exhibiting childish naiveté that is meant to be humorous, nonetheless reflects Simmons’s desire to discuss racial tensions between the NBA’s mostly black players and mostly white fan base in an atmosphere in which “everyone’s sphincters tighten whenever a white guy discusses race and sports” (537). As his anal reference makes clear, however, Simmons’s desire to discuss race and sports is frequently lodged in the crude rhetoric of white male privilege such that his purported awareness can look more like ignorance. In many ways, he fits neatly within the paradigm of New Racism cited by Leonard, relying, as Ben Carrington puts it, “upon a static definition of racism that is so limited and narrow that only overt forms of white supremacy that lead to intentional acts of genocide, violence, or public persecution get to ‘count’ as racism” (175).

Simmons’s obliviousness to the troubling aspects of his racial rhetoric is related to his ostensible authorial project. Though he identifies white superstar Larry Bird as his favorite player, the ’80s Celtics great is not central to his work as Payton is for Shields and James is for Raab. Unlike the forthrightly memoiristic *Black Planet* and *The Whore of Akron*, *The Book of Basketball* has wider ambitions, as the broad framing of its title suggests: its central premise is to re-imagine the Basketball Hall of Fame, to rank and—importantly—re-narrativize the 96 greatest NBA players into a “pyramid” of greatness (263). Though he writes a memoir no less than the other two authors do, Simmons claims to write—believes he is writing—a biography of the league itself. This is to his discredit; rather than a “discourse of anxiety,” as Jürgen Schläeger describes autobiographical writing, he writes biography’s “discourse of usurpation” in which

“the consistency of the narrative and the explanatory power of the arguments [is] based in the individual’s relatively comfortable relationship with her or his culture’s ground of assumptive value” (qtd in Parke 108). Schlaeger’s characterization is apt; writing his own narrative onto the broadest possible NBA meta-text, Simmons assumes that his reader shares in the privileged fan viewpoint of pseudo-enlightened white patriarchy, and that his fantastical associations with particular players on racial terms will be legible as a result.

While Simmons attempts to encapsulate the NBA’s entire history in his own story, Shields focuses on—and is invigorated by—the particulars of Gary Payton’s language. It is “alive and dangerous,” particularizing for the memoirist what he calls fans’ “imaginary identification with black skin,” in which white spectators “pretend we want [the athletes] to be controlled and ‘classy,’ but really what we want them to do is misbehave, so we can equate their talent with inadequacy, reaffirming their deep otherness, their mad difference” (105, 125).¹⁵ Shields recognizes that Payton himself is “not really bad, he’s only pretend-bad—I know that—but he allows me to fantasize about being bad” (10). Though he uses the first person plural “we” to position himself amid this paradigm of racialized fan feeling, Shields also attempts to distinguish himself within it. He is cognizant that not only racial typing, but any framework of “othering,” is inherently disempowering for the athletes, no matter how wealthy or culturally prominent they become, asking “what adoration does not, by its very zeal, transfigure the other person into an icon, an object, a thing?” (59).

Recognizing this objectifying impulse and attuned to Payton’s verbal expression, Shields nevertheless is ensnared within the economy of bodily commodification and desire. He finds himself staring at the Sonics’ cheerleaders, “showing off their bodies, with dollar signs in their eyes; [like] the players, showing off their bodies, with dollar signs in their eyes—this level of

explicitness about bodies and money is weirdly exciting to me.... To be a pure body like this, to be looked at this way, to be admired and reviled for being so young, so physical, so unabashedly a body” (19). The “erotic delectation” that Shields detects extends into his own bedroom (47). He recounts making love to his wife, “imagin[ing] that I am as tall, thin, and muscular as Gary Payton,” and, in another instance, describing their intercourse as “more like fucking: a rough physicality that I realize later is my attempt to imitate the athletes I spend so much time watching and thinking about” (112, 28). Such behavior realizes Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s notion, cited by Shields, that the black body has been “highly, menacingly sexualized,” yielding it an “ambiguous dual role in the Western Imagination” (139).

On a broader fan register, Shields recognizes this eroticism in listening to his fellow fans, remarking that “it would be impossible to overstate the degree to which sports-talk radio is overshadowed by the homosexual panic implicit in the fact that it consists almost entirely of a bunch of out-of-shape white men sitting around talking about black men’s buff bodies” (50-1). It is as if, as one of Shields’s graduate students puts it,¹⁶

watching men we can identify touch each other in that kind of way, an emotional way, watching emotional black men touch each other like that, close up like that, with the cameras right there, and all this excitement about *scoring*, well, that’s threatening and it gets labeled as bad. In American culture the most dangerous symbol, the most frightening symbol, for white people, is black men in love. (59-60, emphasis original)

It is threatening, in an atmosphere of carefully negotiated homosociality buttressed by homophobia,¹⁷ because a large part of a fan’s excitement has to do with bodily association, with Shields’s sense that the players “are our dream-selves and we want to become them” (125). So long as they remain “transcendental signifier[s]” (183), as Shields describes Michael Jordan,¹⁸ unattainable and super-human, the fans’ desirous feelings are easily considered heteronormative. It is when these men are considered *merely as men* that racism and homophobia are recognizable

to the fans and subject to their reflexive panic. Acutely aware that prefigured cultural narratives influence but do not excuse his behavior, Shields wonders if “black people [are] conscious of how excruciatingly self-conscious white people have become in their every interaction with black people? Is this self-consciousness an improvement?” (75). Whether or not it is in fact an improvement, Shields’s self-consciousness of racial difference is vital to his identity construction in *Black Planet*.

Raab, bearing a tattoo of the Cleveland Indians’ famously racist mascot, “Chief Wahoo,” on his forearm, is certainly less willing to reflexively consider his racial assumptions and racist behaviors. Still, just a few pages into the book, he remarks that

In a league full of athletes whose bodies can honestly be described as beautiful—one of the aesthetic delights of an NBA locker room is watching from a distance as the pack of mainly fat, mainly white members of the press gathers and ungathers itself as each chiseled specimen emerges from the shower—LeBron James is a masterpiece. Hewn of sinew, apparently impervious as iron—muscled yet sleek, thick-shouldered yet loose of limb, James looks different from every other player in the league, especially in a damp towel. (5)

Here is the very fulcrum of racialized homosexual pleasure and panic for white male fans: the locker room.¹⁹ Here are the archetypes of black male masculinity, muscled athletes nearly (and often actually) full frontal in their nudity, begrudgingly sharing carefully crafted, cliché-filled opinions on games past and yet to come. Himself admittedly fat and white, Raab nevertheless separates himself from fellow journalists as they suggestively “gather...and ungather” themselves before “chiseled specimen[s]” (5). The specter of black male sexuality looms large in the space, and Raab amplifies it, though he recognizes finally that “there’s nothing especially forbidding about a guy in a towel, even LeBron. He’s a kid who just took a shower, and the fact that he can do things that I can only dream of—the physical summit of my day is a decent bowel movement—doesn’t change that” (5). The diminution of LeBron’s physical stature by reference

to his immature age and the supposed humor of Raab's scatological self-reference may be intended to detract from the eroticism of the synecdochal tableau the author presents, but the deflection is feeble. Raab understands that racialized desire powerfully informs basketball fandom at large, even if he doesn't want to admit it.

Characterizing his own fandom, Raab admits that he doesn't "know or care how or where to draw a line between fan and fanatic" (21). But the statement belies his awareness of, and desire to transgress, the line between conventional modes of spectatorial investment and rabid disregard for others that he exhibits in recounting another visit to the Cavaliers locker room just weeks before "The Decision":

[LeBron James] turns to finish getting dressed. I walk away, straight into the towel receptacle, a large wooden open-topped bin on wheels, waist high for normal folk. I stagger on the thick carpet, but manage to right myself without falling. And as I gather myself, I catch a sideways glimpse—here I'm going to flout what is unarguably sports journalism's most precious and closely guarded rule—just a snapshot, really, of the Chosen Junk. Eh—nothing special. Proportional, which is to say larger than my own cock last time I managed to find it. (91)

Again using self-deprecation ostensibly to minimize the impact of his words, Raab recognizes that athlete nudity, a locker room constant, is respectfully unreported on by those journalists granted access. Commenting on the size of a black man's penis, Raab plays into racist tropes concerning black male sexuality—in which "the black athlete (as the quintessence of blackness) assumes the preeminent position as *the* 'penis-symbol' and becomes a fantastic trope through which anxieties concerning the fragility of western (male) sexuality are played out" (Carrington 88). But he also inverts the trope insofar as he minimizes the "Chosen Junk," calling it "nothing special" (91). This comment is surely intended to insult James personally, but it also counters the old racist notion that white men should fear "hypersexual" black men in accordance with the supposed enormity of their penises. Raab thus both embraces the implicit racialized eroticism of

his—and others’—fandom, and refuses to do so in a way that would acquiesce to conventional modes of racist bigotry. LeBron may seem super human on the basketball court but he is fallibly human off of it, and neither sense of him, Raab’s characterization suggests, can be uncomplicatedly ascribed to prejudicial metanarratives concerning his race.

Though he doesn’t shy away from the racially-charged implications of his rhetoric, Raab does consider that his views on James might not be shared by African Americans. After “The Decision,” in preparation for James’s return to Cleveland as a member of the Heat, Raab heads to the historically African American section of town because, as he puts it,

I want to have a conversation with a black guy about my animus toward LeBron. Jesse Jackson and Maverick Carter and a few black voices in the media have weighed in on the role race played in the reaction to the Decision. Some claim it’s a factor, some deny it—I’m not looking for antipathy or absolution: I just want to know what I don’t know. I want to think about what I haven’t thought of yet.
(271)

Inside an African American-owned barbershop, Raab converses with Jimi Izrael, a fellow writer and native Clevelander. As a barber shaves “QUITNESS” into Raab’s hair, he describes his anti-fandom and asks for Izrael’s take. Tellingly, Izrael represents “white Cleveland” as feeling “like they fed LeBron, clothed him, and never called him ‘nigger’ in so many words—so the least he could do is wear his body down for another few years carrying a team of glamour boys and flatfoots” (272). When Raab insists that James flaunted his local roots—“wore [them] like he meant it. Like he *wanted* to be here”—Izrael importantly identifies an epistemological distinction:

“Listen: Freedom means something different, maybe something more, to black people. White folks look at LeBron and see a traitor who turned his back on his city. Black folks, even hardcore fans, see a black man making choices that suit him and his family—without hesitation or regret. Just like white folks do.” (273)

James's "Decision," Izrael recognizes, was just that: a decision. Outside the context of sports, people change jobs and cities all the time. That such an action is excoriated in an NBA context, Izrael reminds Raab, is not completely unrelated to the demographics of its players. That a black man is expected to stay where the mostly white fans desire him to, no matter how much he will be compensated, recalls a history in which black men didn't have the right to move where they liked.²⁰ Raab does not comment on the substance of Izrael's argument, ending the section shortly thereafter. But the mere fact that Raab records it as such implies some degree of self-criticism at the racial undertones of his own feelings.

Simmons, ever the commenter on his own authorial process, records toward the end of *The Book of Basketball* that "one of my first choices for a title was *The Book of Basketball: A White Man's Thoughts on a Black Man's Game*. My publishing company talked me out of it. Can't play the race card in the title" (536-7). Obviously regretting that decision, Simmons's discussions of race in the work are prominent and frequently sexually charged. To deflect from the controversial nature of such discussions, Simmons asserts that biracial pop science impresario Malcolm Gladwell "loves talking about race. And I do too[...]But when you're white, the degree of difficulty skyrockets. You can't screw up" (537). Amounting to little more than a "some of my best friends are black" defense, Simmons feels no compunction about playing to stereotypes. He delights in remarking that African American Celtics guard Dennis Johnson was "hung like a tripod" and creates what he calls the "All-NBA Dick Team," upon which, "you're never going to believe this, but there were no white guys" (375f, 376f). Simmons, in a manner even more straightforward than Raab, recalls Franz Fanon's formulation, as paraphrased by Carrington, by which "the black man is effectively reduced to the phallus" in the white imagination (88). He further "others" black men by rendering their skin tones alien—remarking

that Sudanese NBA star Manute Bol had “skin so dark that it made him seem purple”—and by comparing them to beautiful and expensive objects—asserting that proximity to NBA All-Star David Robinson, known for his impressive physique, was “like standing a few feet away from a prize thoroughbred or a brand-new Ferrari Testarossa...He was strikingly handsome and even the most devout heterosexual males would have admitted it. Really, he was just a specimen” (336, 457-8). That Simmons does all of this with an air of defensiveness is revealing. In articulating his sports fan persona in this “non-memoir” memoir, Simmons is not content to ponder (and linger in productive uncertainty about) his own racist and racialized behaviors like Shields and Raab. Instead, even as he ascribes racism to others,²¹ he reacts to recognition of his own racially problematic rhetoric with a tone of whiny sarcasm and “post-racial” justifications of white male privilege that cater to his desire to be seen as an ideal homosocial compatriot to others—to be “just one of the (white) guys.”

In *Darwin's Athletes: How Sport Has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race* (1997), a book that lambasts the culture of sports, and basketball in particular, as detrimental to African American life—John Hoberman calls the NBA a “theater of pseudo-reconciliation [which] serves to mitigate the pathos of American segregation...by creating one-sided relationships between white fans and the black athletes they admire from afar” (34). Simmons certainly exemplifies Hoberman's characterization quite effectively. Raab and Shields do not, however, precisely because they are under no illusions about the American reality of de facto segregation and the basketball arena's incapacity to reconcile it. Moreover, as I will demonstrate in the next section, all three male fans in fact crave relationships with athletes that are not one-sided, but predicated on an unattainable level of proximate interaction.

**“I ain’t your fuckin’ plaything”:
Aspirational Homosocial Ventriloquism**

Shields, Raab, and Simmons identify the particular objects of their obsession and recognize, with varying degrees of self-criticism, that race permeates the way their fandoms are constructed, but for all three another mode of fan interaction remains unsatisfied. What is missing, what they crave, is social contact. Unlike the average fan, all three memoirists have writerly credentials enough that they have been able to physically enter the locker room and speak in person to the athletes with whom they associate as fans (or anti-fans), but these interactions—as represented in the extreme by Raab’s voyeuristic, taboo-breaking description of his glance at LeBron James’s “Chosen Junk”—are often nasty, brutish, and short. The athletes, well aware of their position in American celebrity culture, generally speak only to the required limits of game-related questions they are required to answer, and then only in the vagaries of the notoriously hollow idioms that constitute “jock speak.” For the purposes of journalists writing game recaps, this level of interaction is sufficient. But for many committed fans, and male fans like Raab, Shields and Simmons in particular, it is far from adequate. The athletes’ true voices, heard only when the locker room doors are closed to outsiders, are what these fans crave. Not only would unfettered conversation yield deeper insight into the athletes as such, it would bring them into a state of homosocial intimacy desired by many fans.

Simmons exhibits this desire in recounting the closeness of the players on the Boston Celtics’ 1969 championship team:

Right after [Bill] Russell’s Celtics won, ... a crew of friends, employees, owners and media members poured into Boston’s locker room expecting the typical routine of champagne spraying and jubilant hugs. Russell asked every outsider to leave the locker room for a few minutes. The players wanted to savor the moment with each other, he explained, adding to nobody in particular, ‘We are each other’s friends.’ The room cleared and they spent that precious piece of time celebrating with one another. Lord knows what was said or what that moment

meant for them. As [NBA great] Isiah [Thomas] told Dan Patrick, we wouldn't understand. And we wouldn't. (55)

Fulfilling Simmons's paradigmatic notion that the key to NBA success is "The Secret," a measure of camaraderie among good players that makes them a great team, Russell's example is notable because it emphasizes exclusivity. That "we," the fans, wouldn't understand the intimate locker room discourse among the closely-bonded players on a championship team is not merely the product of said fans' inability to play basketball at the highest level. It is always also, because it is unattainable, the source of the fans' deepest homosocial desire: to not merely know the athletes, but be their friends and, in some cases, lovers. Lacking this access to the players, many fans—Shields, Raab, and Simmons included—imagine what it would be like to have that intimacy. They do so by voicing the athletes, putting them in imagined conversation with their narratorial personas, in a practice I call "aspirational homosocial ventriloquism." This ventriloquism is sometimes conducted with careful attention to the racial valences of the authors' larger works, but it must always privilege the fan's perspective. By disregarding the fact that their perspectival biases necessarily render these conversations skewed in their favor, Shields, Raab, and Simmons fail or decline to recognize that their imagined dialogues can be just as objectifying as the racism latent in their sexualized consumption of the black male physique. They demonstrate that they think of black culture, as Todd Boyd puts it, "as if it's always being performed for a white audience...forcing the culture to accommodate whatever perceptions might already be in place as opposed to allowing it to exist on its own terms and give off its own representation" (14).

For Shields, Gary Payton's language is available on the court via snippets of the player's oral expression and body language. Interpreting the latter, Shields often imagines Payton's accompanying words. When "a fan offers him a high-five...Payton quite pointedly refuses;...

I ain't your fuckin' plaything, I feel Gary telling the fan, *I ain't your buddy, you don't know me, don't go thinkin' you can slap my palm*" (148). Voicing the All-Star in italics, Shields imagines a hostility toward the (implicitly white) fan that plays to the stereotype of angry and dangerous black masculinity but that also recognizes the player's potential resentment toward fans who would believe they share in (or even control, as indicated by "plaything") his accomplishments. Gary Payton's verbal expression is available to Shields at greatest depth through "The Gary Payton Show," a Seattle radio program on the local sports station, on which fans can call in and speak to the man himself. Shields never calls, but he records the dialogue between other fans and Payton, with an eye to the subtextual. Though Payton is mostly guarded in his responses, Shields freely expands on the point guard's words. At times, this ventriloquism speaks to the homosocial intimacy and exclusivity coveted by Simmons. When a caller asks about an angry on-court exchange between Payton and an opposing player, "Payton says, 'He said something he wasn't supposed to.' *It's our camaraderie*" (146). Though Payton's vague response ostensibly censors a potentially FCC-unfriendly comment, Shields reads his imprecision as a measure of homosociality: the circle of "camaraderie" is closed to fans, even when the discourse involves opposing players.²²

But the players' interactions are also notably racialized by Shields. When a radio host suggests, in a follow-up to the fan's question, that one of Payton's white teammates, Detlef Schrempf, was responsible for restraining him and preventing his conflict with the opposing player from escalating, Shields records that

Payton strenuously resists this scenario: "I know when to back off and not get the other tech so I won't get kicked out of the game. That's all Det was trying to tell me." *I'm not just a body; I possess consciousness; I don't need blond, blue-eyed Schrempf to imprint upon me the consequences of my actions.* (147)

Here is Shields's racial self-reflexivity transposed onto Payton's voice and onto the court. The player's response is strategic: getting two technical fouls would result in Payton's expulsion from the game, something that would benefit neither him nor his team. But Shields detects in Payton's voice anger born of systematized injustice. That the German-American "Det" would need to impart to Payton this obvious bit of strategy is to imply, for Shields, that the linguistically-gifted point guard is little more than a megaphone-laden body. In asserting a racialized subtext to the point guard's words, however, Shields also sees fit to presume that his concerns are Payton's—that he can determine the areas in which racism impacts the All-Star's life. He assumes as much, if not more, about Payton than the radio host did in making his initial suggestion.

Does Shields's glib use of aspirational homosocial ventriloquism reflect his own white privilege? Or does the authorial device effectively call attention to his fellow spectator's assumption that white players can better control their emotions? He intends the latter, but the answer is surely both. In a guest column for *The Seattle Times*, Payton writes of fans' tendency to equate on-court behavior with personality: "People see us on the court and automatically judge us by our demeanor on the court. ...[They] don't understand that we might be tough on the court, but off the court we're a lot nicer than what they think" (cited in Shields 203). Payton's assertion that on-court performance does not define him as a person leads Shields to ventriloquize again: "*It's all just theater: we're not the lunatic niggers you want to think we are*" (203). Voicing Payton, Shields feels he can use the word "nigger" with impunity; the intimacy he desires would assume blackness such that he can reflect the shame of American racism back on other white fans. This response intensifies Payton's words and makes their racial connotations explicit, but it also answers Shields's earlier claim about fan desires for athlete misbehavior. It

not only relies on Shields to racialize Payton's assertions of performative agency but also allows him to overzealously employ what, coming from him, is a racist epithet. He realizes for himself something akin to film director Quentin Tarantino's motivation in making "Pulp Fiction" (1994), which, Shields asserts, "just comes down to Tarantino's getting to play the only white character in the history of the movies who is cool enough to say 'nigger' to a black man and use it—mean it—as black vernacular" (57). Shields, speaking for Payton, likewise attempts to use the n-word as black vernacular, and that he doesn't, or won't, recognize that this is just as problematic for him as it is for Tarantino, speaks to the off-key nature of his ventriloquism.

Since *The Whore of Akron* is a tale of anti-fandom, one would think that its author would have little desire to interact with the object of his scorn. Yet Raab, a recovering addict, uses the veil of Valium to put himself in imagined discourse with LeBron James. Raab's aspirational homosocial ventriloquism is also built on real interaction, however, as mediated by the social media platform Twitter. Doped up at 2 a.m., hoping the drug will help him sleep, Raab logs on to his computer and notices a tweet from "@King James," LeBron's twitter handle, that reads: "*I love my chef B so much(pause)! He made the meanest/best peach cobbler I've ever had in life. Wow!!,*" with a picture of the dessert attached (195, italics original).²³ Mocking James for "scarfing cobbler and tweeting about it like he's ten years old" in the early morning of a game day,²⁴ Raab nevertheless lusts after the cobbler's "huge rough-cut hunks, gold-cruled and gleaming." He asks: "Can I hate the sinner and love the sin? I do," before tweeting in reply "Note to self: Cobbler hard to hate" (195). Chortling amid the "slow rush of narcotic joy" and hurtling into the realm of fiction, Raab's internet interaction is hallucinogenically transferred to the nearby couch, where "LeBron is sitting [...] and he has a dish of cobbler for me" (196).

As Raab digs in to the hallucinated cobbler, the specter of James scolds him for “killing [himself] with a fork and spoon” (196). Recognizing Raab’s self-consciousness at his own obesity, this remark begins a five-page dialogue, presented with James’s imagined words in italics, that allows Raab to ventriloquize his anti-hero’s responses to the author’s fannish indiscretions. Chief among these, of course, is a confrontation about Raab’s reportage on James’s locker-room nudity:

“Why did you write about my cock? What’s wrong with you?”

I don’t know, kid. I thought you were staying in Cleveland when I saw your dick. You fucked up—you quit. You lied. You left.

“What does any of that have to do with my cock?”

Nothing. Not a thing. It just seemed funny, almost falling over the towel thing, looking over, boom. (197)

Raab’s lame justifications in response to the imagined James’s surprisingly legitimate inquiries—surprising because they ultimately emanate, as they must, from Raab himself—amount to little more than petty revenge and sophomoric humor. However intoxicated he may present himself to be, Raab performatively recognizes that he transgressed journalistic ethics and the locker room’s code of privacy. But he does not do so explicitly or in his own voice. Instead, the ventriloquized voice of James as interlocutor allows Raab to overtly maintain his bloviating hatred while implicitly recognizing the problematic basis of his actions.

Beyond the sexual, this spectral dialogue also probes the broader base of Raab’s anti-fandom:

“How dare you judge me?”

You spit on millions of people.

‘I don’t answer to them. I do what’s right for LeBron.’

Is that what you tell a West Akron kid who cried when you left the Cavs?

“I spit on nobody. I played my ass off for seven years. Those kids never once heard of me with drugs or guns or any of that stuff. Not once. Those were the best years that team ever had, and you judge me for leaving like it’s the worst crime ever committed.”

I can’t think of a parallel betrayal in the history of American sports. (199)

The imagined James quite reasonably points out that his supposed “betrayal” should rank far lower on the scale of possible athlete indiscretions than those involving drug use (whether performance enhancing or merely narcotic) and violent crime.²⁵ And Raab’s response, while condemning in tone, is hollow in substance. What’s more, the potential crimes mentioned by the spectral James relate directly to Raab’s confessed history of drug use and associated gun ownership. By the time the imagined discourse concludes, it is abundantly clear that the ventriloquized James is meant to evince a *mea culpa* from Raab, not himself:

“What’s the worst thing you ever did?”

Summer of 1994. I got the woman I love pregnant. She was afraid to have the kid. I wanted the kid—I was forty-two years old, I’d destroyed everything in my life, including my marriage. I *still* wanted that kid. All she wanted in return was the promise that I’d sober up. Just the promise.

“What happened?”

She had the abortion. I drove her to the hospital myself. Drove her there, drove her home, went back to my place, got fucked up, got out my shotgun, and put it in my mouth.

“What happened?”

I couldn’t do that, either.

“You crying?”

It’s the cobbler, LeBron. It’s the meanest/best cobbler I’ve ever had. (200)

Harkening back to the lusted-after cobbler that sparked the entire imagined exchange, Raab recognizes, in this moment of confession, that his vitriol at James is rooted in self-hatred—the flaws he sees in the basketball star are not analogous to his own, but they evince them. That Raab’s racially essentializing expressions of anger toward James—highlighting his mother’s supposed sexual profligacy, insinuating the criminality of his “posse,” and, of course, measuring his penis—are all noticeably absent or weakly defended in this dialogic framework is telling. Airing his own troubled past, Raab recognizes that his vitriol, like James’s cobbler, tastes best when meanest, but is no less trivial for its objectification. In a book that refers to its fan object as a “whore” in its title, this moment demonstrates the nuance and self-reflection possible in fan

feeling. While it doesn't excuse Raab's often troubling and occasionally racist rhetoric, it does demonstrate the memoir's capacity to represent the sports fan's consciousness on terms that blur the line between reality and fiction, and the valuable critical and creative insights that blurriness enables.

Where Shields and Raab's uses of aspirational homosocial ventriloquism manage to recognize white male fans' desired intimacy with black players and provide complicated imagined landscapes for their interaction, Simmons's use of the authorial device is flatly objectifying. The athlete ventriloquized is not Larry Bird, Simmons's favorite player, but Michael Jordan, a figure of such legendary skill, star power, and corporate power that sociologist David L. Andrews refers to him as "a Reaganite racial replicant: a black version of a white cultural model who, by his very simulated existence, ensures the submergence and subversion of racial Otherness" (125). Contrary to Andrews's notion, Simmons presents Jordan in a distinctly racial way. Simmons prefaces his interaction by declaring that "I'm telling this story in the present tense because, as far as I'm concerned, it still feels like it happened three hours ago. Come back with me to [the] 2006 [NBA] All-Star Weekend in Houston. I am drinking Bloody Marys on a Saturday afternoon with my buddy Sully and his Boston crew" (618). Firmly ensconced in his own homosocial milieu, Simmons is thrilled when former All-Star (and noted friend of Jordan's) Charles Oakley occupies the table next to his, escorted by "three lady friends," and is soon followed by Jordan himself. Though Simmons and his friends are at a restaurant, not a basketball arena, the presence of superstar athletes enhances the homosocial potency of their outing, for, as Michael Eric Dyson rightfully asserts, "the culture of athletics has provided an acceptable and widely accessible means of white male bonding" (66). Simmons and his friends have no compunction about eavesdropping on the subsequent conversation, ordering

food and drinks in order to stay at the table as long as Jordan and crew do. They hope to absorb what Dyson has characterized as the “black cultural nuances of cool, hip, and chic” for which “the black athletic body is deified, reified, and rearticulated within the narrow meanings of capital and commodity” (72, 73).

Though Simmons and company can hear much of Jordan’s conversation, little of it is reported directly. Instead, Jordan and his dialogue are characterized such that their relevance to the eavesdropping crew is prioritized. Describing the procession of people who “stream over to say hello, pay tribute to Jordan, kiss his ring,” Simmons makes him out to be “the real-life Michael Corleone” a power broker who, when asked by his agent how late he stayed up the previous night, “say[s] ‘Seven-thirty,’ as we nod admiringly” (619). Like Michael Corleone, Al Pacino’s infamous character in *The Godfather* (1972) trilogy and a pop-culture touchstone for Simmons and his ilk, Jordan is both revered and criminalized, respected and feared.²⁶ His response to David Falk, his agent, is informational until amplified by Simmons and friends—staying out all night is a measure of masculinist mischief for these men, a sign that Jordan has no obligation to polite, and thus implicitly feminized, society. Simmons effectively incarnates Michael Kimmel’s characterization of “the Self-Made Man,” who “turned to leisure activities, such as sports, to give his manhood the boost he needed and strove to develop some all-male preserves where he could...be alone with other men” (6). Jordan’s response to Falk both demonstrates that display and intensifies the homosocial intimacy of Simmons’s eavesdropping sporting enclave.

Such a feared boss figure must wield the threat of violence to gain such awe and reverence, and Oakley—Mafioso enforcer Luca Brasi to Jordan’s Corleone, according to Simmons—fills that role. Simmons recounts how

Occasionally Oakley stands up and saunters around just to stretch his legs and look cool while I make comments like, “I wish you could rent Oak for parties.” At one point, Oak thinks about ordering food, stands up, looks over at all of us eating, notices our friend Rich’s cheeseburger [...] and I swear, we’re all waiting for Oak to say the words, “Oak wants your cheeseburger, and he wants it now.” But he doesn’t. He ends up ordering one himself. Too bad. (619)

At best, Simmons is oblivious to stereotypes and assumes black male “cool” to a laughable degree.²⁷ At worst, the notion that he could “rent Oak,” as if the former NBA All-Star were just performing himself as a commodity, and that Oakley would speak in the third person while holding up “Rich” for his cheeseburger, is astonishingly racist. To make matters even more troubling, Simmons uses a footnote to assert that he gave his son the middle name “Oakley” because, as he rhetorically asks: “Will you grow up to be a pussy with a middle name like Oakley? No way” (619f). Here is Shields’s notion of the white fan’s implicit desire to see black players misbehave (125), inextricably intertwined with an idea of masculine toughness that Simmons hopes to pass on to his son. Simultaneously made to serve Simmons’s desire to flaunt his homosocial toughness via misogyny and racially characterized by the process, Oakley is little more than a puppet in show, a threatening figure to fit the fan author’s preferred narrative of masculinity.

In this milieu, Jordan himself, with Oakley supposedly at his beck and call, “isn’t Corporate MJ, the one you and I know. This is Urban MJ, the one that comes out for the Black Super Bowl, the one that made an entire league cower for most of the nineties. It finally makes sense” (620). Using the buzzword “urban” to signal a threatening blackness not normally associated with the Jordan represented to white America in Nike and Gatorade commercials, and “the Black Super Bowl” to racialize the NBA All-Star game (and by contrast the Super Bowl itself), Simmons thrills at his supposed exposure to unfiltered blackness. He imagines that he has witnessed what David L. Andrews calls the “dreaded metamorphosis from ‘Michael Jordan the

person to Michael Jordan the black guy” (137), a narrative trope that emerged in the wake of media coverage of Michael Jordan’s gambling proclivities and the (unrelated but nonetheless popularly associated) murder of his father in 1993 (Andrews 135-136). But what “makes sense” about “urban” Jordan to Simmons is a reflection of Simmons. Jordan, ventriloquized and essentialized, is made to be what Simmons, as a fan, desires to be. That is, until his “wife shows up” (621). “Uh-oh,” writes Simmons:

Everyone makes room for her. She sits down right next to him. Poor MJ looks like somebody who took a no-hitter into the ninth, then gave up a triple off the left-field wall. The trash-talking stops. He slumps in his seat like a little kid. The cigar goes out. No more hangin’ with the boys. Time to be a husband again. Watching the whole thing unfold, I lean over to Sully and say, “Look at that, he’s just like us.” And he is. Just your average guy getting derailed by his wife. For once in my life, I don’t want to be like Mike. (621)

Misogyny at its most unfiltered, the passage is also the moment of the most potent homosocial commonality. Though to Simmons they may represent black “others” that are powerful, threatening, and cool, Jordan and his friends have their homosocial intimacy disrupted by the shrewish figure of a wife. The other women present, mentioned earlier in accompaniment of Oakley, are regarded as mere commodities—welcomed on the edges of the inner circle—but Juanita Jordan demands respect and the crude social customs of male buddyism must be suspended. This is misogyny’s common ground, from Simmons’s perspective, reducing Jordan to the level of the fan—of such distaste for feminism that he no longer “want[s] to be like Mike” because the player is rendered normal, “just like us” (621).

Simmons’s ventriloquism differs from Shields and Raab’s insofar as it is not an imagined dialogue and Jordan is not his favorite player, though the “Jumpman” is certainly revered by him, as he is by millions of others. Despite—or perhaps, one could argue, because of—the fact that Simmons does not imagine Jordan’s words, as Shields does for Payton and Raab for James,

his aspirational homosocial ventriloquism is the most misogynist, most racist, and least reflexive of the three. Aware of other fans' racism as Simmons may claim to be, he does not or cannot recognize the ways in which race structures and influences the NBA narrative as he imbues it with personal resonance. He may have once called himself "Jabaa Abdul-Simmons," but that blackface naming did not provide him with any depth of understanding about African Americans or himself. Simmons understands blackness thorough the lens of popular narratives that basketball and other entertainment provides him. As Jeffrey Lane puts it,

Too often the understanding that whites have of blacks is profoundly skewed by the simple fact that...whites interact with blacks only indirectly, through the consumption of a very limited number of representations. Listening to black music, watching black athletes on television, and seeing black criminals on the news function in lieu of direct communication. Since each of these forums is a space removed from everyday life—being famous or a criminal is to exist in the extreme—a transfiguration occurs in which blacks become characters, icons, symbols, or caricatures—that is, something other than human beings. (65-66)

This is what Shields—and even Raab, for all his bile—can see: that the objects of their fan desires are rendered just that, objects. That to the fan these athletes must be little more than "characters, icons, symbols, or caricatures," is a sad, essentialist, and reflexively realized authorial burden for Shields and Raab (Lane 65-66). But reducing human beings to fictional characters is also the price of articulating the self as a memoirist. Simmons's insensitivity is personally motivated, no doubt, but it is also grounded in the kind of wide-ranging objectivist, "post-racial," pseudo-biographical ambitions that his title, *The Book of Basketball*, betrays.

Veering into overt fiction writing, Raab, Shields, and (though he may not recognize it) Simmons use aspirational homosocial ventriloquism to more directly associate themselves with desired athletes. But they also do so for another reason: it implicitly demonstrates their authorial talents as it facilitates their fan identity. That these fictional imaginings should be considered distinct from the rest of their memoirs' "non-fictional" narrative may seem strange to literary

scholars, like Eakin, who accept that autobiographical accounts are “always a kind of fiction” (*Touching the World* 31). But sporting events are usually publicly perceived to be “real” and implicitly anti-creative in nature; vital to the competitive stakes of their excitement is the premise that their outcome is never predetermined. If their ending is known to fans, or known to be predetermined, their action loses dramatic potency in medias res. For Shields, “a sports event takes place inside a very brief temporal frame; the moment the frame is broken, the artificiality of the event—its utter inconsequentiality—overwhelms it” (43). Commenting on the decision by Seattle’s ABC affiliate to delay the broadcast of Monday Night Football, he argues that “the fact that the game is not unfolding in real time makes a mockery of everybody’s fandom” (43). This emphasis on “liveness” lends a sense that that the game is a “real” event and not a story or show.²⁸ That the games are statistically recorded and quantified only adds to the scientific feel of the event as a happening, not a narrative. But like human confidence in the accuracy of our own memories, this denial of the narrative construction of the sporting event is a convenient, and sometimes necessary, distortion.

The truth is, of course, that each fan interprets a sporting event differently. Beneath the umbrella of the event’s “winner” and “loser,” between the numbers in a box score, beyond the public metanarrative provided by the print media account, each fan inescapably builds a narrative from his own perspective. Like the sports fan’s interpretation, “the manner in which the reader experiences [a literary] text,” as literary critic Wolfgang Iser puts it in “The Reading Process,” “will reflect his own disposition and in this respect the literary text acts as a kind of mirror... Thus we have the apparently paradoxical situation in which the reader is forced to reveal aspects of himself in order to experience a reality which is different from his own” (56-57).²⁹ Or as Scott Raab reflexively puts it, amid his vitriol at LeBron James, “What another sees in you will reveal

that person. What you see in another reveals your self. We are—each of us and all of us—mirrors” (174).³⁰ This is perhaps Raab’s deepest insight in the memoir, for though millions of people in the Cleveland area share some distaste for James, *The Whore of Akron* is finally a narrative of Raab via James, not the inverse, as it would be under the classical rhetorical terms of the genre.

Raab, Shields, and Simmons’s overtly fictional machinations are part and parcel of their desire for self-definition not merely in the crowd, but through it. Though all three enjoy some writerly renown, it is apparent from their memoirs that they also desire to be known in a basketball context. Amid his frustration at the “imaginary” nature of his basketball love affair, Shields admits that

Sometimes I get tired of paying homage to all the geniuses out there on the court. Just once I’d like the whole arena to invert itself and applaud me and all my amazing feats; I can’t imagine everyone in the audience doesn’t feel the same way often enough. Who wants to always be just an appreciator of other people’s performances?

I suddenly hate being [at the game], hate being a fan. (166)

Shields’s rage is disingenuous; in retroactively recording the moment, he must be conscious that he is writing a memoir that—should it succeed—will satisfy his desire and invert the crowd’s attention. His appreciators may not be seated in an arena, but they will recognize him and his “amazing feats” no less than basketball fans do Gary Payton. Shields’s complaint about this lack of recognition does more than call attention to his writerly identity, however; it also implicitly validates the worthiness of his memoir. As Ben Yagoda points out, “beneath the account of every incident, episode, or character is one’s interpretation of one’s life. Beneath that is the implied need to justify the whole enterprise of putting that life on paper, to show that in some way it makes a good and valuable story” (110). Bemoaning his status as a mere “appreciator,” Shields solipsistically affirms that the egotism and writing skills on display in his memoir (and requisite

in the form itself) will render his frustrated fandom a performance worthy of others' appreciation.

Raab, meanwhile, is literally presented with the kind of in-arena praise that Shields craves. In chronicling LeBron James's betrayal of Cleveland and its fans, Raab wrote not only *The Whore of Akron*, but numerous widely read articles, both print and web-based, published nearly contemporaneously with his experiences of LeBron's post-"Decision" actions. Upon LeBron's return to Cleveland, Raab finds himself in the arena when

A woman supervising the section checks the placard dangling on my heaving chest and bursts into tears.

"You're Scott Raab?"

I nod.

"I just want to thank you," she says. "Thank you for standing up for Cleveland. For all of us."

Please stop crying. Please. You're making *me* cry. What's your name?

"Chris. I was born in 1965," she says. "I have seen nothing but failure my entire life. I've been with the Cavs for sixteen years, and I thought we were going to *finally* win something—we're going to win something in my lifetime—and then this piece of shit."

His name is unpronounceable; she simply points down to the floor.

(226-7, emphases original)

Raab's fury, racially problematic though it may be, has tapped an emotional undercurrent shared by the usher. Their anguish and rage at the unpronounceable James's actions bonds the two in the kind of hatred that is usually accepted in a sports context, though it would be considered abhorrent beyond it. But this intimate personal experience registers as such to Raab. He recognizes his newfound celebrity on broader terms only when his

Cousin Jeff points down to the crowd behind the Cavs basket. There are two guys holding up a sign toward the press area. The sign reads "Scott Raab is the Man."

What the fuck. It barely registers at that moment. It's way too weird. I'm at a Cleveland game and two guys are holding up a sign with my name on it. No way. (230-1)

Shields's dream is Raab's reality, writ large. But Raab's awestruck record of this moment, of his transformation from spectator to spectated, from appreciator to appreciated, is no less disingenuous than Shields's. Even if "it barely registers at that moment" (231), his memoir's record of it ensures that it resonates loudly in the longer term. And Raab's memory of his reaction—he recalls being "too embarrassed" to go speak with the two men (231)—is no less definitive in its self-articulating role than the memory of his recognition itself. It bespeaks his desire to be respected for his humility as well as appreciated for his writerly ability. In the present moment of the memoir's writing, he articulates himself as a fan-writer who deserves special praise from other fans even as he considers himself merely one of them. The cloud of vitriol at LeBron James's return to Cleveland doubtless hung heavy in the arena that night, but Raab makes it clear in retrospect that he derives his identity from others' recognition of his rhetorical skill as much as, if not more than, his fannish pleasure in James's misfortune.

Though Shields and Raab aren't shy in calling attention to the authorial chops that they suppose give their fandoms extra agency (and lend them memoiristic worthiness), Simmons's articulation of his writerly identity is accentuated to an even greater degree in *The Book of Basketball*. In a work that embraces racially problematic tropes, homosocially-fueled misogyny, anti-intellectual posturing, and scatological humor even as its introduction—written by Malcolm Gladwell—is painstakingly careful to position Simmons as "just like you or me[,]... a fan—an obsessive fan" (x), Simmons makes reference to his authorial presence with surprising frequency. Using parenthetical interjections and footnotes to self-deprecatingly highlight his rhetorical maneuvering, Simmons writes flippant observations like "we're going with a paragraph break and parentheses to build the dramatic tension. Sorry, I was feeling it," and "yes, that was a triple negative. I was due" (97, 560). Even as Simmons vows "to keep you [the reader]

entertained”—in effect, to prevent a “lowbrow” casual reader from becoming disaffected by the length and nuance of *The Book of Basketball* (66)—his faux-mocking betrays a self-flattering perception of the intellectual heft of the work, which features hundreds of footnotes, an index, a bibliography of almost 100 books, and is, he jokes, “the size of *War and Peace*” (561). But the degree to which Simmons feels his authorship deserves respect and defines him as such is best established in the tableau that introduces the work’s primary conceit. Describing a Vegas trip with his buddies (which predictably prominently features a topless pool in which he and his homosocial cadre can play blackjack as they ogle women), Simmons finds himself confronted with the presence of NBA Hall of Famer Isiah Thomas. Unlike his encounter with Michael Jordan, this proximity to an NBA legend is not cause for fannish delight, for, as Simmons explains, “Of any sports figure that I could have possibly met at any time in my life, getting introduced to Isiah that summer would have been my number one draft pick for the Holy Shit, Is This Gonna Be Awkward draft. Isiah doubled as the beleaguered GM of the Knicks and a frequent column target, someone who once threatened ‘trouble’ if we ever crossed paths” (34). Nevertheless, Simmons’s friend and national sports broadcaster Gus Johnson brokers a poolside meeting between them:

We shook hands and sat down. I explained the purpose of my column, how I write from the fan’s perspective and play up certain gimmicks...which made Isiah a natural foil for me. He understood that. He thought we were both entertainers, for lack of a better word. We were both there to make basketball more fun to follow.
(35)

This passage belies Simmons’s assertion of ordinary fandom and reveals his true ambitions in memoiristic self-articulation—fandom is always also a “gimmick,” a path to personal prominence as an “entertainer.” Bill Simmons, the author, understands the narrative potency of the NBA as a meta-text and fancies himself a prominent enough arbiter of its stories that he can

be considered on par with players like Isiah Thomas. “The Secret” of basketball that Thomas shares with Simmons is that “it’s not about basketball” (41). “The Secret” of *The Book of Basketball* is the same.

The manifestations of aspirational homosocial ventriloquism and writerly egotism provided in these memoirs are written examples of the ways in which fans self-servingly interpret athletes, their identity (including their race), and their performances on a much larger scale. In considering the “many Michael Jordans” that exist in the public consciousness, Michael Oriard asserts that famous athletes “generate narratives in which we explore issues of importance to us, narratives that are often closer to *our* concerns than to the star athlete to whom we attach them. This is simply one of the major functions of sport in society” (18, emphasis original). No less than for the reader of fiction, for the fan to imagine that the athlete’s understanding of his own performance determines a sporting narrative’s interpretive possibilities is an intentional fallacy.³¹ The same, of course, is true for the memoirist, no matter what truth claims the autobiographical form may purport to make.

**“A completely imaginary love affair in which the beloved is forever larger than life”
Conclusions on Vanity, Identity, and Narrative Control**

In “From National Hero to Liquid Star: Identity and Discourse in Transnational Sports Consumption” (2012), Cornell Sandvoss argues that the combination of “affection and identification” that characterizes sports fan attachment can be considered

a form of narcissism, in which the fan’s fascination with the fan object lies in its misrecognition as an extension of self, maintained through processes of self-reflection in which sports stars and teams function as a mirror to the fan. On a rhetorical level, this is reflected through the use of “we”... in speaking about their favorite team; on a narrative level, it is reflected through their characterizing and describing the object of their fandom in terms and qualities that reflect both the fan’s self-image, values, and beliefs and their wider social positioning. (189)

For Sandvoss, the athlete as fan object is always first and foremost a vessel for the fan's articulation of self. As the fan's reflexive sense of self changes, the athlete's qualities of attraction do as well. If the fan ceases to find a way to recognize himself in the athlete, the connection is severed and a new one formed. Sandvoss's formulation aptly characterizes fandom in the present tense, but it fails to account for the degree to which the fan's past fandoms are likewise altered to fit his active articulation of self. While Scott Raab recalls cheering for James when he starred for the Cavs, he maintains throughout that he did so on uneasy terms—as if he could anticipate betrayal.³² In doing so, Raab unwittingly connects Sandvoss's notion of narcissistic projection to Paul John Eakin's claim, in *Fictions in Autobiography* (1985), that “autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content, [and] the materials of life history are freely shaped by memory and imagination to serve the needs of present consciousness” (227). The terms of sports fandom, like those of memoir, are always influenced by active self-definition. Recognition of change is possible, of course, but an unbiased account of the fan one *was* is no more possible than any accurate recollection of a past version of the self.

This constant reorganization and rearticulation of self-narrative is possible, in part, because of the notorious unreliability of memory. A further consequence of this self-defining process, especially in a sports context, is a tendency toward teleology in reconstructing the past. Association with players allows fans to correlate their personal successes—or failures, in Raab's case—with publicly recognized figures whose glories resonate on a plane of shared emotion. It is in this vein that Shields reports his “empathy for the church-goers. They go to church for the same reason fans go to the games: adulthood didn't turn out to have quite as much glory as we thought it would; for an hour or two, we're in touch with transcendental things” (145). Projecting their senses of self onto a wave of communally signified emotion defined artificially by the rules

and score, the fans deterministically translate the athletes' performance into their carefully constructed narrative. Viewed in retrospect, the event's winner and loser seems no less teleologically predestined that any memoirist's self-assured notion that who he is the person he was destined to become. Significant happenings are accentuated or minimized by media and fans to account for the narrative determinacy mandated by the outcome.

Simmons, for one, embraces the fact that "basketball is an objective sport *and* a subjective sport, dammit. That's what makes it so much fun to follow" (407). He revels in the imaginary imperative such recognition provides him. "The single best thing about sports is the unknown," he asserts, "it's more fun to think about what *could* happen than what already happened" (24, emphasis original). The predetermined narrative must be denied in the present, but its construction for an imagined future constitutes, for Simmons at least, the single greatest pleasure of sports fandom.³³ This makes a kind of reciprocal sense; if rooting for a team, or player, or result lends some narrative coherence to fans' personal lives, then narratively mapping their futures allows the fans effectively to outsource their identity construction to an outside entity—to fantastically project personal outcomes and emotions in a lower-stakes narrative environment. One could argue, as Mark Freeman does in *Rewriting the Self*, that phenomenological uncertainty drives external passions. Freeman finds it "curious and noteworthy that so many ... insubstantial and unreasonable things have such a remarkable hold over us. Indeed, isn't it the case that the things we care about most – ourselves, others, music, art, nature – are precisely the things for which there is the least reason to do so?" (18). Many a detractor of spectator sport has made the same query, as does Shields:

Why do I care so much? That's what I would like to know. It's a safe love, this love, this semi-self-love, this fandom; it's a frenzy in a vacuum, a completely imaginary love affair in which the beloved is forever larger than life.¹⁵²

The answer lies in the last three words. Because the beloved sports narratives are “larger than life,” they transcend the fan’s own life narrative even as they enhance it.

But if fandom is a “frenzy in a vacuum, a completely imaginary love affair,” as Shields puts it, why chronicle it publicly (152)? If one takes memoir to be a self-justifying construct—if you can write one about your life, then you must have had a life worth living—can we say the same for fandom? Does it follow that if sports are meaningful to you, your fandom has meaning? The more sanguine memoir theorists, such as G. Thomas Couser, firmly believe that “in writing one’s life one may bring a new self into being. If this is true, then in reading life narrative, we witness self-invention” (14). Those more critical of the memoir’s formal claims to truth in representation, like Paul John Eakin, are not quite so buoyant, but nevertheless recognize that “we inhabit systems of social intercourse in which the ability to articulate an identity narrative... confirms the possession of a working identity” (*Ethics of Life Writing* 6). Either way, sports lend material to claims of selfhood and aid in that articulation. Whether the love affair is imaginary or not, it defines fans against the void of non-identity. Humans may rely on “illusions of autonomy and self-determination,” as Eakin puts it, but “we draw on the resources of the cultures we inhabit to shape them, resources that specify what it means to be a man, a woman, a worker, a person in the settings where we live our lives” (*Living Autobiographically* 22). One such specifying resource is the sports fan milieu. Anonymizing as the roar of the crowd may seem, it perpetually assists in the articulation of selfhood on an individual level.

Reading Raab, Shields, and Simmons’s memoirs serves the same purpose. As the authors articulate their identities as fans and writers throughout their narratives, their readers cannot help but “ask questions about ourselves...by observing others as they struggle to find answers” (Eakin, *The Ethics of Life Writing* 14). But what do fans really learn about race and the NBA by

reading *The Whore of Akron*, *Black Planet*, and *The Book of Basketball*? Not all basketball fans are heterosexual white males (nor are all players heterosexual black males), and those that are do not necessarily possess racial views similar to Raab, Shields, or Simmons (nor should they). One hopes, however, that the authors' awareness of the fact that race inescapably imbues their fandom allows their readers to recognize, as David Leonard puts it, that "notwithstanding the efforts of the NBA to obscure or mediate racial difference—to deny or minimize the existence of racism both inside and outside its arenas—race and dominant white racial frames continue to impact the NBA's organization and reception" (11). In the process of writing their memoirs, Raab, Shields, and Simmons demonstrate the inescapable influence of socially constructed racial meta-narratives even in self-constitutive efforts that would attempt to resist them. They likewise undermine the veneer of objective reality and demonstrate the fundamental ontological instability of sports. Narrative art and artifice are internalized in life writing, race, and sports, but commonly recognized as intertwined in none of them.

¹ Some portions of this chapter, particularly the material on Bill Simmons, appeared in a similar form in my 2013 article for *Popular Communication*, "Rewriting Sport and Self: Fan Self-Reflexivity and Bill Simmons's *The Book of Basketball*."

² In *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (1992), Eakin asserts: "autobiography is nothing if not a referential art; it is also and always a kind of fiction.... The constraint of fact is not necessarily a limitation of artistic freedom, and conversely, the invention of fiction in autobiography may be undertaken in pursuit of biographical truth. Together they point to the moral that in the literature of reference we can take neither fact itself nor its form for granted"

(31). Eakin is a prominent theorist of life writing. Also particularly influential (and cited herein) are his books *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (1985), *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999), and *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative* (2008).

³ A few words on terminology: I mean biography, autobiography, and memoir to refer to related, but distinct generic forms. According to Eakin, “the system of classification long in place in our libraries and bibliographies posits the kinship of autobiography and biography [placing them] under the aegis of history as categories of the literature of reference...the theory of autobiography...differs from the practice of biography [such that] it has become commonplace for students of autobiography to assert that the past, the ostensible primary reference of such texts is a fiction” (*Touching the World* 54). Meanwhile, much to Eakin’s chagrin, biography “seems to have largely maintained the traditional purity of its positivistic allegiance to fact, to the past as recoverable reality,” at least in the public eye (54). In contrast to the personally comprehensive and thus potentially solipsistic aspirations of autobiography, the memoir is bidirectional; “subordinated to the story of some other for whom the self serves as privileged witness,” the prominence and potential unreliability of that authorial persona also separates memoir from the objective sterility of biography (Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories* 58). Memoir is thus both autobiographical and biographical, but it is not fully either. Derived from the French word for memory, memoir is intrinsically built on the unstable foundation that is the human recollection of past events (Couser 19).

⁴ “Human action,” as psychologist Mark Freeman puts it, “is itself a kind of text; it is a constellation of meanings which, not unlike literary texts or interviews, calls forth the process of interpretation” (7). Presented with this constellation, humans consciously and unconsciously

determine not only how to order these actions in relation to themselves, but also *that they must have an order*.

⁵ Or, as Robert Folkenflik puts it in paraphrasing Emile Benveniste: “The ‘I’ comes into existence only in relation to some ‘you.’ That is, it is defined by its difference from some other” (234).

⁶ The “Big Four” refers to the four men’s team sports that collect the bulk of television and ticket revenues: MLB (Major League Baseball), NBA, NFL (National Football League), and NHL (National Hockey League).

⁷ The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport at the University of Central Florida, in its 2013 “Racial and Gender Report Card,” reports that 76.3 percent of NBA players identify as African American, 19 percent as white, 4.4 percent as Latino, and 0.2 percent as Asian. Of that same pool of players, 18.7 percent identify as “international” (Lapchick et al).

Meanwhile, according to a 2007 study by Scarborough Research, 64.8 percent of the NBA’s American fan base identifies as white, while 28.3 percent identifies as African American, 15.7 percent as Hispanic, and 3.3 percent as Asian. Among “avid” fans, a descriptor that certainly applies to Raab, Shields, and Simmons, 78.4 percent identified as white, while just 15.7 percent identified as African American. Scarborough Sports Marketing “defines ‘Avid Fans’ as consumers who are ‘very interested’ and ‘Fans’ as respondents who are ‘very, somewhat or a little interested’ in a given sport” (*Sports Business Daily*).

⁸ In *A Level Playing Field*, Gerald Early further asserts that not merely sports, but “popular culture” more broadly “has been an enthralling trap from which blacks have never been able to escape with their image intact or completely under their own control” (7). However much

popular culture contexts may purport fairness, the narratives produced rarely escape hegemonic biases in representation.

⁹ Barash's 2009 screed, which unhumorously opens by declaring that "Marx was wrong: The opiate of the masses isn't religion, but spectator sports," is only the latest in a long line of academic-authored anti-sport perspectives that uncomplicatedly ascribe mindlessness to the fan. Almost 100 years prior, in "Social Psychology of the Spectator" (1912), G.E. Howard declared that "a singular example of mental perversion, an absurd and immoral custom tenaciously held fast in the mob-mind, has its genesis in the partisan zeal of athletic spectator-crowds. I refer to the practice of organized cheering, known in college argot as 'rooting.' From every aspect it is bad" (46).

¹⁰ Public Enemy is a hip-hop group known for addressing social issues in its music. Its 1990 album, "Fear of a Black Planet," reached No. 10 on the Billboard charts. (<http://www.billboard.com/artist/354718/public-enemy/chart?f=305>)

¹¹ The trio subsequently led the Heat to four NBA Finals and two championships, before LeBron James opted to return to Cleveland as a free agent in 2014. As of this writing in April 2015, Cleveland's championship drought continues.

¹² Contested before the first Super Bowl, which was held in January 1967.

¹³ At the time of *The Whore of Akron*'s publication in 2011. It continues as of this writing.

¹⁴ Simmons is not original in this formulation: All-Star forward Charles Barkley was characterized in a similar manner in Nike's infamous "Barkley vs. Godzilla" commercial (Andrews 180).

¹⁵ Shields's notion is similarly expressed by sociologist David L. Andrews, who further suggests that white fans hold "the virulent assumption that these *innately* physical males would be

misbehaving were it not for the involvement of their natural physical attributes in the disciplinary mores and stringencies imposed by the dominant (sporting) culture” (131, emphasis original).

¹⁶ Shields, a creative writer with an MFA from the University of Iowa, is a Professor of English at the University of Washington.

¹⁷ I’m thinking here of Eve Sedgwick’s classic formulation of the “crystallization of a same-sex male desire” (85) in which “the continuum of male homosocial bonds [is] brutally structured by a secularized and psychologized homophobia” (185).

¹⁸ Jordan has been described similarly as the “supreme basketball being” and, consequently, a “floating racial signifier,” by sociologist David L. Andrews (122, 108).

¹⁹ Though Raab inhabits the fan perspective, like Shields and Simmons he is relatively well known as a writer (in this case for *Esquire* magazine) and capitalizes on the access a press credential affords him even as he skeptically regards the members of the sporting press.

²⁰ The black athlete as slave, an analogy most famously articulated by Harry Edwards in *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (1969), has its flaws, to be sure. But as Gerald Early astutely points out in *A Level Playing Field* (2011), “professional sports teams operate as a cartel—that is, a group of independent entrepreneurs coming together to control an industry without giving up their independence as competitive entities.... The cartelization of American team sports, which so closely resembles the cartelization of the antebellum Southern planters, ... is the strongest argument to make about slavery and sports or about sports and colonization” (207). Though Congress has only formally granted an anti-trust exemption to Major League Baseball, the NBA, NFL, and NHL all effectively operate with similar monopolistic immunity. Without a viable alternative to the NBA in which to seek basketball employment (at least in the United States), LeBron’s desire to find a new employer—a right which he only gained after accruing a certain

number of years' experience, as dictated by a collective bargaining agreement negotiated with said cartel by the players' union—necessitated that he leave Cleveland.

²¹ Most prominently while writing about the earliest days of the NBA, when the league was still overtly segregated.

²² Shields repeats this ventriloquism later in the memoir, when a journalist asks Payton what fellow All-Star point guard Jason Kidd said to him: “‘I don’t quite remember.’ *It’s our camaraderie, not yours*” (180, emphasis original).

²³ It is possible, of course, that the tweet in question was posted by someone other than James. Many athletes have accounts that are managed by their agents or other “handlers.”

²⁴ Raab also interjects: “What the hell does ‘(pause)’ mean?” (196), without providing an answer or any indication that he has found one. This is notable, given Raab’s prior sexualization of LeBron, because “pause” is recognized in contemporary slang to be a less-charged synonym of “no homo,” a kind of defensive assertion that the author of the preceding statement (in this case of “love” for “chef B”) is not a homosexual (“Pause,” *Urban Dictionary*).

²⁵ James’s notion of what should offend Raab reminds again of Hoberman’s conception of “the fusion of black athletes, rappers, and criminals into a single menacing figure” as representing the popular notion of “black male style” (xxviii).

²⁶ Simmons is certainly not alone in seeing a connection between Hollywood’s Mafioso and perceptions of dangerous blackness. As Jeffrey Lane puts it in *Under the Boards: The Cultural Revolution in Basketball* (2007), “It is a vicarious high to get into the sinister characters in a good mob movie. When the credits roll, one leaves the movie feeling mischievous and darker....Adults of all ages love to talk tough, show off their knowledge of expressions from the lexicon of cool disseminated by hip-hoppers and teenagers, dress younger, laugh at black

comedians, watch black athletes, and adore and/or hate them (sometimes at the same time).

Blackness specifically still equals cool, even for white adults” (33).

²⁷ Simmons’s naturalization of Oakley’s “cool” represents another instance of white male consumerist adoption of the black male “cool pose.”

²⁸ Contributing to what Philip Auslander calls the “diminution of previous distinctions between the live and the mediatized,” television furthers the cultural “blending of real and fabricated situations” (*Liveness* 7, 33).

²⁹ I consider Iser’s work in “The Reading Process” at greater length in Chapter 3, on pages 136-137.

³⁰ This quote also reminds, of course, of the opening paragraph of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), in which the narrator asserts that he is invisible “because people refuse to see me...it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves or figments of their imagination, indeed, everything and anything except me” (3). When looking at African American NBA players, Raab, like Shields and Simmons, seems to see only himself, or—as I have argued—figments of his imagination and its preferred basketball narrative.

³¹ See Wimsatt and Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” From *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*. W.K. Wimsatt, Jr., and Monroe C. Beardsley. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954.

³² Mostly, this distrust stems from an incident in which James wore a Yankees cap to a Cleveland-New York playoff baseball game (10). Characteristically, Raab’s subsequent condemnation is posited in sexual terms: “His vast sense of childish entitlement seemed to speak louder every season. But, lord, the sex was fine” (9).

³³ Early recognizes the same phenomenon: “In athletics, everyone is always assuming that the past is prologue. Sports fans thrive on and live for the mad, endless speculations about the future, fixated on prophecy, on who will win or lose; but everyone is also buried in the empirical tomb of past performance, the quantitative graveyard of the Ghosts of Athletic Greatness Gone By” (*A Level Playing Field* 138).

CHAPTER THREE

“It was My Fate, My Destiny, My End, to be a Fan”:
Football, Literature, and Mental Illness in *A Fan’s Notes* and *The Silver Linings Playbook*

When Cornel Sandvoss describes fandom as a “form of narcissism, in which the fan’s fascination with the fan object lies in its misrecognition as an extension of self,” he does more than merely recognize the sports fan’s impulse to reflexive self-association (“From National Hero to Liquid Star” 189). He also implicitly renders the fan’s fascination a manifestation of mental illness, of detachment from an empirical reality in which the fan object is what it is: a player, team, or game and nothing more. But Sandvoss is hardly the first to do this. Among numerous other examples, social critic and historian Christopher Lasch asserts in *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979) that fandom “intensif[ies] narcissistic dreams of fame and glory, encourage[s] the common man to identify himself with the stars and to hate the ‘herd,’ and make[s] it more and more difficult for him to accept the banality of everyday existence” (22). To back up this claim, Lasch turns to a literary source, Frederick Exley’s *A Fan’s Notes* (1968), whose author he considers representative of a cadre of “confessional writers [who] walk a fine line between self-analysis and self-indulgence” (18). Lasch posits that the mentally-ill Exley “depicts himself or his narrator—as usual, the distinction is unclear—as a yawning void, an insatiable hunger, an emptiness waiting to be filled with the rich experiences reserved for the chosen few” (22). The only way for Exley to fill that void, to sustain “the illusion that [he] could escape the bleak anonymity of life,” is to be a sports fan, and a fan of New York Giants football star Frank Gifford in particular (*A Fan’s Notes* 231). Lasch thus makes the thrice-institutionalized Exley the paragon of mass media fandom, dubbing him a “new Narcissus” (22). Just as vital to this title as Exley’s sports fanaticism, however, is his work’s ambiguous genre: his self-described “fictional

memoir” meets Lasch’s confessional criteria, blurring the line between autobiography and fiction by positioning its author-narrator as both intrinsically self-revelatory and unreliable (Exley “Note to the Reader”). The indeterminate form of *A Fan’s Notes* thus represents “the narcissist’s [propensity to] pseudo-insight into his own condition, usually expressed in psychiatric clichés, [and] serves him as a means of deflecting criticism and disclaiming responsibility for his actions” (Lasch 19). Egocentric and prone to fantasy, Exley as author-narrator incarnates for Lasch the postmodern American’s blurred sense of reality and need for external validation.

But this notion of Exley’s fanatical narcissism also conflicts with another prominent stereotype by which sports fandom is stigmatized as mental illness. Exley’s impressive intellect and propensity to reflexivity belie the notion that sports are, as John Gerdy puts it, “what we talk about when we want to avoid thinking or talking about anything meaningful or important” (23). Characterizing sports fandom in terms of addiction—where “like crack addicts sitting around their pipe in a dream state waiting for the next ‘hit,’ we sit in front of our televisions, unresponsive to the world around us” (23)—Gerdy better describes the effects of the chemical exacerbator of Exley’s mental illness, alcohol, than those of his desire to associate his life and Frank Gifford’s. Other critics of spectator sports, like David P. Barash, have found fans “lacking a firm grip on reality” in a similar vein, which is to say as a form of illness that involves “a surrender of personal identity” (“The Roar of the Crowd”), rather than an obsession with it, à la Christopher Lasch. To explore this distinct-yet-related stigma as well as Lasch’s claim that Exley’s work typifies a connection between narcissistic content, authorial unreliability, and blurred genre, I will consider *A Fan’s Notes* alongside a more recent work that considers American football fandom, identity, and mental illness: Matthew Quick’s *The Silver Linings Playbook* (2008).

Quick's debut novel, like Exley's, is narrated by a recently-institutionalized football fan whose connection to the sport is ineluctably tied to a traumatic relationship to his father. While Quick's narrator-protagonist, Pat Peoples, does not share the author's name, the character's experiences with football fandom and mental illness are partly based on Quick's own experiences (Pomerantz). This similarity between author and character is not so pervasive that it influences the form of *The Silver Linings Playbook*—as it does in *A Fan's Notes*—but Quick indeed blurs the novel's formal reality by presenting Peoples via diary entries that attempt to fill the massive gaps in his memory. Unlike Exley, Peoples's psychological and physiological damage is such that his 35-year-old brain has been “knocked...back into teenager mode” (Quick 282), and the book's ostensibly naïve narration often makes it sound more like young adult fiction than the art novel to which Exley baldly aspires. Yet Peoples, like Exley, turns to literature to make sense of his fractured life and the events that led to his institutionalization. And rather than categorizing the novels they read as somehow distinct from or opposed to the narratives they covet on the football field, both narrator-protagonists mesh their literary influences with sporting interests when determining their own life narratives.

Reading Exley and Peoples's fandoms as complementary modes of textual interpretation, I argue that the generic flexibility of *A Fan's Notes* and *The Silver Linings Playbook* allows their authors to represent the readerly complexity and interpretive flexibility of fans. Exley and Quick's works manifest Garry Crawford's assertion that “being a fan...is not an isolated incident or coherent ‘thing,’ it is an identity and as such is a highly complex social construction, which is neither wholly imposed, ascribed, achieved nor chosen” (38). Sometimes some fans are, as Barash and Gerdy assume, passive consumerist dupes, and others pseudo-psychologizing narcissists in the vein of Lasch. But as Pat Peoples and Frederick Exley demonstrate, mental

illness and sports fandom are not definitionally or coterminally linked. Sports don't blur reality—reality is always already blurred. Along with literature, sporting narratives are one place where the self-determining possibilities of that blurring are most apparent. In drawing a parallel between the practices of mass cultural fandom and literary interpretation, Exley's and Quick's works show us that, distinct as a live sporting event and a work of literature may seem, our readerly interactions with each are subject to similar impulses, no matter the cultural pretenses.

“To Eliminate our Realities and Substitute those of Society”: Fandom and Institutionalization

Regarded as a critical success, Exley's *A Fan's Notes* received the William Faulkner Award for the best first novel of 1968, as well as the National Institute of Arts and Letters Rosenthal Award for “that work which, though not a commercial success, is a considerable literary achievement” (Exley, *Pages from a Cold Island* 210). The novel has enjoyed modest success since then, selling, as Exley biographer Jonathan Yardley puts it, “steadily if not spectacularly” in paperback (143). But the work has been largely ignored by academic literary critics, and what scant attention it has received has tended to be overwhelmed by an association of football with a national paradigm of cultural corruption and individual alienation.¹ Exley himself blames America for his “inability to function properly in society” (75), but football is not a pariah. Rather, it is his “anodyne” and “intellectual stimulation” (2). Exley's obsession with Frank Gifford and the New York Giants is not a source of alienation, then, but a tether to the self: when Exley is committed, he asserts that the staff at the mental institution “found it simpler to eliminate our realities and substitute those of society” (76), to make acute “the sense of one's anonymity, the loss of self” (97). Faced with such anonymity, Gifford came to “represent to me the possible, ... sustained for me the illusion that I could escape the bleak anonymity of life”

(231). At one point in the novel, after enlisting his friend and future wife, Patience, to check him out of the mental hospital in order to watch the Giants game, Exley is asked if he should rather envy and thus hate Gifford. He responds with “great incredulity. ‘But you don’t understand at all. Not at all! He may be the only fame I’ll ever have!’” (232). Rather than facilitate the “surrender of personal identity” as Barash fears (*Chronicle*), fandom is a tether to the self for Exley. So long as Gifford “possessed the legs and the hands and the agility, the tools of his art,” Exley feels as though he can recapture the lost “tools of mine, writing” (231). But Exley’s association with Gifford is about more than authorial inspiration: it is always also about a psychic need to live up to the notoriety of his father, Earl Exley.

One of the greatest football players in the history of Watertown, N.Y., Earl was a local celebrity, a man so beloved he could not walk down the street without encountering admirers. “Like most athletes he lived amidst the large deeds and ephemeral glories of the past,” Fred asserts, and Earl valued the adulation of the crowd above all (41). The consequence, for the younger Exley, is a sense that “the crowd [came] between my father and me,” inhibiting intimacy in large part because his own athletic abilities were not on par (32). Subsequently traumatized by his father’s premature death, Exley imagines that “had [he] found the words to tell me why he so needed The Crowd, I might have saved my soul and now be . . . sublimely content” (206). Instead, Exley “suffered . . . the singular notion that fame was an heirloom passed on from my father,” and desperately seeks “to have [his] name whispered in reverential tones” (30, 35). The game of football inescapably impacts Exley’s unfulfilled filial relationship. As Yardley puts it, “on the football field, or, later, in the stands or in a bar with the television set showing a game, Fred was in the company of his father” (50). Joining “The Crowd” his father

cherished but unable to command it with an athletic performance, Exley is driven to seek its adulation elsewhere.

Yet fandom can be both therapeutic and a psychotic trigger for Exley. The notion of the fan as “fanatic,” a rabid zealot of biased uncritical support for one team or another, certainly fits Exley’s description of himself, at the onset of *A Fan’s Notes*, drunk and running around a bar, mimicking the New York Giants players’ movements among the barstools. An object of spectatorship for other patrons, Exley describes their interest as “the morbid fascination which compels one to stare at a madman” (2). Exley certainly doesn’t mind such fascination. In fact, he seems to relish discomforting others, including *A Fan’s Notes*’s readership: he unflinchingly depicts the uglier side of his nature, exhibiting misogyny, racism, and homophobia in writing his “fictional memoir” (Note to the Reader). As Yardley puts it, “*A Fan’s Notes* is not for the fastidious” (133). It’s certainly possible to read the Exleyan fan account as inglorious or offensive in a way that would affirm the condemnation of anti-sport critics. But Exley also notably embraces the ugliness of his character in opposition to a mental health industry that embraced shock therapy and lobotomy, that would “scrape away all grief, all rage, all violence, all the things that make us Man, leaving one great hulk of loonily smiling protoplasm.... Yes, I was insane. Still, I did not despise my oddness, my deviations, those things which made me, after all, me. I wanted to preserve those things” (88-89). Faced with medically-sanctioned mental oblivion, football fandom and the dream of fame that Gifford provides do not excuse Exley’s behavior, but they are similarly figured as defense mechanisms that he uses to preserve some semblance of idiosyncratic self-knowledge.

In *The Silver Linings Playbook*, Pat Peoples faces similar quandaries about the nature and distinctiveness of his identity in the face of institutionalization and psychiatric therapy. Unable to

remember the previous four years of his life as well as the incident that led to his institutionalization, Peoples knows merely that what transpired has resulted in legally-mandated “apart time” from his ex-wife, Nikki (4). Released from the “bad place” at his mother’s behest over the objections of his physicians (4), Peoples spends the novel attempting to figure out a way to reconcile with Nikki while living with his parents in Collingswood, a New Jersey suburb of Philadelphia. Unlike Exley, whose time with family members in *A Fan’s Notes* is largely spent in self-imposed sedentary incapacity (with the exception of football Sundays, when he paces manically around the living room), Peoples spends his days in constant motion, exercising obsessively in the hope that his improved physical appearance will allow him to win Nikki back. His routine is, at least initially, interrupted by just two activities: visiting his therapist and rooting for the Philadelphia Eagles football team.²

The latter activity forms the core of family life in the Peoples household, at least for the males, and it provides Pat a means of updating his identity even as he attempts to remember the person he used to be. He associates himself, like Exley, with a particular player on his chosen team: in this case, Eagles wide receiver Hank Baskett. Though the associative animus is initiated by consumerism—Pat’s brother Jake buys him the jersey in order to welcome him back—Pat quickly begins to feel “as if my future were somehow linked to the Eagles’ rookie wide receiver” (29). Like Exley, whose connection to Gifford is biographically oriented in that both men attended the University of Southern California and moved to New York shortly thereafter, Peoples sees in the undrafted, unheralded player an underdog like himself. And, like Exley with Gifford, when Baskett plays well, Peoples associates the player’s successes with his own. He also receives public credit from other fans for Baskett’s success, getting high-fives in the stadium and hearing from his manic father that “Baskett healed the family” after an Eagles victory (175).

This public association between player and fan is extended in less successful times as well. Peoples, in keeping a promise to the sports-averse Tiffany (see endnote 2), does not watch any Eagles games until after the dance competition for which they are training. During his absence, the Eagles fail to win any games and Baskett struggles. Peoples's family, friends, and even his therapist, Cliff, bemoan his absence and cheer him on in the dance competition, in large part because they hope the culminating event will end the "Pat Peoples curse" on the team (211). As if confirming the merit of this superstitious belief, when Peoples returns to cheering for the Eagles, the team goes on a winning streak and makes the playoffs as Baskett thrives.

In addition to filling in the void in his identity caused by memory loss, Eagles fandom provides Peoples a path to acceptance from his skeptical father, Patrick. He describes watching the Eagles game and "glanc[ing] over at my father from time to time, making sure he sees me cheering, because I know he is only willing to sit in the same room with his mentally deranged son as long as I am rooting for the Birds with everything I got" (74). Yet Peoples also recognizes that this standard for intimacy predates his institutionalization, that "all the time I have ever spent with [my brother] Jake or him has always revolved around sports [and that] this is all he can really afford emotionally" (97). Like Exley, then, Peoples's relationship to his father is predicated on the younger male's identity as a fan. Unlike Exley, however, Peoples cheers alongside his father in the crowd rather than watching him earn adulation from it. Still, Peoples's fan identity is sublimated to his father insofar as the elder Peoples can claim a measure of authenticity reserved for the truly fanatical. Insulted by a fan of the Dallas Cowboys many years earlier,

Dad lost it, attacked the Dallas fan, and beat him within an inch of his life. My father was actually arrested, convicted of aggravated assault, and incarcerated for three months. If my uncle hadn't made the mortgage payments, we would have lost the house. Dad did lose his season ticket and has not been to an Eagles game

since. Jake says we could get Dad in, since no one actually checks IDs at the gate, but Dad won't go back, saying, "As long as they let the opposing fans in our house, I can't trust myself." (96)

Here is a fan for whom, as Allen Guttman puts it, "the identification with those who seem to represent them is clearly pathological" (184). The elder Peoples seems to confirm the notion that the ostensibly "deindividuated" spectator easily becomes a part of the violent "mob-mind" that social psychologist George Elliot Howard warned of more than a century ago in "Social Psychology of the Spectator" (1912) (44, 46). For Pat's father, the individual consequences of this partisan violence separate him from the stadium crowd that ostensibly inculcated it, but do not lessen his passion for the team nor mitigate the malignant mode of socialization it seems to have fostered in him. He breaks a television after a particularly painful Eagles loss, treats his family poorly when the team is struggling, and, when Pat goes missing late in the novel, refuses to join the search for his son because the game is on. The question as to whether Peoples or his father is the "mentally deranged" one occurs to the former as they watch a game: "'Scream your goddam lungs out, because you're the twelfth man!' Dad says. The way he talks at me—never really pausing long enough for me to say anything—makes him sound crazy, I know, even though most people think I am the crazy person in the family" (97).

The specter of his father's violent reputation influences Peoples beyond the social dynamics of the family. In grappling with the reasons for his institutionalization, which he cannot remember, Peoples recognizes that his own propensity to violent outbursts is also predicated on specific triggers. One such trigger is the music of Kenny G, which, heard while in the waiting room at his therapist's office, provokes him "out of my seat. [I'm] screaming, kicking chairs, flipping the coffee table" (12). Peoples's therapist, Cliff, characterizes his reaction in terms of fan reception: "The Kenny G song really got to you. I can't say I'm a fan

either, but[...]” (13). Attempting to help Pat recover memories of the traumatic incident that he associates with G’s music (which the therapist knows to be violent), Cliff thus recognizes fan and anti-fan identification as significant psychological epistemologies. This understanding extends to football fandom as well, as the Indian-American psychiatrist reveals himself to be a fellow avid Eagles fan and member of the “Asian Invasion” (161), a group of South Asian fans who tailgate at every game. Communing with Cliff and his fan cohort in that tailgate setting later in the novel, Peoples recognizes the potential positive social benefits of fandom, thinking of the racially diverse group that “all it really takes for different people to get along is a common rooting interest and a few beers” (161). Cliff thus provides for Peoples a more positive model for fan behavior.

Even so, the site of the tailgate is also one in which the deindividuating sins of the father are revisited on Peoples. Confronted by Steve, a Giants fan looking for trouble, Peoples, his brother Jake, and their friends initially rebuff the interloper with insults. Though Peoples feels bad on behalf of the “little boy with [Steve] who is also wearing a Giants jersey,” he admits “it feels sort of thrilling to be part of this mob--united in our hatred of the opposing team’s fans” (103). When that Giants fan escalates the conflict and “throws Jake to the ground,” Peoples’s rage is triggered

and before I can stop myself, I’m moving forward like a Mack truck. I catch Steve’s cheek with a left, and then my right connects with the south side of his chin, lifting him off the ground. I watch him float through the air as if he were allowing his body to fall backward into a pool. His back hits the concrete, his feet and hands twitch once, and then he’s not moving, the crowd is silent, and I begin to feel so awful—so guilty.

Someone yells, “Call an ambulance!”

Another yells, “Tell ‘em to bring a blue-and-red body bag!”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, because I find it hard to speak. “I’m so sorry.”

And then I am running again. (106)

Though Peoples avoids being caught by the authorities, the gravity of his actions continues to weigh on him long afterward. Jake argues that his brother is a hero for defending him, but Peoples doesn't "feel proud at all. I feel guilty. I should be locked up again in the bad place" (108). The consequences of being re-incarcerated in the mental hospital have similar connotations for Peoples as for Exley: "I know I really shouldn't have hit that Giants fan, and now I'm crying again because I'm such a fucking waste—such a fucking non-person" (107). Though he cannot remember the details of what happened, Peoples knows that violence led to his institutionalization, and that the wiping clean of that prior improper identity—non-personage—is associated with the rehabilitation that takes place there. Rather than attempt to preserve the "deviations, those things which made me...me," as Exley puts it (88-89), Peoples seeks to remember them. In both cases, however, the narrative details of personal identity are closely associated with on-field events.

Though he cannot return to the parking lot if he wants to avoid being arrested for assaulting the Giants fan, Peoples enters the stadium at his brother's encouragement and watches the game. The Eagles take an early lead and Baskett pulls in an important catch, but the Giants make an improbable comeback and win the contest. For Peoples, then, the game's sequence of events seems to mirror his own traumatic failings in the parking lot. On returning home, this connection is transferred to his subconscious:

In my dreams the fight happens again and again, only instead of the Giants fan bringing a kid to the game, the Giants fan brings Nikki, and she too is wearing a Giants jersey. Every time I knock the big guy out, Nikki... kisses his forehead and then looks up at me [and] says, "You're an animal Pat. And I will never love you again." (113)

The Giants' victory comes to represent Nikki's rejection of Pat for violence he "can't control" or understand (113). For Exley, at the climax of *A Fan's Notes*, the causality and team affiliation

are reversed, but the inescapable narrative connection between football defeat and personal failure, between the sanctioned competitive violence of the former and the unauthorized criminal violence of the latter, between frenzied mental instability and attendant self-analysis, remain.

With the Giants in the hunt for the 1960 NFL championship, Gifford and Exley enter Yankee Stadium for a game against the Eagles. Playing in the twilight of his career, Gifford begins to excel, his quarterback throwing the ball “to some memory of the ball player [Gifford] once had been” (346). Exley exults that “the crowd was wild. The crowd was maniacal. The crowd was his” (347). In this moment, Exley’s connection to Gifford yields the adulation he craves from the crowd he fears. At the apex of Exley’s joy, however, he detects the crushing force of Chuck Bednarik, the Eagles All-Pro linebacker, bearing down on Gifford. “Quite suddenly,” Exley observes, “I knew [what] was going to happen; and accepting, with the fatalistic horror of a man anchored by fear to a curb and watching a tractor trailer bear down on a blind man, I stood breathlessly and waited” (347). Exley is forcefully reminded of his role as a helpless spectator when, in one of the most famously vicious hits in NFL history, Gifford is brought “to the soft green turf with a sickening thud,” his body rendered “a small, broken, blue-and-silver manikin [sic]” that is subsequently carried from the field on a stretcher (348, 349). Despite the emotional trauma he suffers at this violent encounter, Exley’s critical faculties remain with him. He describes the scene as “in a way...beautiful to behold. For what seemed an eternity both Gifford and the ball had seemed to float, weightless above the field, as if they were performing for the crowd on the trampoline” (348).

In the aftermath of what appeared to be a career-ending, if not life-threatening, injury to Gifford, Exley “seek[s] out a less subtle defeat” of his own (348). He starts a fight with a passing pair of men, interracial and presumed to be homosexual, for whom he exhibits contrived

bigotry in order to instigate violence. “In that limp and broken body against the green turf of the stadium,” Exley asserts, “I had had a glimpse of my own mortality. As much as anything else, that fist fight was a futile rage against the inevitability of that mortality” (349). Though he has captured the aesthetic potential of Gifford’s violent athletic demise,³ his ultimate reaction to the event is to push his emotional response to the ugliest potential combination of fan zealotry and his own mental illness, screaming “nigger fucker” (354) at a stranger for the sake of provoking him: “it was a lament, this fight, a lament for a conspiracy...against anonymity begun so many season before and ended that very day; so that even as I took this black man’s blows I could see that broken, blue-and-silver figure, stretcher-borne” (356). Concluding that, like Gifford, he has been broken and cannot possibly recover, Exley is content with futile rage, choosing an outward expression of bigoted, anti-intellectual fan behavior even as he portrays himself as capable of historicizing Gifford’s defeat and his own. In this moment, Exley resigns himself to the fact that “it was my fate, my destiny, my end, to be a fan” (357): in effect, to be only one voice in a cacophony of amateur appreciators, never a recognized performer like his father, the football star. But in doing so, Exley also demonstrates the depth and critical complexity of fan behavior. He shows that fans, like readers of the broadest range of cultural texts, whether aesthetically-oriented or not, have multiple motivations and reactive registers. His art, finally, is born of the bleachers whose reason and creative capacity he questions. It is his fate to articulate the complicated stakes and blurred reality of fandom with equal measures of artistry and ugliness. *A Fan’s Notes* ends with Exley “ready to do battle,... running: obsessively running,” like Peoples, from his personal failure (385). Despite three institutionalizations, he cannot reconcile his reality to “this new, this incomprehensible America” (385). It would seem that football fandom, synecdochically represented by Gifford’s broken body, has failed positively to reshape

“society’s reality” for Exley (76). A broader consideration of that fandom’s impact in relationship to his literary aspirations tells another story, however.

“Life Often Ends Badly...Literature Tries to Document This Reality”: Fandom and Literature

In “Toward a New Male Identity: Literature and Sports” (1980), Ross J. Pudaloff asserts that “superficially, there would appear to exist an inverse relationship between writing and reading and modern sports, a distinction between solitary, reflective, withdrawn and culturally feminized activities and mass-based, socially approved, aggressive, and masculine ones” (95-6). Yet, even as the weekly rhythms of their lives are determined by football fandom, Peoples and Exley are perpetually motivated by literary appreciation. As with football, both are attuned to the resonances of literature in relationship to their own life narrative. Treating sports and literary narratives similarly, Exley and Peoples affirm Pudaloff’s notion that “literature and sports are...linked because both discover and value the presence of fantasy and desire at the center of the social and ordinary world” (96). Uncertain about what constitutes reality, Exley and Peoples certainly do seek escapist fantasy in consuming the two seemingly distinct narrative forms. Even so, Peoples’s association with Hank Baskett and Exley’s imagined connection to Frank Gifford also impact their otherwise unpalatable realities in meaningful ways. Yet in recognizing that “sports and literature are metaphoric equivalents,” Pudaloff limits their mutual capacity to impact “real” life, asserting that “each changes nothing outside its own world... and each mirrors, distorts, and re-creates the self and world it has left” (96). In doing so, he implicitly stigmatizes both literature and sports and limits their readerly impact:

Both the fan and the reader are returned to infancy to some extent, as is the hero, by their participation in roles where they live solely in the realm of desire. Not for nothing did nineteenth-century moralists link reading and masturbation and warn the unwary about the danger of reading novels. But if such activities and roles

entail a risk of narcissism and regression to infancy, they also bear witness that the essence of identity is in the desire for something better than the ‘routinized’ world [Allen] Guttman believes we can never truly leave. (108)

Reducing fan and reader to infancy, and linking their supposed stigma to an antiquated psychosexual hysteria surrounding onanism, Pudaloff combines Gerdy’s moralistic fear-mongering and Lasch’s intellectual sneer. And yet, necessarily vain as he takes the efforts of sporting and literary readers to be, Pudaloff recognizes their efforts as inevitable manifestations of “the desire for something better” inherent in postmodern identity formation (108). Still, he misses the forest for the trees; in “bear[ing] witness” (108), fan-readers like Exley and Peoples do change something “outside [the] world” of sports or literature (96). By producing their own narratives both *in A Fan’s Notes* and *The Silver Linings Playbook* and *through* them,⁴ the character-narrators demonstrate the agency of fans and readers to appropriate the elements of their passion, use them to create identity on the page, and disseminate that self-expression such that it impacts lived experience.

Fans of rival football teams in the Giants and Eagles, Exley and Peoples’s efforts to forge new realities through immersion in the literary are equally distinct. Exley’s connection to literature is predicated on intellectual aspirations born of his university experience—he asserts that he “quite naturally became an English major” at USC because “The Books, The Novels and The Poems [provided] pat reassurances that other men had experienced rejection and pain and loss” (59)—as well as his aspiring authorship of “The Big Book,” a prospective work he calls his “literary fantasy” (35, 52). For Peoples, on the other hand, the aspiration is informal, rehabilitative, and social: “to read all the novels on [Nikki’s] American literature class syllabus, just to make her proud [and to] be able to converse with her swanky literary friends” (10). While Exley hopes “The Books, The Novels and The Poems” will help elevate him from “The Crowd”

to Giffordian fame in the social sphere of the literati, Peoples desires to reshape his mind, like his body, to please the woman he loves but with whom he is denied reconciliation. The two men approach literature from distinct experiential positions and with different motivations, then, but they both find in its pages—as on the football field—the inspiration to reshape their unpalatable lives.

Since Peoples's roadmap is his ex-wife's high school American literature syllabus, his literary rehabilitation features a predictable list of titles. And equally predictably, given his mental state, Peoples's reactions to *The Great Gatsby* (1925), *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), and *The Bell Jar* (1963) are not oriented to historical or literary critical frameworks, but to a child-like measurement of sympathy with the protagonists. Peoples relates himself to the characters on the page because he sees himself as a character on the page, or, more accurately, on the screen. He thinks of his "own life [as a] movie" and takes solace in his belief that despite his troubles "it's almost time for the happy ending, when Nikki will come back" (15). Conceptualizing his life on melodramatic terms inspires Peoples to see the "silver lining" in his situation, and he seeks the same ultimate optimism in measuring the narrative priorities of the literature he reads. This leads to frustration at "how Gatsby loves Daisy so much but can't ever be with her no matter how hard he tries" and disappointment that "Fitzgerald never took the time to look up at the clouds during sunset" (9). Authorial ascriptions of this type persist: Peoples's anger at the unhappy demise of Catherine in *A Farewell to Arms* leads him to vow never "read another one of [Ernest Hemingway's] books. And if he were still alive, I would write him a letter right now and threaten to strangle him dead with my bare hands just for being so glum. No wonder he put a gun to his head" (22). Transferring his own potential for violent psychosis to the page in his threat to the famous(ly)

dead author, Peoples also blames one of the actual (but at this point still implicit) victims of that psychosis, his ex-wife Nikki, for “teach[ing] this book to children... Why not just tell high school students that their struggle to improve themselves is all for nothing?” (22).

Unhappy endings, familiar as they may be in individual sporting outcomes, are bothersome to Peoples in literature for their finality. Thus a novel like *The Scarlet Letter*, difficult though it may be for Hester Prynne, is redeemed because its unhappiness comes before the end. Hester gets to live “a fulfilled life and [gets] to see her daughter grow up and marry well,” Peoples asserts, because “she believed in silver linings [and] stuck to her guns” when faced with “that nasty throng of bearded men in hats” (58). Mapping his own “struggle to improve” himself onto the plot arcs of each novel (22), Peoples sees their final outcomes in football’s binary terms of wins and losses and rejects those narratives that would suggest that his narrative could, at least when it comes to Nikki, already have ended unhappily. Even when presented with evidence of just such finality, Peoples still rejects such an ending. At long last remembering viciously beating the man with whom he caught his wife cheating, Peoples subsequently learns that the letters he thought he was receiving from Nikki were in fact the fabrications of Tiffany, his equally mentally ill dance partner. Nikki hasn’t been in touch with him, and will never reconcile with him. And yet Peoples asserts that his “movie isn’t over,” citing the way “moviemakers trick the audience with a false bad ending, and just when you think the movie is going to end badly, something dramatic happens, which leads to the happy ending” (260). Urging him to move on from Nikki and start a new life with Tiffany, Cliff attempts to impose what Exley would call “society’s realities” (76), assuring Peoples that “life is not a movie. You’re an Eagles fan. After watching so many NFL seasons without a Super Bowl, you

should know that real life often ends poorly” (260). Tiffany herself, impersonating Nikki in a letter, does the same, contextualizing failure on literary terms:

I'll tell you the same thing I tell my students when they complain about the depressing nature of American literature: life is not a PG feel-good movie. Real life often ends badly, like our marriage did, Pat. And literature tries to document this reality, while showing us it is still possible for people to endure nobly. (217-8)

Documenting that noble possibility in authoring the literary chronicle of his own life, Peoples nevertheless rejects this literary metaphor, just as he does Cliff's football version, because he finds it “defeated by pessimism” (260). Instead, he chooses to interpret his reality on willfully optimistic terms. Like the renewal of football season each fall—each team and player's chance to rewrite over the previous year's (almost always) unhappy narrative conclusion—Peoples refuses to discount the possibility of his redemption. Though in his forgotten role in his own prior adulterous narrative he is Roger Chillingworth, rather than Hester Prynne, Peoples “sticks to his guns” till the very end (58). Only when he drives to Baltimore and sees in person that Nikki has made a new life for herself does he acquiesce to the finality of their separation, to “the ending of the movie, the one that was my old life” (265). Befitting his belief in silver linings, of course, Peoples's acceptance of one life narrative's ending allows him to pursue another: the concluding romantic partnership with Tiffany that provides the possibility for him “to endure nobly” (218).

Similar to Peoples's quest for Hollywood's happy ending, Exley's dream of fame informs his literary associations throughout the novel. Peppering *A Fan's Notes* with references to art novels, the author/narrator/character attempts to fulfill his need to have his “name whispered in reverential tones” (35) by associating the events of his life narrative with the plots and characters of famous (and notably all-male) authors such as Nabokov, Bellow, Hemingway, and Salinger. A particularly young girlfriend is thus described as “Hudson's Rima, Spenser's Una, Humbert

Humbert's Dolly" (149), and Exley wishes he "had been a square-jawed, tight-lipped, virile Frederick Henry who loved, lost, and walked back to his hotel in the rain. But I didn't love in that way; and when I lost, I went quite off my head" (152). Similarly, of his artistic and professional failures in New York, Exley asserts that "it was because, like Tonio Kröger, there was for me no right way" (71). The mention of Thomas Mann's eponymous protagonist, a tortured artist like Exley, signifies his sense of fatedness to an artistic temperament that separates its bearer from satisfaction in quotidian experience. Rather than see himself in these novels, as Peoples does, Exley sees these novels—and their authors—in him. In "throwing mental bouquets to those who had mastered the art" of writing, Exley marks reference points of literary prestige with which he wants to be associated (204).

Exley's authorial desires thus influence not only the way he reads and thinks about literature, but also the way he performs his knowledge of it in the text of *A Fan's Notes*. The references are meant to enrich and elevate the text even as Exley the character displays behaviors—fan-oriented and not—that would seem to present him in an un-, if not anti-, intellectual light. But not all of Exley's literary references are so superficial. Two authors inspire in him a passion akin to his connection to Frank Gifford: Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edmund Wilson. Exley's connection to the latter, as with Gifford, is born of geographical proximity: Wilson lives in Talcottville, "a few miles south" of Exley's hometown of Watertown (202). While Exley recognizes that "this was a remote and flimsy parallel upon which to build a literary romance," he soon imagines that "Wilson and I were having a literary duologue" (202). Like Gifford's football exploits, Wilson's writings inform and inspire Exley's sense of identity and its attendant dream of fame. At one point, merging his two heroes, Exley describes his "vague dream of doing something absolutely Wilsonian. Instead of reading systematically through the

literature of socialism, as he must have done to make his *To the Finland Station*, I expect I was going to read through the literature of football and write my *To the Yankee Stadium*” (224). The dream is never realized, as Exley describes returning “quickly into the insane asylum” shortly afterward (226), but it aptly demonstrates both the similarly powerful and interrelated terms on which literary and football fandom inform his identity and the fact that these iconic figures cannot help him escape “society’s reality” via unrealized fantasy (76).

And yet, as with Gifford, Exley does commune with Wilson on corporeal terms. He describes his “pilgrimatic habit” of traveling to Talcottville, “where in passing I am able to get a hurried glimpse of [Wilson’s] retreat” (203). The mere “glimpse reassures” Exley, as he takes the renowned critic’s rural remove as an “anachronism” indicative of his inability to “recognize...a single aspect of the America he knew; [such] that, in his own word, he felt himself ‘stranded’ from his country” (203). Despite his perception of their common alienation, however, Exley’s proximal connection to Wilson is no more directly interpersonal than his trips “*To the Yankee Stadium*” to see Gifford (224). Since “Wilson elsewhere had said that literary idolaters fell somewhere between blubbing ninnies and acutely frustrated maidens, I never did stop” (203). Inspiring his authorial pursuits—pursuits that would have him emerge from the crowd of such “idolaters” (203)—Exley’s connection to Wilson also implicitly condemns him to such a crowd if it were to be revealed to the famed critic.

Finally it is Exley’s fannish connection to a literary idol with whom he cannot possibly interact in person that helps him find a model for productivity at peace with his sense of identity. Returning to *The Scarlet Letter* because he has gained employment as a high school English teacher, Exley admits that his “previous readings of Hawthorne had been hostile and sneering,” likely because “his obdurate and unrelieved probing of the evil in men, particularly his so

shackling the characters of his somber world with scarcely bearable yokes of guilt, had aroused in me an understandable distress” (366, 367). In the wake of Gifford’s crushing injury and Exley’s own bloody and bigoted resignation to personal failure, however, he finds Hawthorne’s depiction of enduring human turpitude reassuring:

having prostrated myself before the Freudians and found no relief...it seemed to me [that] not only are there certain things from which, this side of heaven, men should not be absolved... but employing all the psychological ploys available there are acts from which men never completely absolve themselves” (367).

Here, contra Lasch, Exley rejects the “psychiatric clichés, [that serve] him as a means of deflecting criticism and disclaiming responsibility for his actions” (Lasch 19). Instead he recognizes that many of his actions have been reprehensible and should not be forgiven by others or, more crucially, by himself. His “deviations” (88), in other words, are to be preserved in order that they *not* be revisited. In contrast with Pat Peoples, then, the “guns” that Hester sticks to in *The Scarlet Letter* are for Exley unredeeming. Ultimate rehabilitation, of the saccharine kind that Hollywood and Peoples covet, is impossible.

The acceptance of the fact that his flaws are permanent but not redeeming for being such does not affect the mode of Exley’s subsequent interaction with Hawthorne, however. “Reading [Hawthorne] in the light of this belief” that “sin and remorse are... a necessary parcel” in him, Exley thus “soon developed a crush on Hawthorne. I forced unanalogous parallels between his life and mine” (367). Rather unsurprisingly, then, Exley most cherishes the semi-autobiographical “Custom House” preface to *The Scarlet Letter*. In Hawthorne’s description of authorial “languor” incurred “while working surrounded by men whose existence was bounded by the succulence of past and anticipated meals,” Exley cannot help but see resonances of the ways in which “teaching children granted immunity from failure” and thus inculcated in him “a similarly impotent languor” (367). To find his own Scarlet “A” in storage, Exley retreats “when

the summer holiday finally came” to his mother’s attic, to write “these pages, [which] had begun to form themselves in my mind” (367). Physically incapable of being an athlete like Frank Gifford, Exley finds in Hawthorne a fan-subject whose actions he can quite literally mirror. Without potential shame at revealing to (the long dead) Hawthorne that this fan passion motivates him, Exley is, for once, wholly unashamed of his fandom. Thus uninhibited, his efforts meet with success and *A Fan’s Notes* is born. In effect, like Peoples, Exley’s fan pursuits ultimately secure his identity, but not in the way he anticipated or intended. Fittingly so, since the foremost lesson of literary appreciation may be that life’s silver linings are never foreseen or unambiguous. Like all truly complex narratives, human experience cannot be reduced to intended meanings or defined outcomes.

“I Never Tell Anybody the Way it Really Happened”: Fandom and the Form of the Novel

A Fan’s Notes is itself a complex narrative, of course, and the most useful critical consideration of it comes from Peter Bailey, whose “Notes on the Novel as Autobiography” rightfully positions Exley’s novel’s generic indeterminacy as central to any consideration of its aims and accomplishments. James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) established a precedent, Bailey argues, for “the idea that the self can be fictionalized, metaphorized, molded into more or less objective aesthetic configurations” (80). This idea follows naturally from “the recognition that any presentation of the self through language is necessarily a selection, a fragment, a fiction,” and results in “novels about characters who bear their [authors’] names and who are deliberately simplified, artfully crafted projections of themselves. Thus, the novel-as-autobiography” (80). In explicating *A Fan’s Notes*, Bailey maintains, the reader must completely bifurcate the author as character—whom he calls

“Frederick”—from the author as author—referred to as “Exley.” “The novel’s title might well be amended to read *A Fan(tasy)’s Notes* once this two-dimensional narrative mechanics is recognized,” Bailey asserts, attempting to demonstrate the “existence of Exley above and beyond Frederick’s disorderly attempt at writing a novel” (88). Where “Frederick” fails to assemble his notes into anything coherent, “Exley” succeeds in producing the novel we read. The failed “fantasy” of the former produces the literary “reality” we hold in our hands.

But Bailey’s attempt to separate the purportedly stable reality of an authorial “Exley” from the uncertain fictions of a narratorial “Frederick” is misguided, constructing a false distinction between autobiography and fiction. Exley insists in the prefatory matter to *A Fan’s Notes* that “though the events in this book bear similarity to those of that long malaise, my life, many of the characters and happenings are creations solely of my imagination” and “ask[s] to be judged as a writer of fantasy” (Note to the Reader). Ostensibly, this serves as a disclaimer, protecting Exley from anyone potentially offended by his or her portrayal, and supports Bailey’s notion that the character “Frederick” may be considered fictional. Yet his evocative metaphor—“that long malaise”—suggests that his request to be judged as a “writer of fantasy” is based on much more than legal concern. As with his multiple capacities as a football fan—passionate and critical, rabid and removed, mentally unstable and intellectually-oriented—Exley’s authorial modes are always both autobiographical and fictive. Commenting on the mercurial Mr. Blue, the cartoonish, cunnilingus-obsessed aluminum siding salesman he follows through a chapter-length series of pratfalls, Exley judges that “though Mr. Blue’s way of death was fitting, I never tell anybody the way it really happened; any more than in a hundred places in these pages I have told what ‘really’ happened. I can’t tell the mode of Mr. Blue’s death because in actuality it was so right as to force the reader’s credibility to the breaking point” (296). A degree of fictionality is

necessary in any narrative, Exley claims, because what constitutes “reality” is often unbelievable to others or untenable for the self.

Unable to tolerate “the bare facts [that] would prove inimical to my own version” (190), Exley’s “fictional memoir” represents the only narrative reality he can bear to reproduce. Its generic indeterminacy reflects the fact that Exley’s aesthetic choices about self-representation are inescapably influenced by the phenomenological uncertainty of his lived experience. The form of *A Fan’s Notes* is, like its subject, inherently multiple.⁵ What’s more, the representative flexibility of the “fictional memoir” as a form allows Exley to better demonstrate the capacity of sports and literary fans alike to inhabit varying positions of desire and analysis.

Just as the sports fan naturally subsumes the “objective” statistical markers of an athlete’s performance within an inherently subjective sense of that athlete’s significance, the reader of literature similarly assigns personal importance to characters with varying consideration for the narrative “reality” conveyed by the words on the page. Exley’s multiple modes of engagement with football approximate Rita Felski’s notion of textual “enchantment” in *Uses of Literature* (2008), in which a reader is immersed and emotionally invested in a text, even as he or she inevitably maintains “a state of double-consciousness...., a distinctive bifurcation of perception [that] underlies modern aesthetic experience, whether ‘high’ or ‘low’” (74). In the context of textual engagement, Felski argues, enchantment is “a richer and more multi-faceted [experience] than literary theory has allowed” (76). It is in this vein that *A Fan’s Notes* gives us reason to broaden the terms of textuality to include the sporting event as an episode of serial narrative and the sports fan as its doubly-conscious reader. As its title suggests, *A Fan’s Notes* both draws out the readerly resonances of sports fandom and highlights the fannish motivations hidden in the way we read.

Considering Gifford and Hawthorne as roughly equivalent readerly subjects coveted through fandom also brings to mind the perspective of reader response critic Wolfgang Iser. In his “Phenomenological Approach” to “The Reading Process,” Iser builds on Laurence Sterne’s rather sporting “conception of the literary text [as] an arena in which reader and author participate in a game of the imagination” (51). Rather than privileging the text, Iser asserts that it “needs the reader’s imagination” to fulfill expectations the text can never meet, an imagination which “transform[s] the reading into a creative process that is far and above mere perception of what is written” (53, 54). The “inevitable omissions” in any text are not flaws, then, but the “opportunity...given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections—for filling in the gaps left by the text itself” (55). As Jane Tompkins puts it, Iser’s notion of readership positions the reader as “actively participating in the production of textual meaning” such that critical interpretation and self-reflexive authorship are synonymous processes (xv). The ramifications of this co-creation for an understanding of fan spectatorship as personalized and necessarily authorial in nature are furthered by Iser’s phenomenological concern for the experience of reading—for considering the “consequent unfolding of the text as a living event” (64). Exley’s frustration with the Giants’ fortunes in coach Steve Owen’s last game, that it had not “played out just as, in my loneliness, I had imagined it would be” (69), manifests Iser’s notion of the “frustration of expectations” that the reader inevitably encounters in a literary text (55). Exley’s subsequent renarrativization of that event in *A Fan’s Notes* represents, in a fully self-reflexive way, the “filling in the gaps” left by that frustration—the personal recontextualization of a narrative unfulfilled (Iser 55). In other words, whether reading Hawthorne or watching Gifford, Exley demonstrates that interpretation, no matter how objective in aspiration, is founded on a subjective and potentially reflexive fictive authorship, however

nascent. In form and content, *A Fan's Notes* thus illustrates the flexibility of fans-as-readers to assume multiple interpretive modes in a wide array of cultural contexts.

In the prefatory matter to *The Silver Linings Playbook*, Matthew Quick makes no genre-blurring claims: we are to understand that the novel is a fiction. The fact that Pat Peoples's New Jersey upbringing, struggle with mental illness, and Eagles fandom approximate many of Quick's own experiences is not vital to the readerly experience as it is for the reader of *A Fan's Notes*. Even so, the novel and its narrator are invested in exploring the fuzzy intersections between narrative interpretation and lived experience. As mentioned earlier, when Peoples reads the works on his ex-wife's high school American literature syllabus, he immediately relates them to his life history—such as he knows it—and his expectations for his future. Chalked up to the “second childhood” of his damaged psyche (225), this relation might be dismissed. Yet Peoples's memory loss means that Iser's notion of the reader as tasked with “filling in the gaps left by the text itself” is quite literally realized in the protagonist's struggle to understand his own life narrative (55). Peoples naturally attempts to graft other narratives onto his own story, then, and, perhaps because he understands that many of the events lost to lacunae will be unpalatable to him, he seeks in those narratives messages he can parse as positive or empowering. When applied to his own life narrative, this active participation in determining textual meaning leads Peoples to assert a kind of bifurcated consciousness (Tompkins xv). Like Exley's notion that above his fantasies “there was always one I, aloof and ironical, watching the other me play out ‘his’ tawdry dream” (80), Peoples describes a feeling that he is “watching the movie of my life as I live it” (65). This kind bifurcation might be considered symptomatic of schizophrenia—and Exley is in fact diagnosed as such (79)—but it is also more than a marker of mental illness.

Peoples's sense of bifurcation is a manifestation of authorship: he writes the life he is watching as the book we read. Formatted as a diary, the novel addresses an unidentified imagined readership. When Tiffany tells Peoples that she will transmit his letters to Nikki for him, and begins impersonating his ex-wife in replying to the letters, he sends her his diary: in effect, the novel itself to that point in the narrative. Transmitting the diary via Tiffany, who is in fact the only person to read it (other than the readers of *The Silver Linings Playbook* themselves), Peoples makes her privy to his narrative self-fashioning and the fan motivations that animate it. In effect, Peoples allows Tiffany to watch him watch his life as he lives it. And because she is both a corporeal part of that life, as Tiffany, and a watchful commentator, as the epistolary "Nikki," she both participates in the narrative and comments on it. Though Tiffany is not a football fan—she forbids Peoples from watching football or participating in any fan activities while they are training to dance together—in reading the diary she is privy to Peoples's association of his own rehabilitation with the exploits of Hank Baskett and the Eagles. While she may not recognize the resonances, Tiffany effectively operates in a similar fan mode. But her access is premised on false pretenses—she is not, after all, giving the diary or letters to Nikki. And it is Tiffany, not Nikki, who responds to those letters. In an authorial mode, Tiffany attempts to write herself into Peoples's narrative in a manner similar to the way in which he attempts to graft literary and football narratives onto his experience. And ultimately, she is successful. Peoples is angry when he finds out the truth: he "wants to hit Tiffany," to revisit his violent psychosis on her, yet he resists (246). And when she later tells him "I need you so fucking bad," he admits he needs her too (288). In so doing, Peoples grudgingly recognizes that the blurred reality he attempts to shape with the narratives that intersect it is not merely a matter of his own agency. He can map Hester Prynne and Hank Baskett's exploits onto his own identity,

but his narrative is also afforded meaning by others. In this case, that meaning provides him with the redemption he needs.

“Watching the movie” of Peoples’s “life as he lives it” also describes the reader of *The Silver Linings Playbook*. The effect of the unlikely reconciliation that is *Silver Lining*’s silver lining is to suggest that hard and fast generic distinctions are a fallacy not merely in literature, but also in lived experience. The novel, at least partially autobiographical, blends the diaristic and epistolary forms of its narration seamlessly with the mass-mediated stories of football action conducted on the field and in the stands. It is not Peoples’s psychosis that blends these narratives in informing what it means to be him—it is the experience of being human. That the on-field football happenings that Quick-qua-Peoples describes are true to the historical record—as Exley’s are of Gifford—only intensifies the effect: the readers of *The Silver Linings Playbook*, like Peoples himself, are to understand that “reality” is a matter of blurred perspective and that no genre can, on its own, be fully true to life.

Conclusion: Fandom and Textual Afterlives

A Fan’s Notes earned Exley a contract for two more novels, but he was never able to match its dynamism. In his second book, *Pages From a Cold Island* (1975), Exley more narrowly focuses his fan passion on Edmund Wilson. To Yardley, this reads as a “transparent attempt... to repeat the formula [he] had devised in *A Fan’s Notes*,” one that becomes “artificial and strained” in *Cold Island* (xxii).⁶ At least in part, the attempt is strained because Exley rebuffs the football fandom that fueled his artistry in *A Fan’s Notes*. Chronicling his attendance at the National Institute of Arts and Letters awards dinner in *Cold Island*, Exley details his horror when the longtime *New Yorker* fiction editor William Maxwell, by way of introduction, “said my work

reflected a ‘maniacal and extended preoccupation with football and other games’” (217). On the surface, Maxwell’s characterization is apt, but *A Fan’s Notes* is more than that preoccupation, and Exley’s adverse reaction reflects his hope that the work will be esteemed by his authorial peers for its reflexive concern with aesthetics and authorship. By disclaiming the mass cultural erotics of football fandom as he woos the “upper case pieties” of the literati in *Cold Island*, however, Exley loses a large measure of the transitive brilliance that powered *A Fan’s Notes* (30).

Rather than a fictional memoir, *Cold Island* is a self-described “work of non-fiction” in which Exley has “changed the names of real persons, [but] the incidents described are as I remember them” (Note to the Reader). And the Wilson of *Cold Island*, unlike the Gifford of *A Fan’s Notes*, is absent from popular culture, having recently died with little fanfare. Though Exley describes his meetings with Wilson’s secretary and daughter, and attempts to access the dead critic through his broad oeuvre, *Cold Island* is ultimately a book about Exley’s frustration that *A Fan’s Notes* did not make him famous enough. *Cold Island* “makes obligatory gestures toward confession and self-mockery, but its tone is boastful,” Yardley asserts, and “in the process Edmund Wilson gets lost” (180). As with Gifford, Exley recognizes the vast disparity in notoriety separating himself and Wilson, but the terms of cultural influence are distinct: in *Cold Island*, Exley imagines himself in close relation to Wilson as a fellow cultural critic. Exley is still prone to the alcoholic outbursts and occasionally ugly behavior that characterized his fan frenzy in *A Fan’s Notes*, but these grotesqueries are detached from his desperate striving to connect his personal narrative to something greater—to read and rewrite the liminal “reality” of sporting events-as-narratives in order to reconcile his personal desires to an incongruous social reality.

Abandoning the self-reflexive fandom and generic indeterminacy that provided *A Fan's Notes's* productive tension, Exley also denigrates the very fans that work garnered. Claiming to ignore the “fan missive[s]” that he “received at the hardly impressive rate of about thirty a year,” Exley complains in *Cold Island* that despite their “rather touchingly slavish devotion” these fan letters inevitably took “an abruptly paranoid turn” and ended in disparagement (20, 21). Belying the obvious seriousness with which he takes his “dopey cult following” (97), Exley’s ascription of paranoia to his fans is meant to separate himself from the crowd that he fears in *A Fan's Notes*. Fetishizing an imagined cadre of his authorial “peers,” Exley writes them missives of his own in *Cold Island*, claiming to be, “like Bellow’s Herzog, . . . an inveterate composer of zany letters . . . to the famous living and the famous dead, to people I knew and people I didn’t know” (37). Most of these letters are left unsent, or merely “structured mentally” (37). Given the chance to actually interact with Bellow, however, Exley finds he can contribute nothing more than “horseshit literary gossip” (118). And, desperate to be esteemed, Exley’s response to an offer to meet Norman Mailer is to ask “Mailer wanna meet me?” (222). As Yardley puts it, in this period Exley was “gradually becoming one of those people for whom the line between the world of books and the world of reality is indistinguishable. . . . The world of books became a retreat into which Fred fled, a place where he achieved a presence and an authority that the real world denied him” (64). Though *A Fan's Notes* may not have made Exley famous enough for his own liking, it apparently earned enough notoriety for him to repudiate the role that stoked its brilliance: no longer a fan, in *Pages from a Cold Island* Exley solipsistically esteems and isolates himself among an imagined cadre of elite authors. It is a *Cold Island*, indeed.

By denigrating outward expressions of fandom by the readers of *A Fan's Notes* and cringing at the prominence of football fandom in that work, Exley effectively disavows the

potential that Felski sees in readerly enchantment with particular texts and authors. In becoming a fan of Wilson, Exley adopts a position of readerly cynicism incongruous with the very formation of that fan identity. Though the behavior he exhibits in relation to Wilson in *Cold Island* is by no means dispassionate, in esteeming himself as the famous critic's peer he accepts the terms of "literary life" as "apartness, confusion, loneliness, work, and *work, and work*" (267, italics original). In effect, per Felski's characterization in "After Suspicion" (2009), Exley embraces the critical modes that dominate the professional practice of literary study. These have come to dictate that "becoming a critical reader means moving from attachment to detachment and indeed to disenchantment" (Felski 30). Associating literary-critical reading with an ethos of "suspicion" aiming to "slice[...] into a text like a scalpel to expose its complicity with the logic of imperialism or heteronormativity" (28), Felski asserts that the professional imperative of university-based literary critics leads them to disparage students' "previous responses to texts" as naïve or uncomplicated (30). Exley's cringing at the football-centric content of *A Fan's Notes* in *Cold Island* speaks to a similar impulse. Exley's recognition of multiple interpretive modes in *A Fan's Notes* models the more reflexively personal means by which we should attend to textual encounters, both scholarly and popular.

Pages from a Cold Island was not *A Fan's Notes* only successor, however. A film version of *A Fan's Notes* was released in 1972, directed by Eric Till and starring Jerry Orbach as Exley. It was, as Yardley calls it, "a well intentioned disaster," in large part because it "captures none of the interior tension that is so essential" to the novel (151). Translating Exley's blurred reality onto the screen is impossible in part because there is no distinct rendering of football and literary narrative as modes of experience that overlay, and indeed influence, his actions in "society's reality" (76). Though Gifford is mentioned, there is but one football scene in the film, and

scarcely a reference to Edmund Wilson or Nathaniel Hawthorne. The result is that while Orbach's Exley is shown to be institutionalized, the circumstances by which his sense of self are irreconcilable to the world at large are not conveyed. The associative power of fandom, and the psychoses that it supposedly accompanies, are flattened in the onscreen rendering of *A Fan's Notes* in a way that inescapably undermines the text's phenomenological resonance.

Something similar happened to *The Silver Linings Playbook* when it was adapted by Hollywood. Unlike *A Fan's Notes*, which was produced by a Canadian offshoot of Warner Brothers, Quick's novel received the full trappings of a Hollywood big budget film. Directed by David O. Russell and starring Bradley Cooper, Jennifer Lawrence, and Robert DeNiro, the 2012 film reaped the rewards of that big budget, earning more than \$100 million at the box office and winning an Academy Award for Best Actress thanks to Lawrence's portrayal of Tiffany. But the same basic problem of depicting the complexities of the narrator's psyche that flattens *A Fan's Notes* renders the film version of *The Silver Linings Playbook* a far less dynamic representation of fan association, mental illness, and the crafting of life narrative. Peoples, renamed Pat "Solatano," is shown fully ensconced in Eagles fandom and, to a lesser extent, reading the books on Nikki's syllabus with an eye to self-improvement. But the very process of representing these actions externally—via third-person camera portrayal instead of first-person diary entry—reduces the complexity with which Peoples self-consciously assigns value to those activities. In other words, the way in which he incorporates these narratives into his sense of self, and the degree to which they can address his psychological trauma, are limited by the generic conventions of the dramatic film in a way that they were not in Quick's pages. That the film also concludes in melodramatic fashion—with Pat rejecting an offer of reconciliation from Nikki and declaring his unabashed love for Tiffany as the triumphant music swells and the credits roll—

seems only appropriate. Despite Pat Peoples's desire for just that sort of definitive narrative conclusion, the strength of Quick's novel lies in its refusal to abandon the complexities of human experience in search of a satisfying story.

Which brings us back to Christopher Lasch and the notion that fandom is inherently narcissistic. It is the search for a satisfying story that animates narcissism, Lasch asserts, the need to fill "a yawning void, an insatiable hunger, an emptiness waiting to be filled with the rich experiences reserved for the chosen few" (22). Following particular sports entities partially meets this need for Exley and Peoples, as does reading literature, and in a similarly fannish mode of experience. Crucially, vitally even, the search for stories with which to associate oneself can never fully satisfy. The eponymous prizes of *The Silver Linings Playbook* are consolations and coping mechanisms in a cloudy life narrative, not definitional means of redemption. The fan's narcissistic "misrecognition [of the fan object] as an extension of the self" (Sandvoss 189) should be contextualized as such. Rather than indicative of their reduced "grip on reality" (Barash), Exley's and Peoples's narrative appropriations—of sports and literature alike—should be read as manifestations of fandom's potential psychological benefits, anchoring them to the possibility that their damaged lives can find positive outcomes without denying the damage already done.⁷ That Exley's and Peoples's accounts of fandom and mental illness blur the bounds of genre in their written expression is only fitting given this context. Were their narcissism totalizing and their mental illness incapacitating, there would be no confusion about reality and fiction or about written words and lived experience. Instead, by representing the blurring of narratives in multiple modes of self-identification, the two men demonstrate the uncertainty we all must feel in making sense of who we are and what we might become. In so doing, they further show that while sports fandom may look or even feel akin to madness, like our connection to literature such fandom

allows us to build identities on the firm footing of established communal narratives without denying the interpretive flexibility borne of our own idiosyncrasies.

¹ Writing in 1975, William Burke values the work for “treat[ing] the cultural importance of football” (391), which, “like popular fiction, . . . presents an image of life that is over-simplified and thus distorted. The distortions in the game parallel distortions in national values” (393). Pairing *A Fan’s Notes* with *End Zone* (1972), Don DeLillo’s college football-set paean to the prospect of nuclear annihilation, Burke is content to view the game as attractive for its simplicity amid postmodern cultural chaos. In his “Alternative Vision of Frederick Exley’s *A Fan’s Notes*” (1977), C. Barry Chabot similarly posits that “contemporary American fiction depicts an imminent Armageddon,” culturally precipitated, from which the typical narrator protests innocence (87). Exley’s work is somewhat distinct, Chabot argues, because “while his America is as relentlessly superficial and dangerous as Mailer’s, Pynchon’s, or Vonnegut’s . . . [he] does not, like other protagonists, exempt himself from his critique” (90-91). Philip Sterling’s consideration in a 1980 issue of *Critique* asserts that *A Fan’s Notes* is “a tragic-romantic novel of a man’s love affair with America—the love affair of an individual who, like many individuals, cannot come to terms with the mythic image of his native country” (45). At the end of his discussion, however, Sterling usefully observes that the novel’s true subjects are “America’s anonymous spectators” (45). Most recently (1999), Timothy L. Parrish writes that “Exley rages against the American imperative to conform that leaves him no choice but to accept his fate as a grotesque parody of what success means in American culture” (127).

² Before long, Peoples is introduced to Tiffany, a mentally-ill woman traumatized by the death of her husband. Despite his friends’ encouragement, Peoples is not romantically interested in

Tiffany, holding out hope that he will be able to reunite with Nikki. When Tiffany suggests that she can transmit letters to Nikki for him, however, Peoples agrees to be her partner in a dance competition in which she plans to participate as a therapeutic exercise. The connection forged in their training sessions, as well as the question of the authenticity of the letters that Peoples receives from Nikki via Tiffany, form the backbone of the novel's romantic plot.

³ Gifford would, ultimately, make a comeback from the injury in 1962. Exley comments on that return with interest, but also a measure of resignation that the football star's playing abilities could never be quite the same.

⁴ At least insofar as Quick and Peoples can be taken to be the same fan-reader-author.

⁵ In his biographical consideration, Yardley takes the opposite tack to Bailey, asserting that "the Fred Exley who speaks to us in this 'fictional memoir' is the *real* Fred Exley, unencumbered by any desire or need to conform to the expectations of Watertown and social convention. It is here that his sensitivity is permitted to rise to the surface, that he allows himself to feel, think and say things the real Fred Exley could not" (135). For Yardley, Exley's fictional ascription is merely protective cover for a kind of unvarnished Fredness; his most true self can shine through because he need not pander to anyone's standards of sensitivity. Like Bailey's reading, however, Yardley's attempt to disentangle the Exleyan clamor misses the point, playing to a false distinction between aesthetic determination in self-representation and the depiction of phenomenological uncertainty in parsing the generic status of *A Fan's Notes*.

⁶ Exley also pursues this glory-by-association tack in his third and final work of autobiographical-fiction, *Last Notes from Home* (1988), but focuses on his brother Bill, a career military man who died of cancer in 1973.

⁷ Sports psychologist Daniel Wann shares in this optimistic outlook regarding sports fans, citing “research [that] suggests that highly identified fans possess a healthy psychological profile” (167). These fans not only maintain that health “in light of the fact that [they] view their team’s performances as a reflection of themselves” but in fact employ “a variety of tactics to protect and enhance their psychological health” in maintaining that connection (167, 169).

CHAPTER FOUR

Reimagined Communities: Web-Mediated Sports Fandom and Technogenetic Narrativity

Literature in the twenty-first century still takes the form of novels, short stories, poetry, and all the printed things it has been.¹ And yet, in the wake of hyperlinks, Twitter, and e-readers, it is also something different. Increasingly incorporated into the niche media consumption that characterizes the “long tail” of the internet era (Anderson, cited in Hundley and Billings 1), literature’s cultural resonance, like that of almost all texts, is diffuse. Sports, by contrast, are often thought to be one of the last concentrated mass cultural touchstones. Because sports’ unscripted competitive construct incentivizes live viewing, media theorists and advertisers consider them differently: as defined by a mass audience that consumes them contemporaneously. While movies and television shows are increasingly consumed on demand via streaming services, sporting events—especially “MegaSport” events like the Super Bowl (Hundley and Billings 2)—still command millions of simultaneous viewers and attendant sums of advertising capital. One unfortunate consequence of this notion of sports as the last bastion of true mass media is the perpetuation of an anachronistic consideration of its fans as passive dupes of the type famously outlined by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Yet, as this dissertation has demonstrated, the portrait of sports fans as a deindividuated mob oversimplifies and mischaracterizes. This is even more evident in the era of the internet, in which fan-authored blogs have demonstrated the myriad ways fans analyze, personalize, and re-narrativize the stories that unfold on the fields, television screens, and computers in front of them. As they rewrite them online, these fans treat sports narratives as a rich meta-textual corpus, and they create their own literature of sports experience within it.²

A wide range of criticism from literary studies, new media studies, and sports studies informs my thinking in this chapter, but I am particularly indebted to the critical framing for digital expression provided by N. Katherine Hayles in *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* (2012). In it, she reconceptualizes the term “technogenesis”—the idea that “humans and technics have coevolved together”—for the internet era (10). According to anthropologists, technogenesis has meant that that humans developed as a species in tandem with their use of new tools. But contemporary technogenesis, as Hayles puts it,

posits a strong connection between ongoing dynamic adaptation of technics and humans [such] that multiple points of intervention open up. These include making new media...adapting present media to subversive ends...using digital media to reenvision academic practices, environments and strategies...and crafting reflexive representations of media self-fashionings in electronic and print literatures that call attention to their own status as media, in the process raising our awareness of both the possibilities and dangers of such self-fashioning. (83)

Arguing that digital media provide more than a new outlet for human expression and analysis, Hayles posits that they affect and in fact develop the way we think. Enhanced connectivity plays a major role in this development, of course, but so does reflexivity, allowing digitally-mediated writers to reach both outward—beyond the conventional limitations of geography and print culture—and inward—towards a better understanding of the motivations and practices that constitute digital selfhood.

Since Hayles is a literary scholar, she naturally provides examples of contemporary technogenesis in digitally mediated writings that are self-consciously literary in their aspiration. But her claims about *How We Think* in a digitally-mediated world have ramifications far beyond intellectually-oriented fiction. Hayles provides the critical background upon which I position the fan blogger as a multivarious reader and self-reflexive writer whose mode of expression is not merely influenced by, but inextricable from, digital connectivity. As the previous chapters have

demonstrated, fan critiques of sports spectatorship and its narrative ramifications for personal identity long predated the web. But the internet era powered a definitive shift in the form and pervasiveness of those critiques, and has amplified their potential to affect change in the sports industrial complex.

In tracing that definitive shift, the fan-authored American sports blog is often credited to Bill Simmons, for the platform's popularization if not necessarily its innovation. Long before he wrote *The Book of Basketball* (2009), Simmons emerged from relative obscurity as a contributor to the late-90s proto-blogsphere to write for ESPN.com beginning in 2001. Eschewing press row and the locker room for first person accounts of TV broadcasts, littered with pop culture references and jokes, Simmons quickly gained a massive online following. Two best-selling books, a documentary series, and the creation of [his own web empire](#) later (*Grantland*), Simmons is today perhaps ESPN's most valuable personality. In an article for *Popular Communication*, I credited Simmons's rise to media star from the performative authorial perspective of a fan "just like you or me" (Gladwell 2009) to his ability to "retroactively rescript the master narrative [of sports, and invest] it with further potency via authorial self-reflexivity and autobiographical detail" (Cohan 131). In doing so, I asserted for the "reflexive sports fan author," more broadly, the capacity to "demonstrate not only the narrative possibilities of sports but also the narrative possibilities of the self" (132). In this chapter, I will examine that assertion beyond Simmons to consider the significance of fan blog innovators that Simmons foreran if not inspired.

In particular, I will analyze three blogs that demonstrate digitally-influenced innovation in their expression of an alternate understanding of sports narratives: [FreeDarko.com](#), [FireJoeMorgan.com](#), and [Power Forward \(pwr fwd.net\)](#). I will consider the work carried out by

these three blogs with an eye to three frameworks through which they reflexively reorient what it means to be a sports fan: [modes of fan attachment](#), [narrative reconceptualization](#), and [identity politics](#). I will demonstrate that the accessibility and communicative flexibility of the blogosphere enhances and further develops fans' capacities to rearticulate the ways in which athletes and games are presented, interpreted, and assigned personal meaning. Reaching an audience of fellow fan-readers far beyond their living rooms or the corporate communicative contexts of major sports media entities like *ESPN.com*, these sports fan-authors use the public forum of the internet to develop new narratives and build imagined communities of an alternative scope.

Modes Of Fan Attachment

In their influential study, *Sports Fans: The Psychology and Social Impact of Spectators* (2001), Daniel Wann, Merrill Melnick, Gordon Russell, and Dale Pease attempted to determine what makes someone a sports fan. Identifying eight primary motives that influence the socialization of the “highly identified” sports fan (4)—group affiliation, family, aesthetic, self-esteem, economic, eustress, escape, and entertainment (31)—Wann et al. used psychological and sociological data sets to determine the “origin of team identification” (5). In taking such a macro approach, the authors can be said to have outlined the parameters of much, maybe even most, fan experience. But they also failed to capture the fact that, as Garry Crawford puts it in paraphrasing Matt Hills, “being a fan is not just a label or category; it is also an identity and a performance” (20). Narratives fuel that sense of self and its performance, and sports provide such narratives in abundant and multivarious ways that allow fans to reach far beyond Wann et al.'s rather monolithic notion of “team identification” (5). Though the team construct naturally enforces the kind of divisions thought vital to the formation of imagined communities (Abercrombie and

Longhurst 116), it also imposes implicit spatial and temporal constraints that electronically-mediated fandoms easily subvert, allowing for the formation of alternate modes of affiliation.



One prominent example of the capacities of fans to work beyond the conventional boundaries of sports' imagined communities was manifested on the NBA blog *FreeDarko.com*. Active from 2005 until 2011, *FreeDarko* was born from the message board of a fantasy basketball league. Calling themselves “the Masters of the Klondike” to evoke a spirit of exploration, *FreeDarko's* group of friends and internet acquaintances posted under pseudonyms like “Dr. Lawyer IndianChief,” “Silverbird5000,” and “Bethlehem Shoals.” The site’s eponymous imperative—to free Detroit Pistons draft flop Darko Milicic from the confines of the team’s bench—was rarely ever its focus. Instead, the site concerned itself with basketball appreciation predicated on critical frameworks that transcended the conventional boundaries of sports' imagined communities. To wit: the “collective,” as they called themselves, coined the term “Liberated Fandom” to refer to a new paradigm of investment in the NBA, “the capacity to watch basketball with an eye toward individual narratives that is not bound to allegiance to a particular team” (Recluse Esq., “Dropping (Three) Jewels”). For Bethlehem Shoals this meant having “no belief whatsoever in the endless maze of sport upon which ESPN is premised,” to watch basketball for reasons having “nothing to do with the importance of what’s on or one’s moral obligation to check it out.... If you have love of the Association there’s at least one game per night that will illuminate you. Maybe this is the ultimate articulation of *FreeDarko* Liberated Fandom—we *chase* product, rather than waiting till we can brag about ours to others” (“Against the Endless Maze,” “Save your Claws,” emphasis original). In effect, Shoals and the other

FreeDarko blog writers forswore inherited favorite teams and “zip code messiahs” (emynd, “Off the Head”)—the prime source of “group affiliation,” to put it in Wann et al.’s terms (31). They had, it seemed, cast aside interpersonal socialization as a primary motive of fandom.

But how and why did this practice manifest itself in the blog era of the internet? Two reasons: one having to do with communication technology and the other having to do with the narrative-based ontology that technology engenders. For the first, the internet architecture of the blog itself allowed for fan communitas on precisely the terms that would, in a larger fan context, seem to reject socialization. Which is to say that while the Seattle-based Shoals couldn’t turn to a Supersonics fan in the stadium stands or sports bar and likely find someone sympathetic to his appreciation for the Phoenix Suns or Gilbert Arenas on aesthetic terms, he could do precisely that on the internet. For those like *FreeDarko* contributor Gordon Gartrelle who find “mainstream sports discourse [to be] as uncritical, stale, retrograde, and conformist as mainstream political discourse” (qtd in Shoals, “The Day Never Ended”), *FreeDarko* was a revelation, and the blogosphere provided the necessary connecting piece for that segment of sports fans, be they merely a “niche” audience or representative of something more. Dan Shanoff argued that they are the latter in eulogizing the site in 2011, asserting that “*FreeDarko*’s essential tenet of ‘liberated fandom’ dovetails with the essential foundation for our current media era.... FD acolytes [are] given intellectual permission to pursue cheering for funky players with no position or stuck on the wrong team or otherwise bending the orthodoxies of the NBA” (qtd in Shoals, “The Day Never Ended”).

In effect, *FreeDarko*’s aesthetic mission amounted to more than a new paradigm for fan interpretation and expression: it was example par excellence of the expanded capacity for critical thinking that digital interactivity allows. Realizing Katherine Hayles’s notion that digital media

is “an important resource for contemporary self-fashioning, for using plasticity both to subvert and redirect the dominant order” (83), the authors of *FreeDarko* incorporated hyperlinks, images (often obscure, or seeming non sequiturs), YouTube videos, criticism from non-sports related sources, and unconventional statistical analysis enabled by the data access and processing power that computers provide. The cumulative effect, as much as anything else, of Liberated Fandom was to free *FreeDarko*’s authors, “collective” though they may have called themselves, to individually reflexively explore the intellectual possibilities of basketball beyond any socially-prescribed interpretive boundary. As Will Leitch put it, “*FreeDarko*...made me realize the power of caring this much, of thinking this hard, and investing this much [...] and how the Web could harness and unleash that power” (qtd in Shoals, “The Day Never Ended”).

From a literary-critical perspective, one might suppose that *FreeDarko* engaged in a hermeneutics of suspicion. Rejecting conventional fandom as an uncritical mode of responsiveness overdetermined by competitive outcomes and a “from-the-gut hermeneutics of greatness,” the *FreeDarko* collective espoused the “active role we take in fandom” (Shoals, “Strength Begat Mind,” “The Ever-Renewing Cauldron”). But to characterize *FreeDarko* authors as utterly suspicious readers is to miss the enchantment and recognition, to borrow Rita Felski’s terms, that they found in the NBA meta-text. Shoals affirmed the notion that modern consumers “find an identity based in culture, which in America is an open market of freelance commodities and personal collage” (“You Can Grade Me Shorter”). *FreeDarko*-an NBA identity formation may have rejected interest in the NBA based on the standard metrics of competition, but aesthetic rapture and personal association were fundamental to their ethos. As contributor “emynd” put it in the context of Allen Iverson:

the game done changed and the winnings and losings are only as important as the winners and losers that play the... game. I suppose finding some sort of grand-

scale enjoyment in each and everyone of AI's performances regardless if they result in a win is akin to liking the music that an artist makes whether or not he wins a Grammy for it. ("The Heart of a Perpetual Loser")

The conventional public metric of success is mostly irrelevant to the liberated fan, but he still sees himself in the text, or invests in it emotionally. As Felski notes in *Uses of Literature*,

the experience of being immersed in a work of art involved a mental balancing act... even as we know we are bewitched, possessed, emotionally overwhelmed, we know ourselves to be immersed in an imaginary spectacle: we experience art in a state of double consciousness. (74)

Though Felski considers art to encompass a wide range of imaginative texts, her immediate context does not consider sports performance. Even still, her characterization aptly describes the mindset of the *FreeDarko*-an liberated fan. Though the site's authors mostly forswore the conventional fan practice of identity construction via team affiliation, they nevertheless realized that, as Nick Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst put it in their influence study of *Audiences* (1998), "analytical performance is intrinsically linked to emotional attachment" (177).

FIRE JOE MORGAN

.....
Where Bad Sports Journalism Came To Die

The relationship between emotion and analysis was equally strong, but manifested quite differently, on the baseball blog *Fire Joe Morgan*. Active from 2005 until the end of the 2008 baseball season, *Fire Joe Morgan* was authored by a group of friends and fellow comedy writers posting under pseudonyms like "dak," "Junior," and "Ken Tremendous." In the style of *FreeDarko*'s eponymous mission, the imperative of *Fire Joe Morgan*'s nomenclature—to get ESPN television baseball analyst and MLB Hall of Famer Joe Morgan removed from his job—was only occasionally its focus. Instead, the site specialized in using Sabermetric analytics to satirize journalists who remained statistically ignorant or obstinate in their thinking about, and commenting on, baseball.³ *Fire Joe Morgan*'s website header declared itself the site "Where Bad

Sports Journalism Came To Die,” and, as Ken Tremendous put it, the site took “borderline-sociopathic joy [in] meticulously criticizing bad sports journalism” (“Post #1377”). While the tools of *Fire Joe Morgan*’s criticism emanated from careful application of Sabermetric analytics, the bloggers’ meticulousness was born of a line-by-line comedic commentary known in internet parlance as “[fisking](#)” (*Urban Dictionary*). The technique involves printing a line of an offending author’s text, following it with a usually comedic rebuttal, followed by another line of the original author’s text, followed by another rebuttal, and so on through the text. The effect was one of a clinical dismantling of rhetorical weakness, of scientific deconstruction of another’s narrative in the name of comedy.

Though any baseball writing that exhibited “old-timey mythology and tradition and ignorance and distrust of modern analysis” was fair game (dak, “Some Questions”), the authors of *Fire Joe Morgan* had noticed in particular that Michael Lewis’s 2003 book about the Oakland Athletics front office, *Moneyball*, had come under fire from baseball media commentators unwilling or unable to understand the enhanced analytical methods it espoused. Among this group of deniers, Joe Morgan had made his distaste especially well known, loudly declaring at seemingly every available opportunity both that he had not read the book and that he was sure its findings were completely wrong: an untenable combination of claims that stoked the satirical fires of *Fire Joe Morgan*’s stable of professional comedy writers. Though dak asserted that the site had “never been singularly devoted to picking on Joe” (“Some Questions”), the obstinately anti-Sabermetric Hall of Famer proved exceptionally apt for a figurehead. As *Fire Joe Morgan*’s authors and readers would be reminded over and over again, Morgan was not particularly receptive to the notion that new ideas and modes of evaluation could or should affect the way one viewed the game. According to Morgan, baseball excellence is self-evident to those with

expertise and first-hand experience. “I watch baseball every day,” Morgan asserted, “[and] I have a better understanding about why things happen than the computer, because the computer only tells you what you put in it. I could make that computer say what I wanted it to say, if I put the right things in there” (qtd in Junior, “Excerpt From the Previously Linked Article”). In other words, as Junior satirically put it: to determine if someone is a great player, use “good old-fashioned gut feeling [and] always, always state your opinions as incontrovertible THINGS THE WAY THEY ARE” (“Someday, You Too”). The nebulous “computer” that Joe Morgan derided as easily manipulable is a threat because it calls into question this sense of the established order by producing new metrics.

Many baseball media lifers agreed with Morgan. One such writer, AOL’s Jim Armstrong, asserted that Sabermetrics cannot “add to the enjoyment of the game.” In his fisking of Armstrong’s piece, Ken Tremendous responded with righteous indignation:

Shut up. Seriously, man, shut the fuck up. This is like saying, ‘I don’t like action movies, so no one can ever enjoy action movies because action movies are terrible.’ If you don’t want to use stats, don’t use them. I don’t care. But for the love of goddamned God, don’t tell me that statistical analysis “doesn’t add up [sic] to enjoyment of the game.” You are telling me that my friends and I are incapable of enjoying baseball. I promise you—I PROMISE you—I enjoy baseball. I love baseball. This is not a situation where only one kind of person can love baseball. Lots of different people can love baseball for lots of different reasons. In my case, I love baseball every bit as much as you, but—and here’s the difference between you and me—I also understand it. (“Heady Days”)

More often, however, the *FJM* crew responded with humor rather than anger. And, as it turned out, making the site’s readers laugh at the technophobic and anti-intellectual voices in baseball media proved to be a quite effective means of advocating for statistical awareness. The folksy tropes of baseball wisdom, like the espousal of a player’s “intangible” qualities, the belief that certain hitters are particularly “clutch,” or the notion that greatness can be measured by “memorable moments,” might seem truthy and harmless when taken at face value. Satirized by

Junior, dak, and Ken Tremendous, however, these same tropes are quite seriously wrongheaded.

Take for example, this typical line of argument from Joe Morgan, as fished by Junior:

[Joe Morgan:] Stats don't tell you about heart, determination and mental attitude.

[Junior:] Or grit, hustle and calm eyes. No, unfortunately, statistics just tell you how good a player is at avoiding making outs while playing baseball. Information that is essentially useless in talent evaluation. When I'm building a team, I want a bunch of inspirational stories. A team of Rudys, or Air Buds. Yeah. I'll call them the Los Angeles Air Buds.

I have heard there are teams that think they can look at a stat sheet and tell you if a guy can play. I don't agree.

The operative words here are "can play." Can a guy play if he OPSes 1.200 for a whole season for the Portland (Maine) Sea Dogs, or WHIPs 0.79 for the Portland (Oregon) Beavers? I would be inclined to say yes, the likelihood is very high that these guys can play. In fact, I would feel much more confident about these fellows than, say, a guy I saw for three days go 8-12 with a couple of home runs and a real sweet swing.

I never would have gotten a chance to play if someone had just looked at me on paper. I got a chance and it paid off.

For the last time, Joe: *you had great statistics*. Because you were great at playing baseball. *In spite of* your underwhelming physical appearance. I don't know how to be more emphatic about this. I'm already writing in choppy sentence.

Fragments. ("JoeChat?" emphasizes original)

Addressing Joe directly in "responding" to text produced in an earlier chat, Junior pointed out not only that the baseball Hall of Famer was reproducing a melodramatic narrative trope about effort and attitude, but that he did so because he perceived his own narrative to have followed that same formula. Yet the Joe Morgan baseball narrative was always determined by statistical effectiveness. Morgan just refused to recognize that fact because he did not understand, or could not personally account for, the measures of that effectiveness. This kind of solipsism was not exclusive to media members like Morgan who are former players. Take Jon Heyman's argument about Hall of Fame evaluation, as fished by Junior:

[Jon Heyman:] Enshrinement in Cooperstown shouldn't be about numbers.

[Junior:] It should be about guessing. Waving your hands in the air and shouting baseball players' names. Loud. Getting piss-drunk on Schlitzes, beating up some Finnish guy for looking gay, putting more Schlitzes in your gut and then using

that gut to remember who was great. Because who remembers better, guts or numbers? Guts. Guts remember.

If anyone thinks so, let's trash tradition and have a computer select the honorees.

You know who a computer would probably pick? All of his computer friends. Hope you like a Hall of Fame full of Commodore 64's, ENIACs and vacuum tubes, you number-loving asshole.

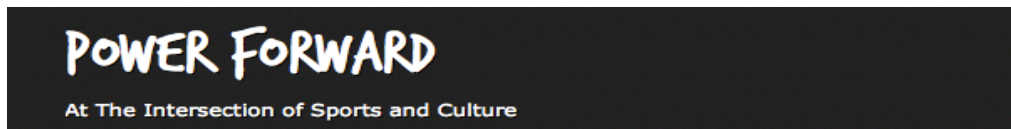
The Hall of Fame should be about who starred and who dominated. And about who made an impact. It should be about greatness.

And how do we determine these things? Simple. Jon Heyman's brain matter. It's a little-known fact, but Jon Heyman's brain matter has been scientifically determined to be the most infallible substance on the planet Earth. Jon Heyman's brain matter has retained every scrap of information it has ever received through Jon Heyman's sensory organs. Jon Heyman's brain matter can tell you the number of hairs on the skin of a Lhasa Apso Jon Heyman's eyes saw in 1974, though of course it would prefer not to, because that would be a number, and numbers are insignificant to Jon Heyman's brain matter. Jon Heyman's brain matter specializes in the recognition of domination, star power, impact and greatness. It does not need numbers to aid it. It simply knows. We must trust it. ("Jack and Bert," emphasizes original)

Junior's humorous responses to Heyman's notion that "greatness" is not measured by numbers were hyperbolic in their satire, to be sure. But they effectively highlighted the fact that Heyman's is an argument for solipsistic subjective evaluation that prioritizes the men doing the selecting over those who are selected for the Hall of Fame. The reflexive recognition of which is, at its base, the larger problem with "computers" and other statistical boogymen for Heyman and the other journalists satirized by *Fire Joe Morgan*. In effect, such "new" thinking forced baseball writers to not merely consider the *what* of the baseball game in front of them, but *how* they consider it and represent it in writing. It forced them to consider that baseball is not self-evident and its traditional representation is not necessarily mimetic of some baseline "reality" of the game.

The same could be said for sports fans—traditional modes of team attachment do not necessarily represent the baseline "reality" of their practices of self-identification. When it comes to understanding both baseball and its fans, then, the authors of *Fire Joe Morgan* presented a

narrative framework distinct from that which would subsume them by convention or “common sense.” As Garry Crawford argues, “rather than being understood as an imagined community, [internet fans] need to be viewed as a *community of imagination*” (144). Advocating for statistical analytics via satirical narratives and largely foregoing team identification,⁴ *Fire Joe Morgan*’s fan community was based in just such imaginative boundary-breaking. The authors of *Fire Joe Morgan* and its dedicated readers were baseball fans united in journalist anti-fandom. As fan studies scholar Jonathan Gray has argued, “hate or dislike of a text can be just as powerful as can a strong and admiring, affective relationship with a text, and they can . . . serve just as powerfully to unite and sustain a community or subculture” (“Antifandom and the Moral Text” 841). Deriving pleasure from their dislike of analytically deficient journalists via sarcasm, *Fire Joe Morgan* used comedic narratives to construct community boundaries without regard to or interest in the conventional definitions used to describe sports fans.



Like *FreeDarko* and *Fire Joe Morgan*, *Power Forward*’s name was an imperative—reflecting sole author Jessica Luther’s desire “to move the discussion about sports forward in a meaningful way” as well as indicating her preferred position on the basketball court (“About”). Active from 2012 to 2014⁵—*Power Forward*’s focus was not on a particular sport, as with *FreeDarko* or *Fire Joe Morgan*, but on re-contextualizing the mainstream media discussion of sports and athletes from Luther’s feminist, social justice-oriented perspective. Powering forward, then, concerned not just “the momentum of moving forward [but] the forceful act of powering through the muck to create that forward motion” (E-mail Interview 11/13/14). Various addressing sports leagues, the sports media, and her fellow sports fans, Luther called them out

for their perpetuation of, or silent complicity in, injustices based on gender, sexuality, or race. Her training as a historian had made her “sensitive... to narratives, [to] whose story gets told and why, whose story we’ll probably never know, whose story we aren’t even trying to tell or whose story we often refuse to acknowledge” (E-mail Interview 11/13/14). Applying that sensitivity in an athletic context in her writing on *Power Forward*, Luther recognized that to grasp the depth and complexity of sports’ fundamental narrativity we must pay attention to the stories that aren’t being told or amplified by media attention, and ask why not.

Where *FreeDarko* and *Fire Joe Morgan* creatively recontextualized fan attachment through aesthetics and analytics, Jessica Luther’s *Power Forward* did its recontextualizing by embracing the distinctiveness and political will of groundbreaking individual athletes. Since tennis and basketball were two of Jessica Luther’s preferred sports (“About”), it was natural that athletes from those sports were two of her favorites. But Luther’s connections to Serena Williams and Brittney Griner weren’t otherwise based on conventional social motives for fan attachment such as geography or family. Instead, as she put in an interview with David J. Leonard for *The Feminist Wire*, “I admire any athlete who goes against the stereotypes of athletes” (“Feminists We Love”). Williams and Griner go against such stereotypes with regard to both who they are and the unapologetic way they comport themselves. As a consequence, their narratives are often handled by the media and fans alike in awkward or inconsiderate ways. It is with regard to this treatment that Luther was particular attentive to each on *Power Forward*.

Serena Williams has been a dominant competitor on the women’s tennis tour since her debut in the mid 1990s, and is considered by some to be the greatest women’s tennis player of all time. All the same, as Luther put it, since Williams is African American and tennis is “a predominantly white sport, [Williams’s] not-white body has endured an endless amount of

scrutiny” (“Serena Williams is Not a Costume”). This scrutiny comes from fans, commentators, and sometimes even her fellow players. In a post titled “Serena Williams is Not a Costume,” Luther took to task fellow players—in particular Caroline Wozniacki—for stunts in which Williams’s body was mimicked, ostensibly in the name of comedy and couched in personal friendship.

Via a series of links, Luther cited the history of racism and body shaming that Serena has been subject to throughout her career, and asserted that

When Wozniacki decided to “impersonate” Serena by adding towels to her breasts and butt, she wasn’t doing so inside of a vacuum where all of this hatred doesn’t exist. [One can’t ignore that] the body you are mimicking has been the target of vitriol and judgment for years and even more so when you are white and much of that vitriol and judgment of the person’s body that you are mimicking has been racist.

Serena Williams’ body is not a costume for another tennis player, especially a white tennis player, to put on and use for laughs when they feel like it.

If Wozniacki had chosen instead to paint her face black in order to impersonate Williams, would we be questioning if this type of display is racist? (“Serena Williams is Not a Costume”)

Attentive to the larger body of rhetoric surrounding Williams’s muscular frame and its connection to the denigration of black bodies that pervades much sports discourse, Luther echoed Susan Birrell and Mary McDonald’s notion that “structures of dominance expressed around... the power lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality... do not work independently and thus cannot be understood in isolation from one another” (4). Luther thus rejected the supposedly exculpatory notion that Wozniacki’s actions may have been acceptable to Williams because the two women are friends: “As much as people want so desperately to divorce the imitations of Serena’s body from the long history of violence, ownership, disparagement, sexualization, and co-opting of black women’s bodies, you can’t do it. Stop trying” (“Serena Williams is Not a

Costume, Part 2”). For Luther, no incident can be isolated from the broader discourse.

Williams’s mistreatment can only exemplify systemic injustice.

Luther was also careful to note that *all* women’s tennis players must grapple with the notion that “athleticism and femininity [are] mutually exclusive despite piles of evidence to the contrary” (“Serena Williams is Not a Costume, Part 2”). In a sports media landscape that largely dismisses women as a niche audience, female athletes are often treated as sexualized objects, if they are treated at all. For a fellow women’s tennis player implicitly to endorse that mode of public perception is to do all women athletes a disservice. Reading her favorite tennis player, Serena Williams, with an eye to larger narratives and the power structures through which Williams’s public persona is mediated, Luther demonstrated that her fandom was about more than vicarious association with on-court excellence. Through Williams, Luther could champion a counternarrative breaking from the hegemonic aesthetic stereotype of the sexualized woman athlete, and advocate for a sporting future in which Williams’s narrative is never decentered.

Luther’s connection to women’s basketball superstar Brittney Griner was similarly predicated, though with regard to a separate set of stereotypes. Griner is a 6’8” center who was one of the most dominant players in college basketball history and the No. 1 pick in the 2013 WNBA draft. She was so dominant as a collegiate player, in fact, that for some she called into question the separation of genders in upper level basketball. In the most famous instance, Mark Cuban, franchise owner of the NBA’s Dallas Mavericks, asserted that he would like her to try out for his team. Naturally there were plenty of arguments against the notion that Griner should try out, both of the misogynistic type and of the sort that argued, as ESPN’s Kate Fagan put it, that “constant comparisons do little more than reinforce the notion that the women are somehow

second-class players, instead of world-class athletes in their own right” (qtd in Luther, “On Brittney Griner”).

On *Power Forward*, Luther took a different tack. Agreeing with Fagan that it is “unfair to put Griner’s accomplishments up against the men’s,” she nevertheless disagreed with the notion “that people don’t implicitly measure her against her male counterparts all the time” (“On Brittney Griner”). As for the notion that such a tryout would be demeaning “spectacle,” Luther broke the fourth wall in order to emphasize that the media itself bears responsibility for such an outcome:

This is the point where I look directly at the camera and speak to the sports journalists out there who write about these things:

clears throat

If you are in the sports media and you’re worried the sports media will handle Griner’s tryout poorly, then choose to handle it well.

If you are in the sports media and you’re worried the sports media will spotlight her sex and gender over her skill, then choose to only spotlight Griner’s skill. (“On Brittney Griner”)

Furthermore, since comparison is inevitable, Luther argued that media should “focus on... the systemic differences in how boys and girls and eventually men and women are treated across the board that leads to major differences in the level of physicality and the play of the game, differences that make a comparison between Griner and male centers in the NBA unfair” (“On Brittney Griner”). In other words, as with the Serena Williams body shaming incident, Luther argued that we cannot divorce the exceptional individual from the larger discourse—the discussion as to whether Griner should play with men should always also be a discussion about why men and women are separated in the first place, and consider the ramifications of that separation. This argument, in turn, led Luther to construct counterfactual narratives for Griner and other exceptional woman athletes:

What I like to imagine is what Brittney Griner would be like today if teams had been separated by skill level and not gender or sex. What if, regardless if you call yourself a “girl” or “boy,” you received the best coaching, the most resources, and the biggest cultural support because you were simply the best at what you do in the game you play? Would Abby Wambach be starting on the soccer field next to Landon Donovan? Would Serena Williams be plowing over Roger Federer the way she regularly does over every woman she plays? (“On Brittney Griner”)

Though Luther didn’t elaborate further on these imagined narratives, they point to another reason that Griner’s excellence, like Williams’s, fostered her fan affiliation beyond titles won or awards received. Transcendent athletes like Griner and Williams call into question the conventional notion that women athletes are second-tier competitors. By doing so they exposed the systemic inequalities that normalize or essentialize this second-tier status as based in gender physiology.

Even as she called into question gender-based stereotypes, Brittney Griner also appealed to Luther because of the way she chooses to talk about her sexuality. Asked by *Sports Illustrated* about why it was that American men’s sports had so few openly gay players when the WNBA had been welcoming LGBTQ athletes since the league’s inception in 1997, Griner said,

I really couldn’t give an answer on why that’s so different. Being one that’s out, it’s just being who you are. Again, like I said, just be who you are. Don’t worry about what other people are going to say, because they’re always going to say something, but, if you’re just true to yourself, let that shine through. Don’t hide who you really are. (qtd in Luther, “Brittney Griner: ‘Being One That’s Out’”)

Griner’s statement about tolerance and being true to her own sexual identity was rather innocuous, but it was treated as a bombshell because, to that point, Griner herself had never “come out” in a public forum. Subsequent stories on *ESPN.com* and other sites which proclaimed that she had done just that revealed their inability to understand LGBTQ identity beyond the construct of “the closet.” “The media is bad about talking about a person who is openly gay and who does not consider themselves having ever been in the closet,” wrote Luther:

This is really a symptom of the heterosexist way in which our entire society talks about people’s sexual lives: one is assumed to be heterosexual unless they choose

to indicate otherwise (an incredibly flat way to talk about sexuality). As many people have said eloquently before, because of this assumption, someone who is not heterosexual has to constantly “come out” to people throughout their life even if they, like Griner, don’t consider themselves “in.” (“The Heteronormativity”).

Nonchalantly talking about her sexuality in a public forum was not a mode of revelation for Griner because in her mind there was nothing to reveal. That the mainstream sports media could only understand it as a revelation speaks to their inadequacies, and Luther eagerly pointed them out. That said, beyond conceptual errors and few headlines, most media seemed to move on from Griner’s non-announcement announcement rather quickly.

By contrast, when NBA veteran Jason Collins chose to “come out,” the news was considered so significant that it was featured on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. Given the pervasive legacy of homophobia still present in men’s sports, this was understandable, but as Luther argued in an article for *The Atlantic* titled “The WNBA Can Teach Male Athletes About Coming Out and Being Allies,” Griner’s non-announcement is the model of sexual identification we should strive for—for the sake of athletes, media, and fans alike. Following up on *Power Forward*, Luther reacted to Collins’s announcement’s opening line—“I’m a 34-year-old NBA center. I’m black. And I’m gay.”—with the following image (“Jason Collins’s Words, Adapted”):



Griner's hand gestures function as a kind of shrug, as if to assert that a self-assured athlete should have little concern for the retrograde politics of homophobic, racist, or gender-essentializing media and fans. More than that, the image playfully communicates both Luther's affinity for Griner and the fact that the center's brilliant abilities and personality effortlessly expose systemic inequalities. Like Williams, Griner is a favorite athlete for Luther because she calls into question the established thinking and stale tropes of sports narratives just by being herself.

Though most of their work is preoccupied with how fans behave in relationship to the fortunes of their favorite team, Wann et al. do briefly recognize, in tracing the "entertainment motive," that the "enjoyment derived from sport viewing is more complex than the simple successes and failures of one's favorite team" (40). Indeed, as the writers of *FreeDarko*, *Fire Joe Morgan*, and *Power Forward* recognize, in one way or another, the enjoyment of sports fandom can lie in critically questioning and reconceptualizing the very notion of team-based affiliation. In doing so, all three sites developed devoted followers and were recognized for their originality. They demonstrated not only that a broader range of discourses can inform individual sports fans' modes of attachment to their preferred texts, but that web-based mediation of such unconventional approaches can foster the formation of alternative imagined communities.

Narrative Reconceptualization

As I've argued elsewhere in this dissertation, sporting events often seem to hide their status as narratives in plain sight. On one hand, this has something to do with the necessary open-endedness of competition as the foundational element of the narrative construct. Since no one has determined the winner and loser before any given sporting contest, the event seems "real," not story-based. On the other hand, the seeming anti-narrativity of sporting events

depends on the fact that the statistical metrics used to provide context rely on quantitative data. Databases, as Hayles puts it in a broader context in *How We Think*, often seem to be “natural enemies” of narrative, doing “battle” with stories by implicitly asserting their superiority as quantitative entities (173). Nevertheless, as Gerald Early argues in *A Level Playing Field*, “sports uniquely combine certainty (statistics and data) and uncertainty (the fact that the outcome of sporting contests can never be consistently predicted, as sports unfold live and with no preset ending) into a heroic narrative of action” (21). These seemingly oppositional forces of under- and over-determination balance each other out to create narratives that consumers around the world crave. Unlike Early, however, most of those consumers *don't recognize* what they're consuming as narratives. The reason for that, I argue, is that the “heroic narrative of action” for every single sporting event, at least as represented in popular media, is always just that: a “heroic narrative of action,” every single time. In popular parlance, this rote story is called the “recap,” and it inevitably relates the same narrative touchstones (score, statistics, attendance) and is predicated on the ultimate designation of “winners” and “losers.” The vagaries of how the participants assume these designations matter, of course, but given the competitive stakes on which athletic contests are premised, mainstream media accounts inevitably tailor their recaps to not only accommodate but emphasize the binaristic designations assigned at its conclusion. This mode of accounting for what happened in a sporting event thus relies on a specific teleology—masked by the purported objectivity of journalistic methods—and has become so ingrained in media sport representation that it is invisible to most fans. The history of a sporting event may not be literally written by the winners, but it is determined by their victory.

In contrast with this model, *FreeDarko*, *Fire Joe Morgan*, and *Power Forward* represent the dynamic critical thinking that the sports blogosphere can foster because they explicitly treat

sports as complex narratives. In different contexts and in very different ways, all three blogs recognize the narrative bases of their preferred sports and criticize the way the sports media represents those narratives as mimetic or uncomplicated. Reconceptualizing sports narratives on their own terms, the three blogs demonstrate the capacity of the sports fan—like any critical reader—to bring to a narrative as much meaning as they take from it.



The most notable and subversive manifestation of *FreeDarko*'s Liberated Fandom that technogenesis enabled came in its attention to narrative. Rather than “watch to see who wins,” as Shoals put it: “I’m going to take stock of whether the game has style.... I reserve the right to enjoy a basketball game, no matter how unimportant it may be—and dismiss them even if there’s a ton of invested value in the outcome” (“State of Fiery Heaven Address”). On the surface, this mindset could seem to de-emphasize narratives altogether, but its aesthetic priorities did not stifle them. Instead it allowed Shoals and his compatriots to account for the games that drew their interest on terms beyond competition. Rather than recount a game’s leading scorers, key competitive moments, and ramifications for a given team’s pursuit of a championship, *FreeDarko*'s authors could manifest their investment by weaving broader-reaching narratives than the results-oriented model allows. This freed them to synthesize Gilbert Arenas’s on-court abilities and his outsized off-court persona; to notice tendencies and weave narratives about the relationships between coaches and sideline reporters; to imagine counterfactuals in which players did not merely switch teams, but play without regard to traditional notions of position; to attempt to represent the aesthetic resonances between basketball and hip hop without collapsing them into to broad-based essentialisms like those that link baseball and nostalgic patriotism, for

example. As Chris Ryan put it, *FreeDarko* taught readers “to see stories and narratives everywhere, even if they were just products of [our] imagination. And it taught...that all those stories and narratives mattered; as much, if not more, than the one being told on the court” (qtd in Shoals “The Day Never Ended”). In effect, *FreeDarko*’s liberated fans imagined non- or even anti-teleological narratives, bases for fan association distinct from those documented in game recaps and mass media narratives.

FreeDarko’s reconceptualization of the NBA’s narrative structures was also rooted in an emphasis on aesthetics in determining the fan-authors’ interest. Six months into publishing the site, Bethlehem Shoals exclaimed, in all caps, “THIS IS A LEAGUE OF STYLE!” (“Free Drafto, Pt. 5”). Style, the defining criterion of what makes a player worth adopting under the terms of Liberated Fandom, connoted a transgressive aesthetics of player performance that realized *FreeDarko*’s avant-garde ideals. This could mean playing basketball at a tempo out of sync with the norm ([a la the mid-2000s Phoenix Suns](#))(“Phoenix Suns - Nash & Barbosa Fast Break”), or possessing skills not normally associated with a particular position or body type ([a la Kevin Durant](#))(“Kevin Durant Catches Fire in OKC”), or merely playing the game with unconventional joie de vivre ([a la Gilbert Arenas](#))(“Gilbert Arenas Career Mix HD”). However manifested, the aesthetic that *FreeDarko* celebrated was not style-for-style’s sake—as might be seen in a slam dunk contest—but *competitive* style, the “joyous extension of playing your ass off,” at once both “wild and determined” (Shoals, “Alone With My Notes,” “Plants Are Not Small Trees”). In effect, style not only contributes to, but in fact determines on-court excellence. It is not mere window-dressing but “the ‘how’ of substance... a means of highlighting his approach to the game, of making it explicit and feared” (Shoals, “Amphibians on Dry Land”).

Given the site's proclivity to critical analysis—born, at least in part, from the graduate school experiences of many of the contributors—*FreeDarko* wasn't content merely to proclaim and celebrate style, however. Instead the collective sought to understand its exhibition amidst a larger media narrative that praised a highly managed game of “fundamentals” and “teamwork” above the bombastic and highly individualized expression of stylish players. Shoals quickly identified player psychology as a connecting characteristic, asserting that “most of our favorite NBA stars are presumed to be people whose inner lives consist of some degree of complexity” (“A Complicated Game”). At once a recognition that basketball players are real humans whose life experiences inescapably affect who they are as players and an affirmation that complex characters make the NBA-as-narrative worth reading, the psychological aspect of style furthers that “part of *FreeDarko*'s immortal credo [which] holds that aesthetic discovery is its own kind of drama” (“Between Fists and Speckles”). In effect, the fact that those players whose playing abilities astonish the fans also seem to be the ones with compelling personalities and personal histories only confirms the necessity of Liberated Fandom—of choosing those players that command our attention, not merely those assigned to us by local allegiance or club affiliation.

The notion that style is based in hyper-individuality also led *FreeDarko* to explore the collective bureaucratic structures of basketball. Not only do the competitive imperatives and team-first constructs of organized basketball run counter to an ethos of individuality, but the professional sport's “corporate environment of control and management... [is] fundamentally at odds with freedom, not matter what we may say about style” (Shoals, “Strength For Everyone!”). This corporate structure serves traditional fandom, making players into “pawns in the team narrative” (Shoals, “The Mind's Lungless Ankle”). Such team narratives, like melodramatic literary narratives, rely on staid formulas of personal sacrifice and make performers beholden to

conventional roles. Against these tropes, a player with style, like LeBron James, “creates an airlock of suspended disbelief around everything he does” (Shoals, “Strength Begat Mind”).

Players who exhibit such “overwhelming and almost problematic idiosyncrasy” in their style affect the Liberated Fan in the vein of Rita Felski’s doubly-conscious reader—making her/him utterly enchanted, rapt with attention, and yet aware that these players always “contain contradictions” (Shoals, “All Breath in Angles,” “Our Kind of Scraping”). They force the fan-reader to recognize that, beneath their enchanting brilliance, these players construct narratives that demand critical analysis. “Basketball is not jazz,” members of the collective proclaimed on more than one occasion, but like jazz, the wordless beauty of basketball performance seemed to the authors of *FreeDarko* to contain narratives unavailable to the uncritical consumer. Himself a former music critic, Shoals credited famed music writers “Greil Marcus and Francis Davis [for teaching me] how to get inside music and pull a larger story out of it. That’s pretty much all I’ve ever tried to do with sports—do more than scratch the surface or stop at ‘sports is sports and it’s beautiful’” (E-mail Interview 10/5/14). For *FreeDarko*, the beauty of basketball was not mere facade, but an important signifier of its underlying narrative complexity.

In addition to a consideration of the interrelation between aesthetics and narrative, the idiosyncratic basketball expression of players with style led the collective to question the conventions of basketball strategy. In particular, they reconsidered positionality in basketball, asking why the game traditionally features a point guard, shooting guard, small forward, power forward, and center, each with prescribed skills and at least partially-defined body types. Players with style subverted these archetypes, leading *FreeDarko* to foment what they called “The Positional Revolution.”

Though the Positional Revolution was proclaimed as such by Bethlehem Shoals in October of 2006 in a [FreeDarko guest appearance at McSweeney's Internet Tendency](#) (“Sweet Fields of Unfastened Terrain”), the notion that basketball excellence could be crafted beyond the conventionally realized boundaries of on-court positioning had percolated on *FreeDarko.com* for months beforehand. The site celebrated “centers [that] have become play-making assist-guys in the post,... power forwards [that] have become obsessed with the three-ball, and point guards [that] have become shoot-first dynamos” (Dr. Lawyer IndianChief, “Am I My Brother’s Brother?”). Like the notion that individual players’ stylistic idiosyncrasies could determine individual fans’ investment in sports narratives, the shock to the system provided by players with skills not associated with their prescribed place on the court fit *FreeDarko*’s (and especially Bethlehem Shoals’s) revolutionary inclination. Take the example of Amare Stoudemire, who, Shoals asserted, “exists to subvert the game, to overwhelm it into accommodating him, to avoid the role of center because of the baggage that comes with technicality” (“Artestifyin’ Vol. 1”). Adopting the avant-garde’s language of “provocation, extremity, defiance...the annihilation of logic, reason and all systems” (Felski 108), Shoals saw Stoudemire’s extreme basketball abilities as annihilating the limitations imposed by the NBA narrative’s positional logic.

But as with style more generally, the positionally defiant players were not celebrated merely for tearing down the walls of convention. The fan-author known as Dr. Lawyer Indian Chief—probably *FreeDarko*’s second-most prominent poster after Shoals—quickly pointed out that, with the exception of Magic Johnson’s famous and seemingly-ancient and isolated exploits in the 1980 NBA Finals (which pre-dated the crystallization of positionality epitomized by Michael Jordan’s “despotic prototype” (Shoals, “When Citizenry Got Settled Again”)), the Positional Revolution had “yet to yield any team a championship,” that it had not been

“embraced at an organizational level,... and furthermore [asserted] that the Positional Revolution (PR) has largely been responsible for much of the league’s decline over the past few years” (“Am I My Brother’s Brother?”). Dampening Shoals’s revolutionary fire, Dr. Lawyer IndianChief effectively argued, in Felski’s words, that “conflating revolution in art with revolution in life is a peculiarly modern mistake” (109). Shoals had to agree, at least insofar as the 2006 NBA Finals “saw stale rhetoric morph into action, as a Mavericks team whose fluidity bordered on humorous squared off against the cut-and-dried Heat... The Mavs jumped out to an early lead, heralded the future of basketball, and then collapsed as the Heat asserted the tradition” (“Sweet Fields of Unfastened Terrain”). However much these Positional Revolutionaries might flaunt the characteristics of *FreeDarko*-an style and thus appeal to the Liberated Fan, their ultimate competitive success was yet to be determined.

But the idea did not die. In some sense it could not: a positional “anti-foundational” players like LeBron James and Rajon Rondo persisted in representing the “known busting apart at the seams” as they excelled and eventually won championships (Shoals, “Ask Me About the Baptist”). More than mere vindication of (most of the members of) *FreeDarko*’s aesthetic intuition, these successes also augured something odd for a narrative-oriented blog: the “Positional Revolution” became an accepted term in broader basketball discourse and analysis. In 2011, Shoals wrote that “it appears the Positional Revolution has gone mainstream, and I’ve been left behind” (“Ain’t No Use”). Analysts of all stripes—of [journalistic](#) (Cavan), [fannish](#) (Mieuli), and even those with [NBA organizational credentials](#) (“Running The Break”)—began to (and still) use the term, often (even usually) without reference to its origins on *FreeDarko*. As Shoals had predicted in 2007, the Positional Revolution’s “inflamed individual [had been] transubstantiated into a form of basketball logic” (“In The Land of Spiny Columns”). But it was

no longer avant-garde, or even radical. “Basically, [positional] categories must wither and die,” Shoals summed it up matter-of-factly, “and instead you get [on-court] heuristic groupings that vary depending on situations” (“Ain’t No Use”). If your center can distribute the ball, your need for a pass-first point guard is lessened. The stylistic resonance of that scenario may still be potent, but its competitive logic is ordinary and incorporated into the on court strategy of NBA teams.

If we think about the Positional Revolution as a kind of rebellion against canonical notions of genre, as I am wont to do as a literary-critical scholar, then its strategic incorporation into the game represents a realization of a kind of postmodernism—a fluid blurring of aesthetic forms that endorses dynamism as the truest possible mode of representation. If the liberated fan informs his sense of identity in a different way by taking an active role in reading the NBA as narrative, and stylish players can be said to provide the individual textual basis of that autobiographical association, then the realized Positional Revolution represents the formal context (or lack of firm context) in which that process of identification can come to its fullest fruition. In such an environment, the notion that the NBA is a serial narrative—one ripe for active fan reading and re-writing—is not only apparent, but eminent. In this sense, the Positional Revolution never left *FreeDarko* behind—it made basketball strategy *FreeDarko*-an such that Liberated Fandom is more potent than ever. Reconceptualizing NBA narratives both aesthetically and strategically, *FreeDarko* demonstrated that dynamic critical readings can impact sports narratives beyond the fan communities that originate and propagate them.

FIRE JOE MORGAN

.....
Where Bad Sports Journalism Came To Die

While *FreeDarko* unabashedly embraced narrative reconceptualization as a way for readers to draw new meaning from the purportedly limited corpus of outcomes and meanings

present in sporting events, *Fire Joe Morgan* was considerably more hesitant. In fact, based on their often aggressive deconstruction of journalists' narratives, it might seem as if primary posters Ken Tremendous, Junior, and dak sought to limit the range of narrative possibilities drawn from baseball games. In a 2005 fisking of Mike Lupica's column, Junior took a step back from his specific ridicule of New York's self-proclaimed "premier sports columnist" to make a larger point about sports media: "nearly every sportswriter and commentator wants to make a neat little narrative out of every single thing that happens in sports. Often these cute fables reinforce virtues like resilience, harmony, hard work, and effort. Often they're bullshit" ("More New York Stupidity"). On the surface, Junior's assertion seems anti-creative, suggesting that journalists with the wrong narrative imperatives should have their "bullshit" voices dampened. Yet in calling attention to the neatness and cuteness of the "fables," Junior effectively argues that bad sports writers allow traditional, easy narratives built on clichéd notions of "resilience, harmony, hard work, and effort" to *limit* the wider range of narratives they might construct from a given play, game, or season. The problem isn't the narratives themselves, but that they are made "neat" and "little" instead of smart and open to new ideas.

For example, to return to the specifics of Junior's critique, when Lupica claimed that the 2004 Red Sox were able to rally from a three-games-to-none playoff deficit against the Yankees because "they had been through something together [in 2003] and it made them stronger," Junior replied that "the 2004 Red Sox added an excellent starter and a lights out closer while retaining a high-scoring offense. That is why they were better than the 2003 Red Sox. Not because they had been through something together" ("More New York Stupidity"). One might argue that both things could be true—the Red Sox might have benefited in some small way from the experience of losing to the Yankees the previous year *and* from adding new personnel—but that's irrelevant

to Junior's larger point. Lupica leaned on grand notions and lazy tropes, hoping to use easily digestible rhetoric to gain the reader's trust and sympathy. The irony is that famous sports journalists such as Lupica—the kind prone to dubbing themselves “New York's premier sports columnist”—are both the writers who seem to rely on these shortcuts the most and those who consider their writing to have artistic value. As Junior put it,

Experts love writing about baseball like it's an art—something subjective to be pored over by qualified Baseball Men with the genius and experience to ponder and catalog its beautiful vicissitudes. And certainly, the game can be appreciated like poetry, music, literature, or theater. The difference is, baseball has winners and losers. Everyone marvels when Omar Vizquel makes a spectacular diving catch. But when it comes to actual value, I think the general public may have a better grasp of who's contributing to wins than the people paid to inform the general public about the game” (“Don't Forget”).

The pursuit of artistry in reading and writing sports narratives “like poetry, music, literature, or theater” can augment those narratives, Junior admitted, but it can also distort or misrepresent the competitive realities of the on field action. When Omar Vizquel—the immediate subject of the Jeff Passan article Junior critiqued—fields a baseball, it can be considered an artistic act and appreciated as such. But insofar as Vizquel's statistical effectiveness as a baseball player is measured, such aesthetics are irrelevant. And Passan, in pursuit of his own artistry, inflated Vizquel's credentials as a potential Hall of Famer by emphasizing aesthetics and ignoring his less-than-glamorous statistical record. Or, in a similar instance, when MLB.com's Tom Singer praised Ichiro Suzuki, a noted singles hitter, by asserting that “there's a good reason baseball is called a game of inches, not a game of 400 feet,” Junior sarcastically retorted, “Yes, I agree. We should allow the cliché ‘Baseball is a game of inches’ to determine what works and doesn't work in the game. It's fortunate the song ‘Take Me Out To The Ballgame’ includes the lyric ‘One, two, three strikes you're out at the old ballgame’ because if it said four, we would have to change gameplay accordingly” (“These Poor Poor Unfamous Men”).

In deriding cliché and purple prose alike, *Fire Joe Morgan*'s fan-authors functioned much like the suspicious readers of literary criticism, who read from “poses of analytical detachment, critical vigilance, [and] guarded suspicion” (Felski, *Uses of Literature* 2). Ken Tremendous even recognized himself as such, writing of one deconstruction of a Joe Morgan chat transcript that “it’s only for people who are really really into a like New Critical-style close-reading of Joe’s off-the-cuff babble” (“Apologies in Advance”). This suspicious readerly stance did serve the critical agendas of statistical advocacy and anti-technophobia that inaugurated the site. But it was always also inextricable from the creative process by which *FJM* produced its own satirical narratives. In critiquing sports narratives in the name of comedy, then, Ken Tremendous, dak, and Junior also inevitably produced them. As Katherine Hayles has argued, rather than “natural enemies,” “narrative and database are more appropriately seen as *natural symbionts*.... If narrative often dissolves into database, ... database catalyzes and indeed demands narrative’s reappearance as soon as meaning and interpretation are required” (176, emphasis original). To explain what the numbers that emerge from a spreadsheet mean, even the Sabermetricians need stories.

Fire Joe Morgan's stories took many forms. The most prevalent was the narrative that Michael Schur fashioned for his nom de plume, “Ken Tremendous.” Claiming to be a “mild-mannered Pension Fund Monitor for Fremulon Insurance, based in Partridge, KS,⁶ who copies dumb articles about baseball and adds snarky comments” (“Missed Connections”). Ken Tremendous often prefaced his “snarky comments” with details about his purported life and travels. These details gave the character a stable identity, which, in turn, allowed Schur to assume a narrative continuity for Ken Tremendous across a series of posts. This was most evident when critiquing “JoeChats,” the ESPN online fan exchanges with Joe Morgan that

Schur/Tremendous fished after the fact. Writing the chatters' questions, Morgan's posted answers, and Tremendous's commentary as dramatic dialogue, Schur was able to not only satirize Morgan's obvious rhetorical and analytical deficiencies, but also relate them to his prior answers *and* Tremendous's prior responses. The effect was one of an ongoing play spread out over many acts, in which Tremendous, the unheard gadfly, presented a kind of memoir of his time with Joe Morgan, professional baseball commentator and "idiot" ("Oh Boy").

While the JoeChat dialogues may have constituted the site's most prevalent narrative, *Fire Joe Morgan* was also chockablock with smaller, more pointed satires. Occasionally these satires would riff on canonical literature to humorous effect. Take, for example, Ken Tremendous's response to Joe Morgan's claim that "you can't compare things with statistics":

[Ken Tremendous:] My point is: you can't compare things with statistics. Think about that, people. "You can't compare things with statistics."

Exactly what, one might be tempted to ask, as one's hands were shaking so badly one would think one had just survived an assassination attempt, might one use to compare things? Metaphor? How about the infallible human memory? Or perhaps poesy?

*Much have I traveled, in realms of gold
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen
Round many Western Islands have I been,
And I have observed some stuff about some shortstops
Bill Hall did not have a monster year
Derek Jeter has a calmer set of eyes
David Eckstein is super clutch
Please don't show me statistics that disprove my observations*
(“Joe Wants to Chat,” emphasizes original)

Using John Keats's poem "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" (1816) as a sort of punch line, Tremendous makes a point about the absurdity of Joe Morgan's claim that one "can't compare things with statistics," while transposing baseball players onto a piece of literature that was itself an homage to an earlier work. No matter the reader's depth of literary knowledge,

however, the satirical humor is evident. Similar literary satire is presented in Tremendous's one-scene play: "Joe Tiresias":

Tony (Weymouth MA): With all of the injuries to the Yankees starting rotation, will Roger Clemens lean to signing with the Red Sox as the best chance to win it all one last time? Does he stay in Houston or retire?

Joe Morgan: I know Roger pretty well, but I'm not going to predict what he will do.

[Ken Tremendous:] Oh my God. Here's a play I just wrote:

(Scene: Joe is the blind Greek seer Tiresias. Oedipus approaches.)

Oedipus: Tiresias, priest of Zeus. I come to you to gain knowledge of the slaying of King Laius.

Joe Tiresias: Well, I knew Laius pretty well, but I don't want to say I know who killed him.

Oedipus: But your visions are never wrong, great seer. You see all.

Joe Tiresias: I have seen a lot of things happen, yes. I have been a seer for a long time, so don't tell me I don't know what's gonna happen in Greece.

Oedipus: *(confused)* ...I wasn't saying that. I am saying the opposite of that. I am asking you for your help in learning the identity of the slayer of King Laius.

Joe Tiresias: I knew Laius. I watched him be King for a long time. He was a great veteran King.

Oedipus: ...What?

Joe Tiresias: If you're saying that he is not as good a King as you, I wouldn't say that. You just started as King, and he did it for a lot of years. He knew how to rule.

Oedipus: ...Yikes. Okay. Listen. I want you to use your wisdom and sight and the power of the Gods to tell me who killed him.

Joe Tiresias: Well, I didn't watch him rule every day, so I don't want to comment. I don't want to say one way or the other.

Oedipus: *(Blinds self out of frustration)* ("I Don't Want to Chat With Joe," emphasizes original)

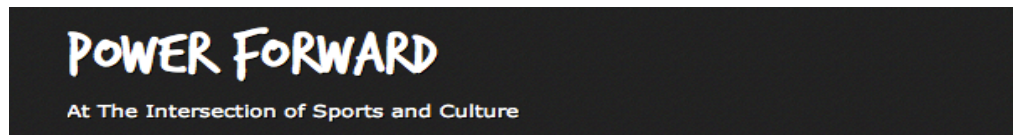
Though Tremendous's basic frustration—the fact that Joe Morgan, baseball expert, will not offer a prediction when the entire purpose of his chats is to share his expertise with interested fans—is not necessarily very funny, the literary tableau amplifies the absurdity of the situation to humorous effect. It also implicitly pokes fun at the fans' lack of insight, highlights Morgan's bifurcated professional persona as ex-player and commentator, and hints at Schur's own professional identity as a comedy writer.⁷

But most of the satirical narratives the *Fire Joe Morgan* authors created were not so self-consciously literary in their orientation. Many merely poked fun at the media's inclination to follow an established pattern in writing about certain athletes by taking that pattern to extremes. Others satirized the self-seriousness with which columnists propagated thinly-evidenced communal belief-based narratives of "curses" and "jinxes" in a bald attempt to capitalize on the fame of prior incarnations. The most prominent example of this was the so-called "curse" that supposedly afflicted the Red Sox and their fans from 1918-2004. In response to just such an example, Ken Tremendous (himself an admitted Red Sox fan) wrote that

I really don't want to be a killjoy. I like the humanistic element of baseball fandom. I often do not move from my seat if the Red Sox have a rally going. But: and this is key: I do not actually believe that my actions affect those of the players on the field. How is it possible for me to differentiate between superstition and the actual doings of men I have never met? Because—and this is my secret—I am a sentient human. ("Apologies in Advance")

Juxtaposing the "humanistic element of baseball fandom," by which he seems to mean superstitious practices, with the "sentient human" who understands that those practices do not actually affect the game in question, Tremendous ostensibly imposed a narrative hierarchy based on logic and reason. What happens on the field, as measured and represented by Sabermetric analytics, represents reality. What happens in his living room, enjoyable though it might be, is a peripheral narrative. But such a juxtaposition belies the fact that *Fire Joe Morgan* demonstrated, in its own comedic conceit, that the "humanistic element" of such peripheral narratives facilitates our attachment to the baseball action we "sentient humans" recognize as real. Baseball's on-field narratives, however metricized, aren't worth anything unless reading them has value to the readers. Journalists often do the work of translating baseball narratives quite poorly, at least in part because they don't understand how to analyze the game statistically. *Fire Joe Morgan's* reconceptualizations of those bad narratives did more than demonstrate how they might be told

using statistically-sound reasoning, however. They also showed, via the creativity of their satirical narratives, how vital the “humanistic element” could be.



Unlike the authors of *FreeDarko* and *Fire Joe Morgan*, Jessica Luther was never particularly invested in expressing her own creativity on *Power Forward*. Instead, she focused on recognizing sports narratives as such, and reconceptualizing how they might be written by a mainstream sports media less beholden to conventions that privilege the imperatives of sport’s power brokers. “Sports are ONLY narratives,” she told me, “and how we tell those stories matter” (E-mail Interview 11/13/14). That attention to narratives took on particular resonance when Luther considered the way the media treats cases of sexual assault in college football.

In the blog’s second post, titled “Predictable,” Luther considered the praise then being lavished on Penn State head coach Bill O’Brien, the man who took over in the wake of the Jerry Sandusky child sex abuse scandal. The problem with such praise, for Luther, didn’t have anything to do with O’Brien himself. Rather, she wrote that

I have a problem with the National Sportscasters and Sportswriters in the US participating in a redemption narrative for PSU so quickly after Sandusky’s crimes were publicly declared and the coverup [sic] by [then-Head Coach Joe] Paterno and PSU bigwigs was uncovered. I have a problem with our unending desire for a “redemption” narrative generally. (“Predictable”)

These redemption narratives “equate ‘success’ with ‘atonement’” such that media and fans assuage their implicit guilt about the football culture that facilitated and covered up Sandusky’s heinous crimes by celebrating it in another way (Solomon, quoted in Luther, “Predictable”).

Resigned to the notion that such a redemption narrative “has always been inevitable,” Luther

nevertheless wondered why its inexorable march so quickly and decisively stifled necessary reflexive attention to the power structures that enabled Sandusky's years of abuse:

Can't we have even a little room to criticize the machine that caused all of that? Don't people see that if we don't criticize that we are just all actively participating once more in the very circumstances that created the culture at PSU?... The redemption narrative around O'Brien and the PSU football program doesn't exist in some kind of vacuum divorced from the scandal that led to O'Brien's hiring and, I reiterate, the need for redemption in the first place. At least some people at PSU would like to move on. Sports media certainly wants to move on. How predictable. ("Predictable")

Despite demonstrating her proclivity to read sports on narrative terms and voicing her related desire that myopic fans and media look beyond the immediate crimes and/or football capacities of the individuals in front of them and interrogate the larger systems at play, Luther herself seemed ready to move on, if exasperatedly. But in 2013, as Luther began to note a burgeoning series of sexual assault cases filed against college football players that were inadequately covered by media and ignored or minimized by fans, questions closely related to those raised in her "Predictable" post kept recurring. Why was the redemption narrative so pervasive? Why were the victims of sexual assault so often erased or stigmatized? Why weren't college coaches held accountable for the rape culture pervasive in their locker rooms?

But perhaps the most troubling recurring question for Luther was: "Where is the media?" By way of example, she conducted a simple search for "rape" on *ESPN.com* and returned 762 items. "Sexual assault" yielded 775, with 314 popping up for "domestic violence." Was this a large number? "[It] seemed like a lot to me until I searched 'concussions,'" Luther wrote. "Concussions" returned 5018. "Brittney Griner" returned 1163 hits ("The Reductions of Penn State Sanctions"). Concerned by this relative lack of attention, Luther began keeping her own list tracking sexual assault cases involving NCAA athletes, with links to whatever media coverage she could find for each case. From time to time, she published updated versions of this list on

Power Forward. Certain cases, such as those involving the football teams at Vanderbilt, the U.S. Naval Academy, the University of Montana, and BYU, were chronicled in stand alone posts on her site. Though her freelancing career for sites like *Sports on Earth* and *VICE Sports* was also propelled by this research, Luther's journalistic writing style retained the dampening trappings of "objectivity." On *Power Forward*, by contrast, Luther could analyze *and* rage against the system. "I am SO CONFUSED as to why this isn't bigger news?," she wrote of the Vanderbilt case, which allegedly involved the gang rape of an unconscious victim: "If you were upset about Steubenville, why aren't you LIVID about this? Come on. COME ON" ("The Vanderbilt Rape Case"). Likewise, on *Power Forward*, Luther could exhort that:

We – all of us as a society – need to do better by rape victims. Because until we do better on teaching enthusiastic consent, making sure everyone understands what rape actually is, who normally perpetrates it, how victims often respond, etc., we will find ourselves right back here again. Probably sooner and more often than we really want to admit. ("Going Into the Jameis Winston Press Conference")

And she could remind again that athletes benefit "from our society's often devastating desire to see redemption in almost every sports story, its endless need to focus attention and praise on such stories, no matter at whose expense that narrative comes" ("On Bill O'Brien"). For, at its base, the problem is one of narrative: "we are supposed to see athletes as the protagonists in their own story" ("How You Talk About Domestic Violence"). Media and fans alike find it all too difficult to recontextualize the stars of on-field hero narratives on the basis off-field actions, no matter how unacceptable the latter may be.

Luther could relate to this difficulty herself when it came to the rape allegations levied against Florida State quarterback and 2013 Heisman Trophy winner Jameis Winston. In an article for *Sports on Earth* titled "The Hazy Middle," Luther provided a first-person narrative of her lifelong affinity for Florida State football. She was, she wrote,

born with garnet and gold blood. Both of my parents graduated from Florida State. Growing up, I spent Saturday afternoons in the autumn watching FSU football, either sitting next to my dad in front of a TV or in the stands of Doak Campbell Stadium. When it came time for me to go to college, I only applied to one school. And during the four years I was at Florida State, I went to every home game, sweating in the blistering heat of an early season 11 a.m. start or freezing cold during mid-November rivalry games against Florida. One summer, as an orientation leader, it was my distinct honor to teach the incoming class the words to the fight song. (“The Hazy Middle”)

So ingrained in Florida State’s football culture, Luther describes looking past previous (non-assault related) scandals embroiling Seminole players, and eagerly rooting on Winston when he joined the team in 2012: “I was a fan.” But when “news broke in November [2013] that Winston had allegedly committed a sexual assault in December 2012,” her view changed (“The Hazy Middle”). Suddenly Luther—like football fans at Vanderbilt, Penn State, and all the programs on her list—had to reconcile her feelings about her favorite football team to her feelings about sexual violence and systemic inequality. “I do not know what to think,” Luther admitted after reading Florida state attorney Willy Meggs’s report about his decision not to charge Winston:

Of course, there are people who will yell at me for being ambivalent or for questioning the outcome... There will be calls of “innocent before proven guilty.” To them, I say this: only 10 percent of rapists are charged, only eight percent go to trial and only three percent to jail. If we are waiting for the judicial system to definitively say a rape occurred, the odds are extremely low that it will ever happen. It almost never happens.

I am not a person who can operate in some neutral space where I put aside the many women in my life who have been assaulted, plenty of them failed by the police who should be protecting them, and many whose communities did not believe them....

There will be people who think I should, somehow, be able to turn off my brain or compartmentalize my knowledge. I simply cannot, though a part of me wishes I could watch the game detached from all of this. The FSU fan in me is desperate to feel the high of cheering on my team as it fights to be national champions. I think back to my 1999-2000 self, a student who paid little attention to the details of off-field problems and focused on the play on the field. Ignorance, as they say, is bliss.

I bleed garnet and gold, but that blood now flows into a brain that is no longer ignorant nor blissful. And all of it together makes my heart hurt. (“The Hazy Middle”)

Grappling with this poisonous complication to her own football hero narrative, Luther was left without easy answers. Inclined as she was to believe the alleged victim, she declared that “we will never know what happened. There is no way to ever know. The sad part is that because we do such a piss-poor job actually teaching what enthusiastic consent is in our society – especially to boys, Winston may truly believe he did not rape her while she truly believes that he did” (“Going Into the Jameis Winston Press Conference”). And regardless of Winston’s guilt or innocence, Luther was cognizant of the fact that, when it comes to athletes accused of sexual assault, “black men are overrepresented” and that Americans “have such a long, messed up, racialized way in which we talk and think about crime, especially that of sexual assault” (“About UT Football”). A case like Winston’s was, for Luther, “the hazy middle... solid gray with no hope of ever becoming clearly black and white” (“The Hazy Middle”).

One of the main reasons the sports media under-examines sexual assault, it would seem, has to do with this haziness: sexual assault narratives are difficult to pin down. Unlike traditional sports narratives, which quantify actions and use the final score to reduce the end result to a binary outcome, these contentious human stories are fraught with uncertainty, unreliability, and inconvenient truths. Nobody wins. Luther, to her credit, pursued them despite their disconcerting narrative incoherence, first on *Power Forward* and then in her forthcoming book project. In doing so, as in writing about Serena Williams and Brittney Griner, Luther argued that media and fans alike should look beyond the particulars of the incidents and think systemically:

It is hard to imagine a sports media that does not always focus on the athlete. But it is an intriguing idea, a goal to work towards perhaps. Because, in the end, de-centering the athlete is not only more fair to alleged victims, it is more fair to the players, as it draws attention away from the individual and instead forces us to interrogate the system itself. (“Who We Talk About”)

In other words, to really get at the root of what is going on in sexual assault cases in college football, we need to examine the broader hyper-masculine, misogynist atmosphere that pervades football culture, and indeed much of the larger sports landscape, college and professional. We need to remove ourselves as readers from the “heroic narrative of action,” at least for a while, and consider the human costs of producing those narratives (Early 21). For Luther, then, reconceptualizing sports narratives means not only reconsidering how we draw stories from the on-field action, but also reexamining who those stories affect and who they serve.

Though narrative structures are endemic to sports, on the rare occasions that they are recognized as such in sports media they are usually presented as forced ascriptions of fiction or bias. Rather than representing the truth or reality of a situation, these artificial “narratives” are said to propagate vendettas or appeal to lowest common denominators in pursuit of readers or ratings. Addressing [recent arguments in this vein](#) by sports journalists (Lowe, Daniels), literary critic and basketball philosopher Yago Colás affirmed that

there is no such thing as a narrative free zone where truth lives.... What we need in order to overpower the influence of *bad* narratives (which is to say, narratives that advance descriptions of reality we find impractical or, worse, contrary to our practical purposes in the world) is ***more and better narratives*** (not appeals to some illusion of “reality” or “facts” or “truth” we imagine we may access free of the irritation of noisy narrative interference). And we need these better narratives, whether they be grounded in science, statistics, philosophy, emotion, intuition, imagination or aesthetics. (“For More, And Better, Sports Narratives,” emphases in original)

For their part, the authors of *FreeDarko*, *Fire Joe Morgan*, and *Power Forward* provide those more and better narratives (and collectively cover all of the areas of knowledge production floated by Colás). In doing so, they affirm the capacity of fans not merely to read from, but to write onto the metatextual corpus of sport in a manner that can benefit athletes, journalists, and fellow fans alike. Furthermore, in doing so successfully online, they demonstrate the web’s

capacity to provide a platform for such narrative innovations, to legitimize them and extend their range such that their metatextual work gains recognition and influence.

Identity Politics

The individual fan's search for an identity mediated by sports narratives is an even more complicated endeavor in a digital landscape. In "From National Hero to Liquid Star: Identity and Discourse in Transnational Sports Consumption," Cornel Sandvoss asserts that "the relative number of identity and political discourses surrounding a particular athlete has increased, whereas their intersubjective signification value both within such discourses and processes of social structuration has decreased" (178). Thus, where star athletes were once thought represent singular, easily-identifiable themes like "the founding myth of the nation" to broad fan communities, "contemporary athletes have largely ceased to denote any such specific discourses and, hence, incorporate potentially any number of discourses and forms of individual appropriation in self-reflective reading formations" (178). Though it seems to me that Sandvoss mischaracterizes pre-internet sports fan signification as monolithic, his assertion does reflect the fact that more diverse modes of reflexive meaning-making and self-articulation are evident post-Web-2.0, simply because they are so easily communicated. The attendant notion that the "intersubjective signification value" of these "identity and political discourses" is lessened is more problematic to me, however, because it equates volume with importance (178). The voice of the monolith—whether it is real or merely represented as such by mainstream media—should never be heard alone. One of the primary strengths of the open-access nature of the blogosphere is that it provides a platform for "identity and political discourses" that would otherwise be ignored or marginalized.

For their part, *FreeDarko*, *Fire Joe Morgan*, and *Power Forward* each recognized, in one way or another, the significance and interconnectedness of “identity and political discourses” in reading sports narratives. This attention to identity politics meant examining the larger power structures in which fans operate, as well as the related extent to which demographics inform their privilege as fans. With the exception of *FreeDarko*’s “Brown Recluse Esq.” and *Fire Joe Morgan*’s “Junior,” who are Asian American, all of the major contributors to the three blogs are white. Only Jessica Luther, sole author of *Power Forward*, is a woman. None of the fan-authors openly identified as anything other than heterosexual. The ramifications of the privilege reflected in those demographic details were not lost on the authors, especially because many of the athletes they rooted for were of different races, genders, or sexualities. Like the fan-authors of the basketball memoirs I examined in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, the authors of *FreeDarko*, *Fire Joe Morgan*, and *Power Forward* grappled with the social stratifications that structure spectator sports and American society at large. Unlike those memoirists, however, the bloggers were able to articulate anti-racist and anti-misogynistic possibilities so that demographic differences between fans and players need not be said to define their relationship. They demonstrated that athletes and their sporting exploits are narrative entities whose reception and appropriation by fans need not reproduce social inequalities.



As a self-proclaimed “hip-hop-reared blog” that was informed by the cultural expressions of African Americans both on and off the basketball court, *FreeDarko* was attuned to matters of race and racial difference from the start (Shoals, “Come Back Strong”). And though Bethlehem Shoals proclaimed that he did not purposefully “racialize style,” it was notable that almost all of

the players said to exhibit “style” were African American (“Call it Pyrite”). Since the vast majority of the players in the NBA are African Americans, one might be tempted to attribute this tendency to probability. But the *FreeDarko* collective itself did not accept this explanation, and, as a general rule, the site never shied away from talking about race. Instead, *FreeDarko* recognized the “Style vs. Fundamentals debate [as] the long-form narrative of race and basketball in America” (Shoals, “Snack of Fair Demons”). Players praised by media for their fundamentals, said to play “within the system” or with particular intelligence, are almost always white. Meanwhile, players with *FreeDarko*’s notion of style—who transcended or undermined the terms of such systematic forms of basketball with “shocks” or “sudden leaps” of transformative ability—were almost always African American (Shoals, “Safe to Say”). Were they able to perform in this way because of their race? *FreeDarko* rejected any simplistic notion of causation, but recognized, via William C. Rhoden’s taxonomy of “black athletic style” in *Forty Million Dollar Slaves* (2006), that the difficulties facing African American men in this country could—in highly individualized ways—affect the on-court manifestation of their basketball abilities. Each player’s style “is a function of his personality,” Shoals wrote, and “there exists a similar bond between personality and biography” (“My Interview with Nets Rookie Anthony Randolph”). Beating incredible odds not merely by becoming professional athletes but also by navigating an American social landscape structured with bias against them, black players often have dramatic life stories. Since style is an exercise in “personalized basketball storytelling” (Shoals, “The Mind’s Lungless Ankle”), it would follow that, at least to some degree, their on-court stories would be similarly dynamic.

Still, the primary authors of *FreeDarko* were careful to recognize the limitations of their ability to speak on matters of racial inequality. As Shoals wrote,

We at *FreeDarko* are not exactly in a position to speak authoritatively about race in the NBA. Some of us are pretty dark, several of us could get away with claiming non-white when we take standardized tests, and (here it comes) I can always mouth “Holocaust” if you want to call me out on my people’s place in the big book of discrimination. But on the real, I’m not black, none of our contributors are, and I’d just as soon defer to African-Americans in the league when it comes to deciding what they think might stink of Grand Wizardry. (“Just Remember Who Said It”)

Despite this assertion, Shoals and Co. couldn’t ultimately leave the conversation about race to African American players themselves. In the NBA’s “war between corporate interests and African-American aesthetics” (“Amare Who?”), the players are implicitly, if not explicitly, discouraged from speaking out. And in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the inequalities it laid bare, and the NBA players’ response to it, the authors of *FreeDarko* had to admit, as Brown Recluse, Esq. put it, that “race is never too far from our minds and hearts” (“Happy Birthday To Us”). In addition to the site’s consideration of Katrina, race “also provided a lens through which we’ve viewed such [NBA] topics as the age limit and the new dress code” (“Happy Birthday To Us”). Occasionally carried out in standalone posts that bore the titular prefix “Racial Semiotics,” the work of discussing race was taken seriously even as it was constantly incorporated into the discussions surrounding *FreeDarko*-an conceptual innovations like the Positional Revolution. “No sport more accurately represents the contemporary question of race in America than this treasured diversion of ours,” Shoals asserted, adding that “the NBA offers no easy answers, no fixed categories, and no clear sense of direction. I’m not here to insult anyone’s intelligence, but this ambiguity, coupled with the haunting possibility of socio-cultural landmines, pretty much mirrors American attitudes on race” (“The Crown Is Dead”).

Whether discussing the discriminatory business practices of Donald Sterling, the racist connotations of the word “thug” as they pertained to polarizing players like Allen Iverson and Ron Artest, or the meaning of Jeremy Lin, *FreeDarko* continually asserted that just having the

conversation was important, because, as Shoals wrote, “fans are not particularly inclined to rock the boat these days, since most sports fans are aware of athletes, not socio-culturally constituted public figures. When things are going well, no one wants to talk about race, especially if it can be kept out of the basketball conversation entirely” (“The Unfortunate Moss”). But considerations of race and the NBA should also affect more than just the basketball conversation, contributor ForeverBurns argued: “Black cultural norms and white fear of them sorely needs intelligent discussion in this country and... the NBA provides a forum large enough for everyone to hear it” (“Harvest Moon”). Rather than merely a mode of escape or distraction, basketball’s popular position as an entertainment product makes it an even more potent forum for racial considerations.

Even so, Shoals was careful to point out that while the NBA, its players, and fans reflect many American racial issues, they do not usually affect the larger politics of race in this country. Contrary to the Jackie Robinson-mediated notion that sports is a kind of forerunning influence on social justice, as Shoals puts it, “sports can have political undertones and associations, but rarely lead the way” (“Look Down That Lonesome Road”). When fans closely read the NBA narrative, in other words, they can see racial misunderstanding and implicit bias everywhere in it. As with any text, those readings matter, and sharing them in pursuit of a more inclusive, informed, racially aware culture is important. That does not mean that the players can be expected to advance the politics fans prefer, or even express any politics. Fans can mythologize and celebrate players, but they must always remember that they are people, too: much as the league, teams, or corporate sponsors might attempt to influence them, the players author themselves. “You can read the world onto the NBA,” Shoals wrote, “but you can’t read the NBA back onto the world” (“FreeDarko Book Club #2”).

Politically aware as they were, the authors of *FreeDarko* were nevertheless made to wonder if being any kind of fan of the NBA could have pernicious effects for African Americans. These worries came to a head when Shoals—then a graduate student at the University of Texas—was tasked with reading the work of John Hoberman, a professor at UT and author of *Darwin's Athletes* (1996). As Shoals quite aptly summarized it, in *Darwin's Athletes*, Hoberman's

basic argument... goes like this: mythologizing sports leads to a gross over-estimation of their societal worth, and ignores the pernicious effect they have had on the black community. Kids want to be athletes, who ultimately are not that special or interesting and are stuck in a white-controlled business venture. Few of them will get to become one of the pros they emulate, so they'll have effectively forfeited their future. Compounding the problem are black intellectuals, who see sports as a meaningful cultural contribution. Comparing sports to jazz is an example of this. Seeing sports as a meaningful vanguard of racial harmony is another; this is also a tactic employed by white liberals who like their politics anthemic. ("*FreeDarko* Book Club #2")

Reading *Darwin's Athletes* effectively threatened *FreeDarko* by calling into question the site's social responsibility: the practice of amplifying and analyzing NBA narratives about black athletes, Hoberman's book argues, is damaging to regular, non-professional-athlete African Americans. Shoals countered by reaffirming the utility of reflexive, racially-aware conversation in and of itself: "our political usefulness comes in our insistence that, through the NBA, we can be compelled to frankly discuss race," he wrote, adding that "there are forms of myth-making that can serve a political purpose without offering a false hope or loopy directive" ("*FreeDarko* Book Club #2").⁸ In many ways, Shoals's defense of basketball fandom resonates with Italo Calvino's notion that reading literature makes us "aware of the disease of our hidden motives," and as such provides a "way of starting to invent a new way of being" (100). If communal discourse on race like *FreeDarko's* can help the NBA's fan-readers do the same, then it can affect political change on an individual basis. Insofar as *FreeDarko* had the capacity to make

readers such as Will Leitch “realize the power of caring this much, of thinking this hard, and investing this much” (qtd in Shoals, “The Day Never Ended”), it could help them recognize that while Allen Iverson might not be “poor, or discriminated against in any spine-sharding way, . . . what we see, and the way its dealt with by media and the fans, is certainly an effective metaphor for situation he would face if he didn’t ball” (“*FreeDarko* Book Club #2”).

That said, what the readers bring to such an exercise matters as much as what the NBA text itself represents: for those seeking purportedly “post-racial” entertainment, the NBA as a commercial entity is more than happy to oblige. As David Leonard puts it in *After Artest* (2012), “the NBA and its marketing partners have long de-emphasized the blackness of the NBA baller . . . which they have considered key to [the league’s] success” (10). When it came to “Racial Semiotics,” as with many things *FreeDarko*, one thus had to choose to “define [oneself] against ‘the basketball industry’” to recognize those politically-useful forms of mythmaking (“On The Eve of Pricey Incursion”). The site’s self-consciously “liberated” brand of fan identity and its racially-aware politics were inextricable.

FIRE JOE MORGAN

Where Bad Sports Journalism Came To Die

Compared to *FreeDarko*, *Fire Joe Morgan*’s consideration of race seemed less urgent and existentially determining. This was the natural result of the fact that player demographics were invisible to the statistical metrics they championed. But the journalists that *Fire Joe Morgan* lampooned were certainly not free from bias, however, and one particular storyline—or set of descriptors, really—seemed based in something more insidious than mere hewing to rhetorical formulas or cutting narrative corners. These descriptors, of the “throwback” “lunchpail” player who played with particular “grit,” “hustle,” or “scrappiness,” were frequently used by writers and commentators operating in a nostalgic mode. The *Fire Joe Morgan* crew

naturally balked, as these designations are basically impossible to quantify. But they also objected for another reason: in assessing the notion that particular players could represent some historically-determined measure of effort, the writers of *Fire Joe Morgan* noticed that the players described in this way were almost always white. “No minority players [are] ever called ‘throwbacks’ or praised for their ‘grit’ and ‘hustle’ and ‘old-school’-ness,” wrote Ken Tremendous; “It is one of the oddest things. No Dominican players, no Afro-Am players, not even the odd Curacaoian” (“Someday You, Too”). It was as if baseball writers, in asserting that extra effort was somehow exclusively evocative of a romanticized pseudo-history, could not see beyond the color line imposed by Major League Baseball from the 1880s until 1947, ignored or disregarded the Negro Leagues, *and* were incapable of making interracial comparisons between modern MLB players of color and their white forbears from baseball’s “Golden Age.” In the writings of baseball journalists, it seemed, the virtues of “hustle” were still segregated.

Anaheim Angels/Chicago White Sox first baseman Darin Erstad was an early flashpoint for *Fire Joe Morgan*’s consideration of this rhetoric. Erstad, who is white, was often praised in the media despite his less than stellar statistical record. This nostalgic praise was couched in “scrappy” language and almost always seemed to reference his experience as a college football player. Noting in 2006 that the “selfless” “gamer” Erstad’s statistics were some of the worst among regulars in baseball, Junior wondered

If he’s a different guy in a different city, perhaps a different skin color, how reviled does Darin Erstad become? Doesn’t he essentially become a bum who got a fat contract and starts phoning it in? Instead, we get another article praising his intangibles to the high heavens. Memo to aspiring young baseball players: learn to punt a football. You’ll be bulletproof to the media for the rest of your life. (“Five Players You Don’t Want”)

As Junior pointed out, even if football experience should be a mark of toughness and self-sacrifice, and it shouldn’t, Erstad was a punter—a position that rarely incurs the supposedly

character-building violence of the game. Even so, descriptions of Erstad’s baseball abilities were tinged by a rose-colored notion of white masculine valor based in football-bred “toughness.”

Yet the paragon of “the scrappiness racism that pervades baseball commentary” as delineated by *Fire Joe Morgan* wasn’t “tough” in the physically-imposing sense suggested by the violence of football (Murbles, “As a GM”). Rather it was the 5’7”, 175lb shortstop of the 2006 St. Louis Cardinals, David Eckstein. Eckstein was a journeyman known for his bunting ability whose performance in the 2006 postseason helped St. Louis make an improbable run to the World Series title (for which he was named the Series’ Most Valuable Player). The media covering the playoffs fell in love with the diminutive player, smothering him with praise that, as *Fire Joe Morgan*’s crew was quick to point out, was disproportionate to his impact.

Occasionally, *Fire Joe Morgan* highlighted the flawed strategic thinking inherent in this praise, like that of a *New York Times* article which asserted that “although St. Louis is still best known for Albert Pujols’s 450-foot home runs, Eckstein’s 10-foot bunts can be just as productive” (Tremendous, “Has Anyone Heard”). More often, however, they focused on mocking the rhetoric of “scrappiness,” as Junior did in fisking *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*:

[Post-Dispatch:] Never one to shy from taking the extra base - in fact, it’s in the DNA of his grit - Cardinals shortstop David Eckstein did something unusual in the ninth inning as he rounded second base. He stopped.

[Junior:] Now we know: David Eckstein’s grit can reproduce. Look for David’s awkwardly titled autobiography, *The DNA of My Grit*, ghostwritten by Buzz Bissinger and printed with ink produced from David’s own blood, sweat, and tears. (“Lede-Writing School)

Highlighting the incongruity between the scientific precision of “DNA” and the nostalgic gauziness of a player’s “grit,” Junior satirically amplified this tension by connecting the language of scrappiness—“blood, sweat, and tears”—to that of the reproduction of sports writing itself. The nonsensical notion that bodily fluids could be used as ink is no more ridiculous, Junior

suggested, than the notion that Eckstein is genetically predisposed to play harder. What's more, such a notion of "grit" as a biologically-determined inclination to hard work, contextualized by its almost exclusive application to undersized white players like Eckstein, is effectively a linguistic assertion of baseball-based white supremacy.

Though they did not usually connect his "hustle" to his genes, many similar articles used effusive, racially-coded language in praising Eckstein despite his apparent physical limitations and lackluster statistics. By the end of the 2006 season, the *Fire Joe Morgan* crew had come across so many such articles that they began forgoing thorough fiskings. Instead, they merely linked to each article and provided a list of its most objectionable descriptors. Concerned that they not be perceived as "haters," the *Fire Joe Morgan* authors reminded readers that their jokes at Eckstein's expense were not ad hominem: "we...do not hate David Eckstein. What we hate is bad sports journalism.... Apparently, nothing brings out the cliché machines faster than a small man who plays sports" (Tremendous, "Eckstein Round Up"). But they also could not entirely limit their criticism of the "scrappiness racism" that surrounded Eckstein to the media members propagating it (Murbles, "As a GM"). Major League Baseball and its fans also eagerly endorsed the notion that Eckstein incarnated a vintage, racially-coded bootstraps ethos that would suggest that effort conquers all. To wit, Eckstein easily won the 2006 Holiday Inn "Look Again Player of the Year" award. Junior fished the award description by providing his "translation" of its verbiage:

Behind every great team on the diamond, lurking in the shadow of baseball superstars, live the role players who sacrifice for their team in often unrecognized effort. Which of these role players' best deserves recognition for their contributions as the Holiday Inn Look Again Player of the Year?...

Behind all the great colored and Latino or whatever the fuck players who are actually good at baseball, in the deep dark shadow-realm of guys who only make \$3 to 8 million dollars a year, live the role players whose jobs are so torturous and awful that other grown humans pay to see them and applaud when they walk into

their offices. White, tiny, albino, and white, these Ecksteins, proto-Ecksteins, and mega-Ecksteins need more love from crappy budget-priced motel chains and you, the paying fan. Which of these Ecksteins is the Eckiest? The answer: David Eckstein. (“The David Eckstein Memorial”)

Consequently listing “David Eckstein’s name and the names of the guys who will lose to David Eckstein,” Junior sarcastically asked about the list of 30 names: “Notice anything? Yep, two non-whiteys. White people: role players who are always sacrificing for the glory of the non-whites (“The David Eckstein Memorial”). Pointing out the overwhelming whiteness of role players eligible for the award, Junior satirically framed this disproportion on the terms of reverse racism, whereby white people suppose that minorities have an advantage over them because of compensation for past disadvantage. In such a rhetorical economy of false self-victimization, the notion that “gritty” players like Eckstein are popular because they “are always sacrificing for the glory of the non-whites” makes sense. His timely performance amplified by the postseason spotlight, Eckstein had become the preeminent icon of “scrappiness,” but the racial connotations of who is or is not a “role player” were extended league-wide and, in this case, reified by fan voting. In challenging the language of “hustle” and “grit” and pointing out its unbearable whiteness, then, the ramifications of *Fire Joe Morgan’s* close reading in the name of comedy reached well beyond David Eckstein, Darin Erstad, and the individual propagators of “Bad Sports Journalism.” It addressed the legacies of U.S. racism, the related danger of nostalgia, and their influence on the very language with which “America’s Pastime” was considered in the broadest discourse. Though *Fire Joe Morgan’s* consideration of race was certainly less reflexive than *FreeDarko’s*, the *FJM* authors effectively recognized the eminently quotidian nature of systemic inequality, and pointed out that something as simple as close reading could be used to expose it.

POWER FORWARD

At The Intersection of Sports and Culture

Where *FreeDarko* and *Fire Joe Morgan* primarily attended to matters of race and fandom, *Power Forward's* politics were usually oriented to issues of gender inequity. In particular, given Jessica Luther's primary understanding that sports are narratives and that "how we tell those stories matter," her focus on gender inequity often considered the many ways in which sports media narratives disregarded women fans such as herself (E-mail Interview 11/13/14). For example, "during the Olympics," Luther wrote of the 2012 Summer Games, "we get to watch all sorts of women play all sorts of sports. That is no small deal" ("The Double-Edged Sword"). Unlike much of the rest of the modern American sportscape, in which "men are the assumed participants unless otherwise specified," at the Olympics "'men's' is not the default" ("The Double-Edged Sword"). These women's events get roughly equivalent billing, and ratings to match: a circumstance unequalled in other spectator sports contexts. Why? Because, as Luther put it, "the Olympics is an event predicated on nationalism, a manufactured collective 'us'" ("The Double-Edged Sword"). So long as the women's competitors wear flags on their uniforms, they are placed under the "metaphorical umbrella" of national collective identity ("The Double-Edged Sword"). Jingoism, in this case, serves to draw women athletes into the sphere of interest and relevance to millions of sports consumers who would normally ignore or stigmatize them.

Even under the "metaphorical umbrella," however, these women athletes are covered by the same sports media that is largely inconsiderate to them in other contexts. Documenting numerous instances of this insensitivity in coverage surrounding the 2012 games, Luther demonstrated that the enhanced coverage of women's Olympic athletes was a "double-edged

sword” both “awesome and... maddening” (“The Double-Edged Sword”). Between Olympics, however, the sword predominantly cuts the maddening way, and Luther frequently took it upon herself to criticize the “Dudebro Sports Media” for its gender bias and essentialism (“DudeBro Sports Media”). “It’s not simply that misogyny exists,” Luther wrote, “it’s that it is specifically hellish within sports culture and the media plays a significant role in that” (“On Brittney Griner”).

How is this sports media misogyny manifested, beyond the mere fact of the relative lack of coverage for women’s sports? In seemingly ordinary conversations like the one in which *ESPN* “SportsCenter” anchor John Anderson analogized “Wes Welker going from catching footballs from Tom Brady to catching footballs from Peyton Manning as ‘sort of like Leo DiCaprio trading a Victoria Secret model for a Sports Illustrated model’” (“Catching Footballs”). To many—maybe even most—heterosexual men accustomed to their hegemony in American sports culture, the notion that, as the title of Luther’s post put it, “Catching Footballs Is Just Like Trading Women” may seem utterly unremarkable. But for Luther, “as a woman and a huge sports fan and spectator, [it is representative of the way in which] the sports media is ALWAYS there to remind me with casual, everyday sexism, that I am NOT the intended audience for their programs and their clever quips” (“Catching Footballs”). Like the inclusion of cheerleaders on football sidelines, such “everyday sexism” normalizes the notion that women are “images/accessories” and drives away many women from potential interest in spectator sports (“Why Ladies Nights”).

This kind of quotidian objectification thus also buttresses the

popular cultural narrative that women, as a group, don’t really like sports or are ignorant of how sports are played [which itself could be thought of as] a self-fulfilling prophecy: girls aren’t taught about sports or encouraged to enjoy them because people assume that the girls don’t want to know. But we live in a post-

Title IX world. [To quote BuzzFeed and *VICE* Sports writer] Lindsey Adler... 'We are not rare.'" ("Charlie Strong's UT Women's Football Camp").

The statistics cited by Adler and others about sports consumption back this up: despite the pervasive misogyny around them, [one in three self-identifying sports fans is a woman](#) and [leagues like the NFL largely have women to thank for recent expansions in their consumer base](#) ("Year in the Sports Media Report," Chemi). Luther noted, however, that rather than adopting more inclusive discourse, the major sports leagues have largely responded to the expanded role of women sports fans by sectioning them off as a "special" interest. Hosting "Ladies Nights" and marketing pink merchandise on and off the field, the sports industry communicates that "for one night/month we will focus on women and include them in our club" and implicitly denies the fact that "women are in the club all the time, they just aren't acknowledged as such. I just wish (and wish and wish and wish) that we could start from a place where men and women are both seen as normal fans of the sport. If pink = women, what do the other colors mean the rest of the time?" ("About the Oregon Ducks' Pink Uniforms"). Asserting that all sports narratives are for all women all of the time, Luther rebuked the implicit gender segregation of sports fans by sports leagues. But this is not merely a matter to be handled by the teams and their marketing departments: Luther imagined and demanded a gender equitable sports media to match, and she aspired to make herself a part of it.

Since "sports media sucks for women" ("Weeping for Sports Media"), Luther embraced the notion on *Power Forward* and in her freelance work that she is a member of the "rebel media." She aimed, as she put it, to "operate outside of the standard journalistic structures that often demand that people not offend people by talking about the problems they see" ("On Brittney Griner"). Uncompromised by the commercial partnerships of an entity like *ESPN*,

Luther was able to set her own freelance agenda. Even as a free agent, however, Luther noted that she has had to ask herself whether the price of tolerating misogyny was worth publication:

I've written at sports sites that have their own section just to show off boobs. And publishing in those spaces always leads to me questioning what I am doing: "Do I publish at the sports place that has the boobs stuff and get my stuff at least near to that? Or do I avoid it all together because the very rape culture I'm trying to discuss is just being propped up right over there next to my words?" I feel constantly pulled between these two questions and angry that these are questions I even have to ask.... Sure sex sells. And sports media makes bank off that... But this is the sports media you want to be a part of? This is the sports media you are happy to do? Objectifying women for some fucking clicks on your SUPPOSED SPORTS SITE? ("Weeping for Sports Media")

Publishing work about rape culture in sports next to pictures of minimally-attired women may further her professional goals, but the price of having the journalistic medium undermine her message led Luther to question a system that would require such a sacrifice. Envisioning and demanding a sports media landscape that not only transmits but affirms feminist politics, Luther reaffirmed her role as a woman, fan, and writer unwilling to compromise any single aspect of her identity to accommodate another. As she told *The Feminist Wire*, "I am a feminist sports fan. I am a feminist anything. That's a hat I can't take off." As such, it is her mission to continually remind: "I am here! Women are here!" (Leonard "Feminists We Love").

On one hand, Luther's fan critique of gender and sports media is distinct from *FreeDarko* and *Fire Joe Morgan*'s considerations of race because, as a woman, she is a member of the disadvantaged group whose status she interrogates. The white male heterosexism inherent in most sports media narratives affects her directly, not just the athletes she follows. On the other hand, given her professional identity as a journalist, Luther has put herself in a position to work within that media to affect change. Regardless of any additional influence her professional status may afford her, however, the fact that Luther was able to gain such professional status by asserting the inherent politics of her fan identity on *Power Forward* speaks to the additional

agency afforded fans by web-mediated expression. “Women are here” indeed, and blogs like *Power Forward* allow such women to assert their presence, and their politics, to a much broader audience of fellow fans, male and female.

Expanding on his notion that the multivarious discursive framing of athletes has diversified to the point of signifiatory incoherence, Cornel Sandvoss concludes that contemporary athletes have become “constantly adaptable spaces of discourse that correspond with changing sociocultural conditions as well as agency within them” (179). For the German sociologist, the athletes’ status as “flexible vessel[s] of identity” for fans renders a “diminishing role [for such] athletes as authors of their public persona” (179, 182). But such assertions effectively represent for sports narratives what literary critics call “the intentional fallacy.” Sports stars partially author the narratives in which they participate, but they do not determine their meaning in that narrative’s interpretation. That has always been the fan-readers’ role, and such fan-readers have always done so in diverse and politically distinct ways. The difference is that earlier incarnations of sporting mass media did not effectively communicate the wide range of those interpretations to, or among, distinct social groupings of fans. Furthermore, *FreeDarko*, *Fire Joe Morgan*, and *Power Forward* counter Sandvoss’s notion that an increasing number of discourses of fan signification is to the athletes’ detriment. These blogs demonstrate the reflexive capacities of fans to consider identity politics as a determining influence on their modes of interpreting sports narratives, and therein, on their consideration of athletes. While such self-aware considerations of how fan consumption affects the mediation of athletes may represent the exception, rather than the rule, their very presence shows the importance of the blogosphere in allowing fans to communicate nuanced interpretations beyond the “singular, easily-identifiable themes” ascribed to athletes by mass media (Sandvoss 178).

Conclusion

In a larger sense, what *FreeDarko*, *Fire Joe Morgan*, and *Power Forward* did—in rethinking sports fan attachment, reconceptualizing the structures and emphases of sports’ narrativity, and reexamining the stakes of sports’ identity politics—was emphasize and extend the intertextual potential of sports narratives. Far from marginal, sports narratives can powerfully inform and influence the way fans make sense of the world, and to pretend they are isolated from our larger concerns about politics, aesthetics, and culture—as some fans and media are wont to do—is reductive and dishonest. But intertextuality is not an innovation of the internet era. It is “not new,” asserted Patrick O’Donnell and Robert Con Davis in their 1989 compendium *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*. Rather, intertextuality “is the oldest troping we know, the most ancient textual (con)figuration” (xiii). As post-structuralist literary critics recognized, texts are always relational—all writing, at least implicitly, references other texts. Seen in this light, hyperlinks, images, and embedded YouTube videos should not strike us as conceptually innovative, even if they are technologically impressive. All the same, as Linda Hutcheon and other critics of postmodernism realized, the authorial ethos of referentiality has changed over time, ensuring that “intertextuality in postmodern art both provides and undermines context” (Hutcheon, “Historiographic Metafiction” 8). Intertextual reference, in other words, can be used to not merely to communicate, but reflexively to interrogate the very basis of communication.

Framed in this way, we might think of mainstream sports news websites like *ESPN.com* and *SI.com*, which include hyperlinks, images, and embedded video in their textual coverage, as using internet tools to provide conventional contexts for sports narratives. For example, a typical game recap might have links to player biographies and statistics, a photo gallery of the game, and

video of an analyst describing the contest's significance and determining factors. By contrast, *FreeDarko*, *Fire Joe Morgan*, and *Power Forward*, reflexively inclined as they were, used those same internet tools to extend, or even undermine, contexts. They self-consciously juxtaposed ideas and stories not commonly associated with sports narratives in order to gain a greater purchase on how those narratives might be better understood. This could mean (de)contextualizing a sports narrative by discussing hip-hop and Hegel, referencing Oedipus or jurisprudence, including photos of political revolutionaries and videos of jazz performance, or embedding a Twitter conversation about feminism in a blog post. Far from forced, this mode of comparative media generation was effective in part because it was natural. In the information-intensive environment of the internet (and especially in light of social media), users are perpetually "hyper-reading": "filtering by keywords, skimming, hyperlinking, ... juxtaposing, as when several open windows allow one to read across several texts, and scanning, as when one reads rapidly through a blog to identify items of interest" (Hayles 61). Technogenetically speaking, then, these blogs co-evolved with the meta-textual architecture of web-based narratives so that they not only had the capacity to connect disparate cultural forms and intellectual contexts, but also internalized the inclination to do so.

Distinct as *FreeDarko*, *Fire Joe Morgan*, and *Power Forward*'s incarnations of the possibilities of technogenetic intertextuality may have been, each naturally extended and undermined contexts for sports narratives in ways that would have seemed unprecedented or exceptional in the pre-internet era. And in doing this intertextual work, the three blogs were not ostracized or ignored, but in fact developed devoted readerships that functioned as fan communities of their own. For thousands of fan-readers, finding fellow fans who thought about sports narratives beyond the confines of the play-by-play, postgame recap, and television talking

heads was a revelation and a reassurance. In writing their own literature of sports experience and expressing it online, then, *FreeDarko*, *Fire Joe Morgan*, and *Power Forward* not only reoriented what it means to be a fan through their selection of words, images, and video, but fostered the readerly communities that grew up around their texts.

¹ Though reproduced here in print, this chapter takes as its primary form a website (<http://americanculture.wustl.edu/projects/cohan>) that allows readers to experience the larger web networks of contemporary American sports fandom via links, images, social media content, and its own blog—in effect furthering my analysis by inhabiting the form I examine. A select number of the links from the website are embedded in this text as well.

² For the framework of fandom as based in narrative appropriation I am of course indebted to Henry Jenkins and his pioneering study of fan narrativity, *Textual Poachers* (1992). Yet, as I argued in an earlier article (“Rewriting Sport and Self”), “sports fans are given short shrift by Jenkins, mentioned in *Textual Poachers* only to note that they are ‘mostly male and . . . attach great significance to ‘real’ events’ which allow them to ‘enjoy [a] very different status than media fans (who . . . attach great interest in debased forms of fiction)’ (19). Jenkins implies that the ‘reality’ of sporting events, in conjunction with patriarchal privilege, renders sports fans a passive cultural dominant, uncritical of their practices because they are not ostracized followers of fictional narratives. . . . For Jenkins, then, [sports texts] are narratively shallow, inhibiting critical and creative fan production. Sports fans do not foster an active subculture of ‘textual poachers,’ he implies, because the source material does not yield the wealth of narrative resources necessary for appropriation” (131). Highlighting the work of Bill Simmons, an

especially prominent example of just such a sports fan subculture, I argued that “contra Jenkins, it is often precisely because there is something ‘real’ about sports that they foster fan appropriations. Capitalizing on the mutually accessible sense of unscripted ‘liveness’ that provides the sporting event’s primary experiential thrill, fans such as Simmons often retroactively rescript the master narrative or invest it with further potency via authorial self-reflexivity and autobiographical detail” (131).

Despite his groundbreaking influence, Jenkins does not solely represent the field of fan studies, of course. Influential works by Matt Hills, Roberta Pearson, Jonathan Gray, and Derek Johnson—just to name a few that have impacted my scholarship—have developed and modernized the study of fans. And Cornel Sandvoss, in particular, has textured and complicated reductive notions of sports fan narrativity. But Jenkins’s characterization is indicative, it seems to me now just as it did when I wrote on Simmons, of “a larger disconnection between athletics and those academic disciplines concerned with the study of narrative. Perceived to lack narrative depth in production, sports are rendered mimetically passive in reception. In this conception, sports fans are binarily emotive, cheering or booing—using the games to vent instinctual expressions of the id” (131). Blogs such as those I examine in this chapter provide definitive evidence to the contrary. Sports fans, like fans of movies, literature, cult TV and any other narrative-based entertainment, use their chosen entertainment to pursue creative and critical expression that they find lacking in other aspects of their lives, and which are consequently vital to their sense of identity.

³ “Sabermetrics,” a word first coined by onetime security guard-cum-baseball analytics whiz Bill James, refers to the advanced statistical methods fomented by the members of SABR, the Society for American Baseball Research (Lewis 81-82)

⁴ Though Ken Tremendous, Junior, and dak were, in fact, self-identified Boston Red Sox fans, the site was decidedly not oriented around that allegiance. There can be no better evidence of this than the fact that the site regularly defended Alex Rodriguez, a member of the rival New York Yankees, against critics by citing his superlative stats.

⁵ Unlike *FreeDarko* and *Fire Joe Morgan*, *Power Forward* has not officially ended its run. But Luther's book project with Akashic has, at least temporarily, stopped her from posting on PwrFwd.net. So, for the purposes of this chapter, I will consider her posts on *Power Forward* (and a few articles from other sites) through September 4, 2014.

⁶ Partridge, KS is the hometown of Ortho Stice, a character from David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), a novel for which Schur proclaimed his affinity (Trump, "We Didn't Know What The F--- We Were Doing").

⁷ Feeling somewhat conflicted about satirizing others from a position of anonymity to a wider audience than they ever imagined they would get, the *Fire Joe Morgan* crew eventually revealed their true identities on Feb. 5, 2008.

⁸ Shoals's counter-argument evokes Ben Carrington's in *Race, Sport and Politics: The Sporting Black Diaspora* (2010), when he writes: "[Hoberman's] argument ends up replacing one exaggerated and naïve paradigm, namely that sport erases racism and racial discourse through inter-racial contact, with its conceptual opposite, namely that sport can *only* reproduce dominant racial ideologies and relatedly that black subjects who engage in sport are, in effect, racial cultural dupes. Hoberman's provocative account is partial and in the end a distortion of the totality of both the black experience in sport and the ideological effects of that engagement. The intellectual task of understanding the relationship between sport, race and politics is in fact much

more difficult and complex than these rather hyperbolic interventions would suggest” (174, emphasis original).

CODA

Articulating “the Gift We are Denied” on Campus: Pedagogies of Sports Fan Narrativity

The high wall of the stadium just across the way, which cut off the sun... had been put up only a few years ago, yet there were large cracks in the concrete already, and the wall was substantially clothed in ivy; ivy seemed to grow fast and tough in the academic atmosphere.... His office had been a more pleasant place before that stadium went up; it used to get the sun all afternoon (marvelous for dozing), and had a view across the level playing field (he had been able to watch football practice) to the row of the faculty houses on a slight rise beyond.

-Howard Nemerov, *The Homecoming Game*

Distinct from its peers around the world, the American system of higher education is home to many of the nation’s highest-profile sports teams. Thanks to the successful efforts of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) to market the bodily pursuits of “amateur” student-athletes, American university-based athletics are popular and sometimes profitable publicity-generating pursuits with avid fan bases on par with professional sports. On campuses where high-profile NCAA Division I football and men’s basketball teams play, college sports can seem overwhelming in their influence. The relationship between academics and athletics, complicated by massive television revenues, enhanced alumni giving, and young athletes who are often academically undermotivated, is fraught with unease.¹ As Howard Nemerov indicates in his metaphor of the football stadium blocking the sun, big-time athletics can obscure or distort a university’s mission to generate knowledge.

Naturally, the professoriat has commented extensively on the problems with college athletics. Some, such as former athletic administrator and college professor John Gerdy, see little more than an “anti-intellectual culture that permeates the athletic establishment [and] continues to undermine academic values and integrity” (219). This culture determines not merely the under-motivation of “student”-athletes, but renders the fandom of student-spectators a mere

“affirmation of self, of one’s beliefs, attitudes, and identity, that the performance of your favorite team is a direct reflection on your worth as a human being.... We won, therefore we are right and good” (57). Though he recognizes that identity and fandom are interconnected, Gerdy thus denies the capacity of sports narrative to help fans do anything more than confirm pre-existing biases and beliefs. David P. Barash similarly equates sports fandom with mindlessness. While “the rabid sports fan” participates in a process of “primitive identification (fish in a school, birds in a flock) that results in a homogenous, selfless grouping,” Barash argues that the “reader or theatergoer” is part of a “heterogeneous assemblage whose members retain their individuality.... [T]he escape from the self is always conditional, transient, and within control” (“The Roar of the Crowd”). Barash’s argument exhibits his training in evolutionary psychology, but it also betrays the anecdotal notion that for “highly educated folks,” as communications scholar Benjamin Mako Hill puts it, “to signal to others that you *belong* in the intellectual elite, it can pay in cultural capital to dislike things, like sports, that are enormously popular among the least educated parts of society” (“Cultivated Disinterest,” italics original).² For Barash as for many academics, the “reader or theatergoer” naturally possesses “control” born of intellectual sophistication, while “the rabid sports fan,” like a rabies-infected animal, is necessarily unthinking. For the disaffected scholar, the popularity of sports on campus can seem causally related to a perception that students are increasingly uninterested in academics.

As this dissertation has demonstrated, such blanket aspersions unfairly characterize sports fans in a manner that is reductive and untrue. But it is worth considering, given the prominence of sports in the American university, how my argument for the literary analysis of reflexive sports fan narratives might be manifested on campus. In this coda, I will examine a reflexive sports fan narrative, the aforementioned *Homecoming Game* (1957), whose protagonist (fictional

history professor Charles Osman) and author (former Washington University in St. Louis professor and poet laureate of the United States, Howard Nemerov) are both fans and academics. Both character and author demonstrate the manner in which we scholars might better reckon with the complications of our own sports fandoms (or anti-fandoms) and ask our students to do the same.

Reprinted after Howard Nemerov's death in 1989, the 1991 edition of *The Homecoming Game* includes an afterword from the poet laureate's friend and fellow writer, Albert Lebowitz. Describing the many tennis matches the two men shared, Lebowitz asserts "that Howard dearly loved games because he refused, against all conventional wisdom, to take them seriously, to be a fanatic" (247). Though "fanatic" is the root word of "fan," Lebowitz's use of the attendant phrase "to take them seriously," conveys not merely intensity but also anti-creativity in fanatical investment. Rather than share in such a "relentless desire for resolution," Nemerov was concerned with "imagining how things might turn out. This converts fate into a sufficiency of satisfaction: we can smile indulgently at all the tennis balls that inevitably fall beyond our reach" (258). Characterized as such, Nemerov was certainly a reflexive fan, if not a fanatic. And, as Lebowitz points out, *The Homecoming Game* was "as close to an autobiography as Howard ever got" (251). Like his protagonist, Charles Osman, Nemerov was a Jewish professor who "looked and acted more like a Connecticut Yankee than a New York Jew" (251). Like Osman, he taught at a Midwestern school that aspired to the status of "an old, Eastern College" (251). And like Osman, "if Howard had a moral philosophy, it was resistance to being bullied—by people, by dogmas," as Lebowitz puts it (252).

The bullying dogma of college football drives the action of *The Homecoming Game*, and Osman's professional, personal, and sporting lives are affected by it. After the campus's football

star, Raymond Blent, is ruled ineligible due to the failing grade he received on a recent test in Osman's British history class, Osman is lobbied for leniency by students, his department chair, the football coach, the college president, and Blent's girlfriend.³ Insisting that Blent appeal to him directly, Osman wonders if the demand "reflect[s] in [him a] deeper wish to be acquainted with Raymond Blent" (52). Finding himself an agent in, as well as a reader of, a football narrative, Osman is forced to consider his relationship to the game on terms both academic and personal:

Football produced in Charles Osman some subtle tensions which he had never bothered to inspect very closely, which in fact he had constantly kept away from reflection out of a feeling that some parts of one's own history were better left unexamined so long as they themselves set up no clamor. These tensions nevertheless kept him interested in the game enough that he habitually went to see it played on Saturdays and even felt a trifle lost when the College team played away; the strange and difficult feelings aroused in him and brought to a pitch of some urgency by the game itself always issued in a deep melancholy that colored Saturday night and lasted well over into the Sunday; so much so that by now even his nervous enthusiasms of Friday afternoon bore the melancholy of anticipation. His double sense of excitement and oppression of spirit was strong enough for him to have sometimes resolved to "break himself of the habit" of watching such contests; but he had not yet been successful in this moral enterprise. (46-47)

Admitting a purposeful prior lack of reflection on his fandom, Osman recognizes the ways in which each weekend's game structures not merely his time, but his emotional well-being. Highlighting the complexity of a "double sense of excitement and oppression of spirit," he responds to his discomfort by characterizing football's hold on him in terms of addiction—as Gerdy and other sport-critics have been wont to do—vowing to "break himself of the habit" as a "moral enterprise" (47). Here stigmatized as chemical dependency, Osman's also later frames his attachment in psycho-sexual terms as a lack of control.

Remembering "those early years during which he himself had wanted to be a football star," Osman recalls posing as one before a mirror, only to feel a kind of masturbatory shame

when “his sister suddenly opened the door one day and caught him grimacing there, standing on one leg, running fiercely, without motion, into the silence of the mirror” (53). The memory, inflected by Osman’s subsequent ineffectiveness as a high school football player, reveals an inchoate sense that his is not to do, but to observe. Though he “had wanted to be a star on the world’s great stage,” he was fated to become “instead a teacher of history” (53). Nemerov’s dramatic flourish reveals a primary fear in academia, especially among humanists: that their research is not tangible to undergraduates or the broader public, and that teaching is a practice devoid of agency. As the old adage goes, “those who can’t do, teach.”

Like many in academia, then, Osman found himself

in college [a part of] that section of the intelligentsia which despised football and all who played it, but which went to games nevertheless; the fine distinction of the attitude being enforced on the moral side by the test of one’s ability to sit in the cheering section (to which one was assigned) without cheering. It was from this period of his life chiefly that Charles remembered his tensions about football to have begun: the nervous elation of Saturdays, the hollowness in the stomach as severe as though he himself were going to play—sometimes he could not bear to eat his lunch—the cold splendor of the afternoon and the great resonance of sounds in the stadium [...] and then the intense disappointment, win or lose, when the shadows grew over the field, the air got colder, and the clock ran out. (53-54)

Real or imagined, the moral test of anti-fandom that Osman describes—of representing oneself as a part of a larger campus community, but rejecting the game that obsesses that community on the grounds of intellectual superiority—is an academic trope related to the insecurity surrounding the value of pedagogy. But though he does not show it outwardly, Osman does indeed feel connected to the game itself, and highlights its emotional and aesthetic resonances. What’s more, as he becomes embroiled in the machinations surrounding Blent’s eligibility, Osman comes to realize that the notion that sport pollutes the university is rather more complicated than faculty anti-fans would like to admit.

When Osman meets with Blent, he learns that the student-athlete's academic ineligibility is more than a simple matter of a "dumb jock." Blent explains that he intentionally failed Osman's test out of shame over the fact that he took money to throw the homecoming game. What's more, Osman's isn't the only test Blent intentionally failed: in order to regain his eligibility, he will have to convince the intransigent philosophy professor Leon Solomon as well. Vowing to play to win, Blent gives Osman the match-fixing money he accepted. Osman agrees to return the money and to help persuade Solomon to restore Blent's eligibility. After an unpleasant exchange with the college president and a pair of high-profile alumni and football boosters (one a senator, the other a business man and the university's biggest donor), Osman heads to Solomon's house. Solomon, an adjunct faculty member under investigation for his one-time membership in the Communist Party, is in dire mental straits, having received death threats from enraged fans. Just as the two are about to reach an agreement, the college president and the two alumni boosters burst drunkenly through the door, spouting anti-Semitic threats and enraging Osman and Solomon, both of whom are Jewish. To make matters worse, a mob of students forms outside, chanting in support of Blent before throwing rocks and a torch onto Solomon's porch. The shamefaced college president is able to diffuse the potentially riotous situation, but Solomon and Osman both resign from the college in protest at their mistreatment. Afterward, accompanied by Blent's girlfriend, Lily—for whom the now-frenzied Osman professes his love and with whom he shares a kiss (see endnote 3)—he makes his way to a dingy bar and returns the match-fixing money.

Blent is reinstated for the game the next day. Osman, confident that he has set things right, watches as the team loses despite Blent's apparent best efforts. Shocked to find the football star in good spirits and reunited with his girlfriend after the game, Osman seeks out the man—

Mr. Giardinieri, a local restaurateur—who had helped him return the match-fixing money. Osman learns that the exchange was a set-up. Rather than return the money to the men who arranged the fix with Blent, Osman had unwittingly given it to one of Giardinieri's busboys. Giardinieri then wagered the funds on the opposing team, and returns them—along with the additional winnings—to Osman, remarking, “You don't think those boys would leave the fix to one player, do you? ... Even if you returned the money it wouldn't have made any difference—except one difference maybe: it would have got some hard people sore at me” (231). Utterly disillusioned, Osman returns to Solomon's house and learns that that the college president has suspended the anti-Communist investigation and offered the adjunct a tenure-track position. Refusing the gambling winnings, Solomon urges Osman to un-resign, as does the college president, Dr. Nagel. Shaken, Osman calls Nagel “an old fake” only to hear the president admit that he is one: “I don't know what else it's possible to be. Here the whole world is likely to fly into a million pieces any day, and meanwhile everybody is making more and more money. I don't know anyone who can change it—or anyone who would dare change it if he could” (244). Capital drives the university, Nemerov concludes, and football players and faculty members are equally valuable, or disposable, to the degree that they serve the campus's business interests. Furthermore, the integrity of competition in the classroom and the stadium are equally easily compromised, no matter the best intentions of the participants. To return to Nemerov's stadium metaphor, the ivy of academia girds the crumbling concrete walls of sport, but also flourishes in their murky cracks.

Given Nemerov's equally-damning indictments of sport and the university as tools of capital, then, one might wonder what is left of their relationship to value. Despite his final

disillusionment, Osman himself provides the answer, in ruminating on the scene in the stadium after the home team's defeat:

When the great crowd migrated slowly through many gates and dispersed, moving with the sheepish, bewildered resignation of men and women wakened from a dream in which some sad and terrible truth has been revealed, which they are unable to interpret although they will soon reduce it to the practical commonplaces of their daily lives, Charles remained for a long time where he was. It may be, indeed, that he quite consciously savored and even sentimentalized a trifle the pathos of this moment which of all moments—in the darkening and scarred arena, when the heroes have gone home and human action has failed once again and the monks are singing on the steps of Ara Coeli—belonged to the historian's brand of elegiac poetry. (215)

Through Osman, Nemerov insightfully, if rather pessimistically, metaphorizes the sporting event as a dream: an often-potent narrative whose relation to reality is unclear and which is usually processed in relationship to “the practical commonplaces of [our] daily lives” (215). Whatever the intellectual implications of Osman's attendant notion that the minds of the fans will be “unable to interpret” that narrative in useful ways, the accompanying recognition of his own analytical skills as a historian poignantly demonstrates the potential pedagogical value of sports narratives. It is always tempting, Osman realizes, to attempt to confine the meaning and importance of these narratives to those moments when the stadium is full and the athletes' bodies are in motion. But the study of history has taught him that the causes of social change, human triumph, suffering, pain, and death are nowhere near as simple as heroism-based “great man” views of history would lead us to believe. To really understand the arc of history, we must also examine those moments “when the heroes have gone home and human action has failed once again” (215). Applied to sport, this manifestation of “the historian's brand of elegiac poetry” means understanding that the action on the field contains not merely the record of points scored and statistics accrued, but also countless “counternarratives,” as Susan Birrell and Mary McDonald call them, “alternate accounts... that have been decentered, obscured, and dismissed

by hegemonic forces” (11). Rather than the “great men” on the field, these counternarratives are often best encapsulated in the experiences the “average unbeautiful watchers” in the stands (Wallace 142). Personally privy to many such counternarratives regarding the performance of Raymond Blent, Charles Osman has the scholarly training to understand their significance for any broader critical consideration of the games. Considering the open-endedness of sports narratives in their performance, and the temptation to presume the teleology of those narratives after their conclusion, Osman realizes his own capacity to resist that teleology:

As long as any action lay in the future, he reflected, it belonged to freedom and seemed to be accountable to human decisions; as soon as that same action had become past, it looked not merely necessary with the necessity of what is plainly irrevocable, gone, dead, but as though it had always been necessary even before being enacted, and it appeared as though human wills had never affected the result, could never have affected the result, save in the way of making it more certain than ever of coming to pass. (215-216)

While the media monks recap the football master narrative “on the steps of Ara Coeli,” the “historian’s brand of elegiac poetry” provides the insight and the artistry to recontextualize it, and to make room for other stories (219).

While Osman has little energy left at the novel’s end to demonstrate that insight and artistry, his notion of the critical potential of the academic sports fan has been realized many times beyond the pages of *The Homecoming Game*. Many faculty members may prefer to imagine that spectator sports do not exist or are inconsequential to the humanistic analysis of culture on and off campus, but many others have considered it in their personal and professional interest to address them. And though the landscape of college sports has changed dramatically in many ways, the core problems with its incorporation into the collective body of American higher learning that Nemerov identified remain. The under-compensation and mistreatment of both “amateur” athletes *and* adjunct faculty members are related to an administrative ethos based in

business principles that emphasize revenues at the expense of labor. Pointing this out in a professional context has been difficult for academics, but that is changing in the twenty-first century, thanks to the blogosphere and social media. Just as the authors of *FreeDarko*, *Fire Joe Morgan*, and *Power Forward* found an otherwise inaccessible audience for their insights online, so too have sports-interested academics such as Jennifer Doyle (thesportspectacle.com), Laurent Dubois (“Soccer Politics” at sites.duke.edu/wcwp), and Yago Colás (“Between the Lines” at yagocolas.com). Though these tenured professors of literature and history do not always address sports on campus—or even in the United States—they regularly demonstrate the important insights humanistic scholarly methods can bring to our understanding of sports. In addition to their online writing, Doyle, Dubois, and Colás have each extended their critical interest in sport into the classroom, in scholarly monographs, and in publications not usually oriented to sporting issues.⁴ Each identifies as a fan as well as a critic of sports, and does not shy away from considering the role that their personal attachments play in informing their scholarly endeavors.

Like Nemerov and his thinly fictionalized protagonist, Doyle, Dubois, Colás, and other sports-oriented academics possess both reflexive sports fan personas and the scholarly tools to consider how fan reflexivity impacts a sports-industrial complex that weighs consumership over contemplation. Their efforts are significant, for, despite the on- and off-campus business principles that drive the monetization of college athletics, spectator sports ultimately matter because of the narrative interest of the fans. To consider this audience inconsequential or unworthy of our attention as humanists is to miss the forest for the trees. On campus, a critical mass of reflective fans could have obvious ramifications for athletic departments, as well as the potential to impact the greater business-based culture of the university. The obsession with the bottom line, like the overemphasis on the final score, results in the “relentless desire for

resolutions” identified by Lebowitz-qua-Nemerov that stifles the human enrichment fostered in “the multiple curious ways of imagining how things might turn out” (252). The strength of the humanities—and of the reflexive sports fan narratives I have explored in this dissertation—lies in that curious imagining.

It would be naïve, of course, to suggest that the humanities or the reflexive sports fan can completely rewrite the narrative endings outlined in the box score and the fiscal report. But sports, like universities, are entities that productively contain contradictions, and it is worth the time and effort of academic sports fans to call attention to “the narrative that lives in the spaces of the official play-by-play” (DeLillo, *Underworld* 27). Study of reflexive fan narratives is needed to explore those spaces, as is classroom instruction that would encourage students to query the narratives that inform their own identities as sports fans—to consider why they go to the stadium on the weekend or watch their hometown team on their televisions or laptop computers. For despite all of its mass appeal, the fundamental relationship of sports fandom is ultimately the personal one between a reader and a text. Whether or not particular fans realize it, they read sports in a way that both influences, and is informed by, their sense of self. And when they do realize it, reflexive fans can make of sports narratives something that is much more significant than the sum of their ostensible parts. Actively reading and writing sports narratives allows such fan-authors to recontextualize their world and critically address topics of concern within it in much the same manner as literary critics. Whether they are applied to the narratives of Tracy Austin or Jane Austen, close reading, aesthetic critique, and the historicization of texts are valuable tools for understanding our culture and ourselves. Though David Foster Wallace felt shame at the bookstore when purchasing athletes’ autobiographies (“Tracy Austin” 141), cultural pretenses, not the simplicity of their content, determined that embarrassment. Tracy Austin may

not have been able to capture the “profundity” of her own athletic narrative, but her “techne, that state in which Austin’s mastery of craft facilitated a communion with the gods themselves,” was never truly hers to proclaim (143, 150).

¹ For evidence of this tension, one might explore any number of athletics-related scandals at major research universities that also field Division I sports teams, but surely the most notable recent cases are the horrific Penn State child sex abuse scandal and the massive academic fraud perpetrated at the University of North Carolina. Both cases not only involved malice and corruption in the athletic department, but implicated the university administration in tolerating, covering up, and even abetting the misbehavior of athletes, coaches, and athletic administrators.

² English Professor and essayist Philip Lopate echoes this notion in “Confessions and Self-Justifications of a Sports Fan,” an article he wrote for the collected volume *Body Language: Writers on Sport* (1998): “In the arts community to which I belong, I know many people who have zero interest in sports, and who look askance at anyone who does” (9).

³ Osman is largely unsympathetic to all the petitioners except Blent’s girlfriend, Lily, who flirtatiously charms the professor in a manner that leads to a short-lived romantic encounter later in the novel. Osman recognizes but disregards the notion that the ethics of their relationship are questionable.

⁴ In addition to authoring *The Sports Spectacle*, Doyle—Professor of English at UC Riverside—edited *GLQ*’s “Athletic Issue” and is currently working on a book project (*The Athletic Turn*) that “explores the recent and extensive turn toward sports in contemporary art and performance” (“Faculty Profile”). Dubois—Professor of Romance Studies and History at Duke—authored *Soccer Empire: The World Cup and the Future of France* (2010), contributes to *Sports*

Illustrated, and regularly teaches a popular “Soccer Politics” course at Duke. Colás—Associate Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan—is author of *Ball Don’t Lie! Myth, Genealogy and Invention in the Cultures of Basketball* (forthcoming 2016) and multiple articles on sports and culture, and the instructor of courses on “Global Sports Cultures” and the “Cultures of Basketball.” In addition to blogging, all three use Twitter extensively to share information and critical insights about sports, culture, and the university (at @FromaLeftWing, @Soccerpolitics, and @BadProf, respectively).

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APPENDIX A

E-mail Interviews with Nathaniel Friedman [aka “Bethlehem Shoals”]

From: **Noah Cohan** ncohan@go.wustl.edu
Subject: Re: An odd sort of interview
Date: December 5, 2014 at 10:12 AM
To: Nathaniel Friedman friedman.nathaniel@gmail.com

Dear Nathaniel,

Thanks for the most helpful responses. I hope it's not too burdensome, but as a kind of follow-up I submit for your comment the following post you authored: <http://freedarko.blogspot.com/2008/07/artless-self-sabotage-and-other.html>

The post's text deals with some of the core tenets of FD. I can, of course, offer my own close reading of the images' interaction with that text, but I'm curious to hear your thoughts uninfluenced. What, if anything, can you remember about the images in this post? What do they evoke now?

Thanks again for your patience and willingness to help. I really appreciate it.

All Best,

-Noah

On Dec 4, 2014, at 2:54 PM, Nathaniel Friedman <friedman.nathaniel@gmail.com> wrote:

Noah,

Got some free time so here are some answers.

How did the use of images evolve over the life of FreeDarko? Did you have a philosophy or organizing principle? Were you the one responsible for selecting images for all posts, or just your own?

I honestly have no idea how our approach to images came to be. I suspect—I can't tell for sure because most of them are missing due to Flickr canceling my account due to copyright violations—that at first, we were more straightforward. But then at some point we realized that the images could serve as commentary on the writing. A lot of times the image would be an example of what we were discussing, or a parallel, or sometimes even a reference that undermined or contradicted the preceding text. Every writer was responsible for his own images but we all arrived at the same conclusion about how to use them—without ever really discussing it explicitly.

What were the determining factors in connecting a particular image to a particular post? What tropes or modes of connection were most prevalent?

see above

Is there a post (or posts) you can point me to which features images in a way that is particularly notable or representative?

Again, I wish I could remember one, but it was a long time ago. And the current state of the site doesn't exactly lend itself to that kind of archaeology.

If it's not obvious from those questions, I'm thinking about images as intertexts within FreeDarko. The text of *FD* was relentlessly intertextual in its references (and links inherently so), so I guess I'm wondering if you consciously considered the use of images as part of an intertextual ethos.

I don't think the images necessarily interacted with each other (in one post or across posts) but again, they were certainly meant to work as part of the text and in some cases push against or expand it, thus suggesting an entirely different text (or an alternate version of the text in the writing). There were certain kinds of images we used a lot, like musicians, politicians, or art that served to broaden the scope of the discussion, even if they didn't always make perfect sense.

Let me know if you have any follow-up questions.

Nathaniel

Thanks!

-Noah

On Oct 9, 2014, at 2:47 PM, Noah Cohan <ncohan@GO.WUJSTL.EDU> wrote:

Nathaniel,

Thanks again for your thoughtful replies. I don't have any immediate follow-ups, but I may be in touch in a few weeks, if that's alright with you.

Thanks again,

-Noah

On Oct 6, 2014, at 8:29 PM, Nathaniel Friedman <friedman.nathaniel@gmail.com> wrote:

>I will admit that my philosophy education is quite poor.

So is mine, strictly speaking.

>Would you provide a brief example on the particular influence of >Heidegger and/or Derrida on the Positional Revolution?

And Ornette Coleman. Don't forget Ornette Coleman. The Heidegger comes in the thought that players should be judged according to what they are and what they offer, not pre-formed roles we expect them to fill. Players aren't defined by positions, they define them. The Derrida (and the Ornette of it) is that when players come together on a court, they form an interdependent system that exists only in reference to each other. There is no fixed point and that system of relationships can shift from possession to possession, depending on how many skills each of them can exploit on a given play.

>When you say that Liberated Fandom might be drawn from Jewish >Studies, what do you mean by that?

That's probably a stretch. I guess I was thinking about liminal identity and the ability to inhabit multiple worlds or communities. Always a basketball fan, the fan of what exactly being more portable.

>Your response about your background in music criticism makes want to ask what "journalism" means to you. Where is the >divide between fan-blogger and journalist, if there is one?

Journalism to me is either writing with reporting or writing for a media outlet with a reputation for reported writing. It's also a voice thing—the rambling, first-person, editor-averse style that I think Simmons is responsible for has spawned a million writers that don't seem to have that rigor. I have no idea if that divide even matters anymore, to the extent that I don't try and decide if everything is journalism or something else. More than I know journalism when I see it. I'm not so concerned with saying things are NOT journalism, or naming what it is those things are.

>How does the model of music criticism/journalism complicate or >inflect that distinction?

With criticism I think it's purely a matter of quality. Everyone can tell the difference between a serious, involved review online and some tossed-off blogging. With criticism there's actually more of clear benchmark and people can write their way into journalism, as it were. I'm wondering how much I talked about "journalism" to begin with, since it's not really something I've ever worried about all that much.

>Where did/do you fall on the spectrum, in contrast/conjunction with someone like Bill Simmons?

Simmons is a columnist gone haywire. When FreeDarko started, Simmons wrote with a beginning, middle and end, and had a real sense of pacing. Who knows what's going on now. He's probably to blame for the way most sports bloggers wrote, or thought about writing, even if he didn't used to push it that far himself.

Like I said, I'm probably just a mutant essayist. I generally write with some argument in mind. If anything I can be too didactic instead of just letting it flow. I've also very rarely written in first-person.

>The notion of pulling a story out of music is also a helpful way to conceptualize what you guys did with narrative and basketball.
>Did you ever feel like the story was getting away from you, or away from "reality," however we construe it? And did that matter?

There were certainly times when I felt like we were projecting stuff onto players. I mean shit, we never had enough information to really know if anything we wrote about athletes was true. The way we dealt with that, which is kind of bad, was to pivot to mythology. So we psychoanalyzed players until we turned around and made it about the narrative needs of us as fans. Pretty cheap trick, I know.

On Mon, Oct 6, 2014 at 8:07 AM, Cohan, Noah <ncohan@wustl.edu> wrote:
Nathaniel,

Thanks for your extensive responses. I would like to cite and selectively quote from these responses in the chapter, if that's alright with you. If you'd prefer to leave your comments off the record, just let me know. To be totally honest, as you know or can guess, they don't train us how to interview living humans in the English Department, and my college journalism skills are quite rusty at this point. So feel free to school me on the etiquette of this. Here are a few follow-ups:

I will admit that my philosophy education is quite poor. Would you provide a brief example on the particular influence of Heidegger and/or Derrida on the Positional Revolution? When you say that Liberated Fandom might be drawn from Jewish Studies, what do you mean by that?

Your response about your background in music criticism makes want to ask what "journalism" means to you. Where is the divide between fan-blogger and journalist, if there is one? How does the model of music criticism/journalism complicate or inflect that distinction? Where did/do you fall on the spectrum, in contrast/conjunction with someone like Bill Simmons?

The notion of pulling a story out of music is also a helpful way to conceptualize what you guys did with narrative and basketball. Did you ever feel like the story was getting away from you, or away from "reality," however we construe it? And did that matter?

Thanks again,

-Noah

On Oct 5, 2014, at 11:51 AM, Nathaniel Friedman <friedman.nathaniel@gmail.com> wrote:

Noah,

Sorry it's taken me a minute to get back to you. Stupid advertising production road life.

>How would you characterize the influence of your graduate school experience on the way you wrote for FreeDarko? Did it >affect FreeDarko's approach to basketball as narrative? Were any critical frameworks particularly influential?

Undergrad probably more than grad school. I probably threw myself into FreeDarko the way I did because grad school wasn't a good fit for me. On the other hand, my American Studies background definitely influenced the way I went about doing anything remotely historical in nature, especially the second FD book.

I was a philosophy major in college and I think FreeDarko has always pretty blatantly reflected that. My dudes were Heidegger, Levinas, and some half-digested version of Derrida. I wouldn't say I'm the most sophisticated person in the world when it comes to theory but applying this kind of thinking to basketball made a lot of sense to me.

My background in music criticism was as important to the equation as anything academic. Writers like Greil Marcus and Francis Davis really taught me how to get inside music and pull a larger story out of it. That's pretty much all I've ever tried to do with sports—do more than scratch the surface or stop at "sports is sports and it's beautiful."

I've always thought that the Positional Revolution was some half-assed melanges of late Heidegger, Derrida, and Ornette Coleman. League of Style is pulled out of jazz writing. I wonder if Liberated Fandom is in some way drawn on stuff I read for Jewish Studied courses. Long way of saying that my DNA is criticism and critical thinking.

>You were clearly the site's most frequent poster. How did the "collective" work? To what extent was FreeDarko your blog?

Well, "collective" was just a funny bit of branding. It was a way of connecting ourselves to the Futurists and Wu-Tang, which kind of sums up the blog's initial approach. We also did lean on each other a lot to affirm that, yeah, this was something, we weren't crazy, the comments section just didn't get it yet. But there were a lot of times when one of us would post unexpectedly. We certainly weren't reading each other's posts or exercising any kind of editorial system, except for the time we tried to organize a regular daily rotation.

I did write more for the blog than anyone else, define the agenda, and dictate the house style early on. I think that changed over time, and certainly changed for the better.

The books were a totally different animal. Those were a true team effort. I don't think there's anything in the first book that wasn't mulled over by committee; the second one was a little more traditionally organized and executed but we all were weighing in on what should be in there and why.

>If you have it, any information on the kind of website traffic you received, or other ways of characterizing your readership, would be helpful.

I have no idea what these numbers mean by today's standards. When Deadspin started to linking to us, we started hitting 1,000 uniques a day. That kind of became the benchmark. Sometimes we'd hit 2,000 if we posted twice in a day but usually, if it went higher, it was 5,000 or so because something went viral.

I also remember noticing that our page hits were always way higher than our uniques, which suggests that we had a relatively small group of readers who checked in several times a day to read the comments.

Our greatest visibility came from the books which, I have to say, aren't the most complete reflections of what we were all about. Or at least they didn't articulate it as explicitly or with the same kind of nuance. Obviously we wrote them from the same perspective but there wasn't that same theoretical deep-dive going on at all times.

>You tweeted that writing for money changed the way you wrote. In what ways? How did "professional" writing for other web outlets compare to writing for your book projects?

It made me a more responsible writer. It also made me a less wild, free, and unpredictable writer. Editors have certain expectations and will do certain things to prose. You see how stuff performs when it's too out there. It's a survival instinct. There's reason why the blog only ever had so high a readership.

I'm not trying to make blanket statements. Every outlet is different. In some cases, the experience made me a stronger writer, or at least a better informed/more rigorous one. If there's a value judgment here, it depends on thinking that FD's early days were some sort of peak performance that I've never come close to matching.

When we did the first book, our editor was very hands-on with the writing. He was trying to balance the blog's instincts with what he knew had to happen for the thing to actually cohere or be accessible throughout. I mean, let's be honest, the blog was very hit-or-miss, and there would be paragraphs on end that didn't make sense to anyone but the author. Those were usually us trying to work through ideas in public but they weren't the most reader-friendly thing in the world. The whole thing had insularity as a them, which was part of what attracted certain people to it. It also turned a lot of people off.

For the second book, we had a different editor and he was less involved from page-to-page. We rewrote large chunks of that thing when we were correcting the first round of proofs. I don't know, maybe we were more seasoned or cynical, or maybe we were tentative because of the subject matter, but that one ended up being more restrained even without an editor trying to discipline us much.

We pretty much had absolute freedom with the stats, graphs and visuals on both books.

Let me know if you have any follow-ups, especially on the first couple question. I know I have more to say than what I've typed here!

Also, out of curiosity, is this stuff on the record or just for your general edification?

Best,

Nathaniel

On Wed, Oct 1, 2014 at 10:20 AM, Cohan, Noah <ncohan@wustl.edu> wrote:

Dear Nathaniel,

Here are a few questions to get us going. Please feel free to also add comments on anything I've written on the blog, for good or ill.

How would you characterize the influence of your graduate school experience on the way you wrote for FreeDarko? Did it affect FreeDarko's approach to basketball as narrative? Were any critical frameworks particularly influential?

You were clearly the site's most frequent poster. How did the "collective" work? To what extent was FreeDarko your blog?

If you have it, any information on the kind of website traffic you received, or other ways of characterizing your readership, would be helpful.

You tweeted that writing for money changed the way you wrote. In what ways? How did "professional" writing for other web outlets compare to writing for your book projects?

All for now. Thanks so much for your time and consideration.

-Noah

Noah Cohan
Founding Coordinator - American Studies Association: Sports Studies Caucus
http://www.theasa.net/caucus_sports_studies
PhD Candidate in English and American Literature
Lynne Cooper Harvey Fellow in American Culture Studies
Washington University in St. Louis
ncohan@go.wustl.edu

On Sep 23, 2014, at 10:20 AM, Cohan, Noah <ncohan@go.wustl.edu> wrote:

Thanks, Nathaniel. I'll be in touch next week.

L'Shanah Tovah,

-Noah

On Sep 22, 2014, at 10:57 PM, Nathaniel Friedman <friedman.nathaniel@gmail.com> wrote:

Noah,

Ready to talk whenever by whichever medium best suits you.

Nathaniel

Sent from a public place

On Sep 22, 2014, at 6:49 PM, Cohan, Noah <ncohan@wustl.edu> wrote:

Dear Nathaniel,

Thanks for your kind Twitter words about my dissertation project. I'm writing, as I'm sure you've ascertained, to ask if I might e-mail you a few questions about FreeDarko. Would that be alright? If so, I probably won't send them your way for a week or so—I'm hoping to get my blog entries written before incorporating your insights—to preserve my naiveté, if that makes sense. And if you'd rather be left alone, just let me know.

Thanks again,

-Noah

Noah Cohan
Founding Coordinator - American Studies Association: Sports Studies Caucus
http://www.theasa.net/caucus_sports_studies
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APPENDIX B

E-mail Interview with Jessica Luther

From: Jessica W. Luther luther.jessica@gmail.com
Subject: Re: A dissertation project interview
Date: November 13, 2014 at 9:24 PM
To: Cohan, Noah ncohan@wustl.edu

Noah,

Yes, all of it on the record is fine.

Good luck.

Jessica

On Thu Nov 13 2014 at 6:46:23 PM Cohan, Noah <ncohan@wustl.edu> wrote:

Dear Jessica,

Thank you for your thoughtful responses. Just to be clear, I intend to include excerpts from these responses in the body text of my chapter. If there is any material in here that you would like to remain "off the record," please let me know.

I don't have any follow-up questions at this moment, but they may occur to me as I write. If so, I will be in touch.

Thanks again,

-Noah

On Nov 13, 2014, at 5:27 PM, Jessica W. Luther <luther.jessica@gmail.com> wrote:

Noah,

Sorry not getting back to you sooner. I hate writing about myself so it's taken me a while to get around to this.

"Power Forward" is the position I played when I was on the basketball team way back in middle and high school. But more than that, it's both the momentum of moving forward (the positive connotation of progression is embedded in that for me) and the forceful act of powering through the muck to create that forward motion. When I think of playing the position in basketball, I think of posting low, near the goal, getting the ball, dropping my shoulder into the defender, pushing with my body to make space, and then going hard to the basket. The kind of writing I do in sports media, it often feels like I have to force that space for myself in the same way a power forward forces space on the post.

Most of the time my identity as a journalist is separate from my identity as a fan. And I try to maintain that distance, though I'm never not aware of how subjective this entire enterprise is. But there's definitely a journalist voice that I affect when I set down to write. Part of that is my own insecurity of writing about topics in sports media that men don't tend to like while knowing that sports media is dominated by men. I literally don't want to leave space for someone to say that I wrote something the way I wrote something because I'm the fan of another team or because I'm a woman (though I'm not, it is clear, spared from such criticism no matter the tone or style I use). I think maybe the difference between my writing as a journalist and as a fan is probably clearest when I write about Brittney Griner or Serena Williams on Power Forward versus when I've written about them for say, The Guardian or Sports On Earth. When doing the latter, I try not to let my love for these athletes and the way they play bleed into the analysis of LGBT issues or race in sport.

Sports are ONLY narratives. The reason sports are so compelling is because games and seasons and histories of seasons are stories. They often stand as self-contained units: we can watch 22 people on a soccer pitch tells us a story, we watch it live, we follow the drama of it for a couple of hours, and it is resolved by the end, often (especially if invested in a team) with some kind of emotional reaction. On top of those seemingly self-contained stories, we have the stories of the individuals involved, of the teams that they play on, of the coaches who lead them, of the communities they represent, of the physical spaces in which they play. These are narratives wrapped in narratives running parallel to other narratives. And how we tell those stories matter. I can't really say that enough. This is a direct impact of what I learned in graduate school.

Trained as a historian, especially as one who focused on issues of race, gender, and bodies in the work I did, I learned quickly that there are stories we know, stories that are already written down, and then stories buried in archival documents yet to be discovered and ones we'll never know because of what no longer exists, whose experiences were never written down and preserved. I was told repeatedly when I started on my dissertation that I'd never find the documents I was looking for, that there was nothing out there on my topic - and I learned pretty quickly that people believed that because no one had ever really looked for the documents I was interested in. And so, I'm "very" sensitive now to narratives, whose story gets told and why, whose story we'll probably never know, whose story we aren't even trying to tell or whose story we often refuse to acknowledge. And I apply that to my work in sports.

I don't really remember why college football and sexual assault became my beat. I think it was while I was prepping for a piece I wrote about recruitment for The Atlantic back in September 2013. But I know I was writing about it before that point - it could have been when the UT players were in trouble for an alleged sexual assault before their bowl game in Dec 2012 <http://pwrftwd.net/2013/01/13/this-is-my-not-shocked-face>. It became clear really fast while doing research for the Atlantic piece that no one was writing about this issue in a way that I felt it should be covered. Then just weeks later, the Winston news broke and, as you know from my Sports On Earth piece, that one rattled me as a fan and a feminist. And I wanted to be a part of the conversation because I found so much of what was being said to be incredibly problematic.

How has it affected my fandom? Well, short answer is that I don't love FSU football like I used to. I find watching college football (or any football, honestly) to be difficult, though I still do it. I mean, part of what I write about with this topic is how the players themselves are exploited and how the NCAA as a regulating body cares not at all about this issue. It's hard enough to consume a product in which the commentators, the analysts, the advertisements can easily veer into sexist territory. That's always been true. Adding on this layer where I see bigger, more terrible problems - major systemic ones - all the time...it makes it hard to be a fan. Because I have to seriously answer, "A fan of what exactly?"

Jessica

On Thu Oct 30 2014 at 3:10:46 PM Cohan, Noah <ncohan@wustl.edu> wrote:

Dear Jessica,

Sorry for the delay. I wanted to go back and re-read your Feminist Wire interview and listen to a podcast or two, to prep a little bit more. Here are a few questions. If you're amenable, I'll ask a few follow-ups after you respond. Please do so at your leisure.

What does "Power Forward" connote, to you? (I'm wondering in particular about its muscular distinction from MSNBC's "Lean Forward")

How do you think of yourself as a fan? Is it distinct from your identity as a journalist? If so, do you write in different modes?

You seem to be always thinking about sports as narratives. How would you characterize the relationship between the two? What about your personal experience (graduate school?) helped orient your thinking in that way?

As a feminist fan, you've addressed numerous instances of sexism and racism on Power Forward. How did sexual assault in college football become a particular focus for you? And how has that focus, and your current book project, affected your fandom?

Thanks!

-Noah

On Oct 30, 2014, at 10:08 AM, Noah Cohan <ncohan@go.wustl.edu> wrote:

Jessica,

Great. Thank you! I will send them along shortly.

Thanks again,

-Noah

On Oct 30, 2014, at 10:04 AM, Jessica W. Luther <luther.jessica@gmail.com> wrote:

Noah,

Sure. Of course.

Jessica

On Thu, Oct 30, 2014 at 9:50 AM, Cohan, Noah <ncohan@wustl.edu> wrote:

Dear Jessica,

I'm wondering if I might e-mail you a few questions about your blog, PwrFwd.net, which I'd like to include in a dissertation chapter I'm writing on fan blogs. The chapter itself is mediated online, through a chapter page (<http://americanculture.wustl.edu/projects/cohan/index.php?pg=Introduction>) and a blog page (<http://americanculture.wustl.edu/projects/cohan/blog.php>). The latter hosts much of my preliminary writing to this point.

Would that be alright? Your work particularly interests me because of your attention to narrative and assumed/alternative reading perspectives. I recognize, of course, that you are a professional journalist and author, but I feel as if you adopt a more personal, fan-oriented tone on Power Forward than in your articles for other sites. I hope that's not way off-base. If so, please let me know.

Thanks,

-Noah

Noah Cohan
Founding Coordinator - American Studies Association: Sports Studies Caucus
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