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Stealing home: decolonizing baseball's origin stories and their relations to settler colonialism

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The sport of baseball has played an integral role in constructing a national identity in the American settler state. This essay analyses baseball's popularization as America's national pastime and its interconnections with the formation of a settler colonial identity that seeks to erase Indigenous presence on Turtle Island. It does so by tracing the roots of baseball's origin stories and their relationship to the creation of an American national identity. By examining the processes of colonialism, displacement, genocide, and xenophobia that characterized the game's early history in North America and delving into baseball's role in governing the boundaries of insiders and outsiders in the national imagination, this essay provokes questions with regard to the possibility of re-imagining the game of baseball in a decolonial context.

The ceremonial first pitch and the national anthem: an introduction

It is been a while since I have played under little league lights. The distinct smell of moist grass, dirt, and resin still evokes within me a sense of exhilaration, thrill, and place. I close my eyes and imagine roaming centre field as a fly ball drifts closer and closer to the outfield fence. My heart beats at the thought of rounding third base and heading home. And in those snippets and fragments of memory, somewhere deep within me, I feel belonging. Baseball did that to me – as I am certain it did for many of us who grew up uncertain about our place in this society and on this land. It is a game where failing most of the time is accepted as inevitable. It is a game that invites people of different body types, skillsets, experiences, and knowledges to play and find a role that benefits the team. It is 'America's national pastime' and any kid who swings a bat or rounds the bases is seduced by the distinct possibility that they too can belong here.

Despite these promises of inclusion, the historical organization of baseball as we know it today has, in fact, relied heavily upon exclusion and exploitation based on gender, race, class, immigration status, sexuality, among other factors.¹ The control of professional baseball by a class of billionaires, millionaires, and large corporations has had a critical impact on how we understand the game in our contemporary context and how we tell stories of its origins.² For nearly 150 years baseball's promoters, fans, players, and historians have recited conflicting narratives about the game's origins, but as David Block duly notes, the debate 'has always been long on bluster and short on facts'.³ What is apparent, however, is that these origin stories all seek to establish a link between American identity and the game of baseball and in doing so help to solidify the structure, system, and logic of settler colonialism.⁴

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This paper makes three central claims about how we can understand baseball history in relation to settler colonialism and what it would mean to re-imagine the game in a decolonized relationship to Indigenous peoples and territories. First, in the USA, baseball has been explained as a normatively white, but increasingly multiracial pastime that differentiates American settler society from its European colonial ancestors and links urban dwellers to their pastoral ‘origins’ in the frontiers of early colonial society.⁵ I will argue that the long-standing historical debate between supporters of the Spalding Commission’s ‘Doubleday theory’ and supporters of Henry Chadwick’s ‘rounder’s theory’ both articulate claims to Indigenous territories by naturalizing the origins of the popular pastime in the American settler state. This paper applies a useful framework to baseball’s origin stories developed by Scott Lauria Morgensen in his study of queer settler colonialism and Indigenous decolonization. Morgensen shows how settlers establish their national belonging by attempting ‘to amalgamate subjects in a settler society as “non-Native” inheritors, and *not* challengers of the colonization of Native peoples on occupied Native lands’.⁶

Second, baseball’s popularization as America’s national pastime is a direct result of the process of settler colonialism and xenophobia in the USA as well as US imperialism and cultural hegemony outside of North America. Since Robert W. Henderson’s groundbreaking historical research *Bat, Ball, and Bishop* in 1947 a number of studies have sought to explain the social and cultural origins of baseball in the American context,⁷ however very little has been written about how the logics of settler colonialism permeate the history of the game. These are stories that seek to both legitimize settlers as distinct from their European ancestors while simultaneously incorporating and erasing Indigenous presence on the land. The identification of baseball, thus, as the national pastime provides a cultural contribution to the claiming of land, history, and destiny in which a distinctly American identity is forged within settler colonialism.⁸

Third, I believe that the opportunity to ‘decolonize’ the baseball narrative exists through the principles that underlie the game itself and through a re-telling of its origin stories in a way that complicates and centralizes settler colonialism and Indigenous decolonization within it. A decolonial analysis should contribute to our engagement in political action to transform the game in its current context and more broadly contribute to Indigenous struggles for decolonization and resurgence on Turtle Island.⁹

Leading off: origin stories

Baseball’s emergence as the ‘national pastime’ in the USA is intricately related to the historical forces of colonialism, settlement, and displacement. Numerous authors have (at least in passing) discussed the long history of the interconnections between bat and ball play in the USA and settler colonialism, though for the most part this connection has been peripheral to the author’s central thesis. For instance, Arthur Waldo describes how Polish migrant laborers who helped build the colony at Jamestown, Virginia in 1607 wrote about playing a popular Silesian bat and ball game called *palant* in their time of recreation away from glassmaking and pitching tar.¹⁰ In Waldo’s work, he quotes extensively from the journal kept by one of the Polish settlers, Zbigniew Stefanski, including a passage in which he emphasizes the popularity of the sport with ‘the savages [sic] who sat around the field and delighted in the games’.¹¹ Similarly, Altherr uncovers discussion of playing baseball in the journals of Henry Dearborn on a 1779 expedition ‘heading northwards to attack the Iroquois tribal peoples’ and while he extracts the importance of the evidence of these games to the origins of baseball, the historical context in which these events occur is deprioritized from the analysis.¹² I argue in this paper that historians have, perhaps unconsciously, minimized these aspects of baseball’s history in order to construct a framework for American identity and a sense of belonging and legitimacy on these territories *without* having

to confront the ongoing practices of colonization within society and within the sport today. Most glaringly, this includes the use of racist imagery in the naming of professional baseball teams like the Cleveland Indians and Atlanta Braves and the related tropes (e.g. Tomahawk Chop, Chief Wahoo, Beating Drums, etc.) that continue to permeate baseball culture.

It is not a coincidence that baseball became the American pastime amidst western colonial settlement and Indigenous displacement in the era following the Royal Proclamation of 1763 and the end of the US Civil War. As Deloria notes, ‘from the colonial period to the present, the Indian has skulked in and out of the most important stories various Americans have told about themselves’.¹³ Baseball undoubtedly occupies an important role in the construction of the American identity. Baseball’s origin stories contribute to the making and re-making of the boundaries of identity in the USA and helped to maintain settler colonial power relations.

I believe that we can understand the popularization and formalization of baseball in white settler society as what Morgensen following Mary Louise Pratt describes as a ‘contact zone’.¹⁴ A contact zone in this sense recognizes that settler colonialism is not a thing of the past, since core elements of this structure are ‘recognizable not only in the past or in local spaces but as pervasive throughout settler society and all that transpires within it’.¹⁵ The ‘contact zone’, in this sense, is useful to understand the ways in which settler colonialism is pervasive in our discussions, engagements, and interactions with sports and games in North America society. Following Patrick Wolfe’s important formulation that settler invasion is a structure not an event, I show how baseball’s framing as the ‘national pastime’ is both shaped by and helps to secure the logics of elimination, extermination, and assimilation of settler colonialism.¹⁶

Take, for instance, the opening segment of Ken Burns’ epic Public Broadcasting Service series, *Baseball*, unequivocally the most comprehensive documentary on the history of the sport. Burns characterizes baseball in the following way:

It is a leisurely game that demands blinding speed; the only game in which the defense has the ball. It follows the seasons, beginning each year with the fond expectancy of springtime and ending with the hard facts of autumn. Americans have played baseball for more than 200 years, while they conquered a continent, warred with one another and with enemies abroad, struggled over labor and civil rights and the meaning of freedom ... Most of all, it is about time and timelessness, speed and grace, failure and loss, imperishable hope and coming home.¹⁷

In his attempt to imagine the history of baseball from ‘the bottom up’ instead of the ‘top down’, Burns nonetheless crafts a settler colonial narrative that simultaneously centres American ‘conquest of a continent’ and erases Indigenous presence in order to equate the story of baseball with the story of America – with the story of home.¹⁸ Most strikingly, this excerpt and the broad framework of Burns’ documentary reinforces a common theme recurrent in historical accounts of baseball’s origins: the role the game plays in evoking a sense of home and belonging for early colonists, immigrant newcomers, and others *within* the American settler state.¹⁹ This typical narrative of baseball history can be traced to the long-standing liberal settler colonial tradition of disavowing the destructive processes of extermination, exclusion, and othering that helped to constitute baseball as the ‘national pastime’ and continue to structure the game today.²⁰ This disavowal is both a common feature in the national myths of American identity and in the structures of its most beloved games. In his review of the popular board game *Settlers of Catan*, Lorenzo Veracini notes, ‘even if the presence of indigenous peoples is simply disavowed, this absence is significant: after all, settlers are serial and systematic disavowers of indigenous peoples’.²¹ The stories that we tell about baseball history and its relationship to the pastoral colonial frontier are, indeed, reflective of the stories we tell about America in that they largely erase the presence of Indigenous peoples.

Thomas King offers an insightful analysis on the power of stories in constructing identity, remarking that, ‘the truth about stories is that that’s all we are’, while further suggesting that we can begin to shift the way we live our lives by changing the stories that we tell about our origins, our relationships, and our responsibilities.²² This is not to minimize the central role that material conditions play in struggles for justice, but rather to acknowledge the important role of storytelling in creating, legitimizing and re-imagining our societies.²³ Baseball is not immune to such forces. Historian Eric Selbin reminds us that ‘stories are reservoirs of views and values, a way for people to know themselves and associate themselves with (or distinguish themselves from) others, and are reflective of the past, present, and future their culture holds “true”’.²⁴ This is what I contend baseball’s origin stories were devised to accomplish. In hopes that we can re-imagine baseball’s futurity within a process of decolonization, we must first look at baseball’s origin stories from a different lens.

Close play at first: the origin myths of baseball in America

My analysis of baseball’s origin myths is most indebted to David Block whose groundbreaking research, *Baseball before we knew it*, is the most extensive work on baseball’s origin to date and is steeped in rigorous historical analysis.²⁵ Notably, Block’s research allows us to reflect on how myths about baseball’s origin emerged and how we can understand the evolution of these stories within a particular historical context (predominantly at the precipice of the consolidation of US nationalism and the settler state in the long nineteenth century).

Chadwick’s ‘rounders theory’ and the ‘Doubleday Cooperstown theory’ are the two most dominant baseball origins stories. In 1860, Henry Chadwick, a first generation migrant from England and inventor of the baseball box score, published the sport’s first annual guide and in it proclaimed that baseball was a game of English origin that had been derived from the old children’s game of rounders. Without a significant amount of empirical evidence and likely due to Chadwick’s high regard within the baseball world, the lineal relationship between the game of rounders and baseball in America became one of the dominant baseball origin stories of the last 150 years. Chadwick’s assertion that baseball derived from rounders was partly influenced by his own diasporic experience of playing the game as a child in England and then ‘discovering’ the sport of baseball to have similar rules of play as a migrant in America. Chadwick’s theory of baseball’s origins in America, however, lacked any supporting documentation for his assertions, and relied most closely on his childhood memories and observations about the similarities between the rules of play of baseball and the old English game of rounders.

Seeking to understand how Chadwick came to this conclusion, Block notes that the earliest reference to the game of rounders can be found in a children’s handbook titled *The Boy’s Own Book*, published in 1828 where it was said to be most popular in the west of England. He extrapolates that since Chadwick was born in the west of England only four years after the publication of the handbook, his personal experience with the game known as rounders contributed to his steadfast belief that this game was the progenitor of contemporary baseball. However, Block is quick to point out that if Chadwick had been born in London the debate may have instead been around whether baseball was a descendent of the game of ‘feeder’, a variation on the game of rounders played in the metropolis or if Chadwick had been born in any other region of the country perhaps there would have been no debate at all as ‘in most locales [the game] still bore its original eighteenth century name – “base-ball”’.²⁶ Based on this research the game of rounders was simply a variation of an already existing bat and ball game called ‘base-ball’ and, as such, the element of chance with regards to Henry Chadwick’s place of birth played heavily into the terms of the original debate in the USA.

What is perhaps more significant for our purposes is the underlying meaning behind Chadwick's baseball origin story. The arc of the narrative revolves around the transformation of a common eighteenth century English children's game into a highly structured and culturally significant part of nineteenth century American urban life. This could be said to parallel the desire of white settlers like Chadwick (particularly those who were more recent migrants) to understand their trajectory towards Americanization through the journey from English schoolboy to American adult. Written on the precipice of the US civil war, Chadwick's appeal to an Americanized identity of an old English game fits very well with the sentiment of the time in the urban north. Whether or not he was initially conscious of it, Henry Chadwick was engaged in the start of a battle over the significance and meaning of the game of baseball and its relationship to the stabilization of American settler colonial identity.

Such a process is referred to as 'boundary work' by social anthropologist Noel Dyck who notes that in sport, as in other areas of social life, differences and similarities are declared, made culturally significant and fashioned into identities for the groups or "imagined communities" thus constructed.²⁷ In order for Chadwick to imagine baseball as a distinctly American phenomenon with European roots, it is important for him to tell the story of the game's origins as one of migration, change, and re-construction in the settler colonial context. This process evokes a sense of belonging and a process of *becoming* American, rather than simply acknowledging the *importation* of traditional European games into the colonial context. This narrative also begins to construct insider/outsider boundaries of identity as they pertain to who belongs in America in as much as it bounds who belongs on the baseball diamond. It is this naturalization arc that was so affronting to Chadwick's greatest critics John Montgomery Ward and Albert Spalding.

By the late nineteenth century, with nationalist sentiment increasing, the doctrine of 'Manifest Destiny' bolstering the expansion of US colonialism on Turtle Island and the spread of US imperialism in Hawaii, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines, the framing of baseball's origin became a matter of significant contestation among former players who desired to assert that the sport was American by 'birth'. At the same time, baseball was being introduced as both a quintessential *traditional* game to be played in assimilationist Indian residential schools and as a *modern* sport set to be exported across the globe through the intervention of US baseball men.²⁸ For instance, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, whose policies of cultural genocide were forthright in the school's own mission statement saw baseball (among other forms of extracurricular activities) as integral in disconnecting Indigenous youth from their cultures, languages, and traditions and replacing them with a quintessentially American identity. While the school successfully produced some of the most famous early American Indian professional baseball greats, including Hall of Fame pitcher Chief Bender, their mission statement made this genocidal process abundantly clear:

It is the nature in our red brother that is better dead than alive, and when we agree with the oft-repeated sentiment that the only good Indian is a dead one, we mean this characteristic of the Indian. Carlisle's mission is to kill THIS Indian, as we build up the better man. We give the rising Indian something nobler and higher to think about and do, and he comes out a young man with the ambitions and aspirations of his more favored white brother. We do not like to keep alive the stories of his past, hence deal more with his present and his future.²⁹

The assimilationist strategies that dominated US expansionist policies at the turn of the twentieth century were no less violent than the processes of extermination used to push westward toward the colonial frontier.³⁰ Yet the processes of assimilation and exclusion played a particular role in the emergence of baseball as the 'national pastime' that helped to structure settler colonial identity in America at this time. Capitalist accumulation, white supremacy and dispossession were the main determinants of who was assimilated and who was excluded from the game. Thus, working class

migrants of European origin who had previously been excluded from the game due to their class status were incorporated into baseball teams under the structure of whiteness, while African-Americans faced fierce exclusion. Indigenous peoples conversely were taught baseball as an expressly assimilationist exercise. As Deloria explains in the context of American universities admitting Indigenous athletes into their institutions, ‘unlike blacks, Indians had long been enmeshed in the discourse of American assimilation. “Giving the Indian a chance” was a culturally appropriate move, a shouldering of the white man’s burden’.³¹ Thus, the apparent shift in the narrative surrounding baseball’s origins seems directly in-line with the way in which American identity was being asserted globally and forced onto Indigenous peoples’ whose lands were being stolen through material and cultural genocide. Baseball as a game provided an important tool to assert a distinctly American identity that was neither ‘snobbishly’ European nor ‘savagely’ Indian.

Bruno Cornellier, explains that more generally, ‘the modern, liberal settler state needs to become somewhat but never altogether Indian. It needs to imagine a certain filiation between the European settlers and the First Nations’.³² In doing so, the white settlers seek to claim a legitimate place as the rightful inheritors of the history of the colonized spaces they occupy while specifying a distinct delineation from their European forbearers whom they must transcend in order to claim a state of exceptionalism. By the turn of the twentieth century, baseball’s origin stories became an important space of contention to assert this mythos of American liberal exceptionalism.³³

John Montgomery Ward, an ex-baseball player driven by extreme nationalism was one of the first prominent people to criticize Chadwick’s theory on the origins of baseball. In his book *Baseball: How to Become a Player* he contends that baseball had been played in the USA for at least a century, likely since colonial times, and had, in fact, actually predated the ‘old’ English game of rounders.³⁴ For Ward, baseball’s origins could be traced to the ‘genius of an American boy’. It would take nearly two decades and the advent of a special commission on baseball’s origins to locate that mythical genius American boy in the figure of a civil war general named Abner Doubleday. In the meantime, Ward participated with other professional American ball players in a six-month ‘Around the World’ baseball tour organized by sporting goods magnate Albert Spalding. In parallel to the colonial expansion westward, the tour set out from Chicago and crossed west into the plains until reaching San Francisco where it would eventually continue on to Hawaii, Australia, Egypt, Italy, France and the British Isles. According to Block, among others, by the end of the tour players and promoters alike had returned with a renewed patriotic jingoism: ‘the oft-repeated account of this event places former National League president Abraham Mills at the podium, declaring with nationalist fervor that “patriotism and research alike vindicate the claim that [baseball] is American in its origin”’.³⁵ The crowd was said to have responded with repeated chants of ‘No rounders! No rounders!’ and in that moment signalled a break with Chadwick’s origin theory in favour of a story that would highlight baseball’s American exceptionalism.

It became critical for Ward and Spalding to establish a historical narrative of baseball’s origins that was wholly centred within America. A number of scholars, dignitaries, and political elite anxious to establish America’s political ascendancy also offered narratives of baseball history that could be set in an exclusively US context. For instance, Professor James Mooney, a scholar with the Bureau of Ethnology even went so far as to suggest that the game of baseball derived its origins ‘among the aborigines of the American continent, who played bat and ball for ages, for aught we know, before the dream of a new world filled the imagination of the Italian adventurer’.³⁶ While Mooney’s theory was not accepted among historians of the game, the sentiment that baseball could have possibly been an adaptation of Indigenous games by early American settlers paralleled thinking around governance, culture, and language of the

time. The apparent desire of Professor Mooney to incorporate Indigenous peoples into baseball's founding myths exemplifies the process of seeking to *adopt* 'Indianness' in hopes of assuming the rightful position of inheritors of a country. Jodi Byrd explains that this site of transposable Indianness helps to propagate American claims to territory and history in the settler state.³⁷ Mooney's assertion of baseball's mythical Indigenous origins resonated poorly with baseball's most avid nationalist supporters. For them, the game needed to be connected to the story of the 'self-made man', the colonial frontier, and the liberal individuality of America.

Advocates of the 'Baseball as America' paradigm sought instead the *erasure* of Indigenous peoples from the story while nonetheless attempting 'to define *themselves* in relation to a primitivity projected onto Native Americans whose disappearance they could recover and redeem'.³⁸ The desire to root baseball's origins outside of Europe and within a distinctly American context is part of a broader process steeped in settler colonialism in which the legitimacy of one's culture and claims to territory rests on a severing of ties with the colonial homeland and both an erasure and a reclaiming of past traditions by settler colonists as the true inheritors of the colonized territories. Jafri notes, 'settler/colonial desire is integral to the construction of settler subjectivities, to settler narratives, and to the project of erasure underlying the indigenizing efforts of settler projects'.³⁹ The Doubleday myth, as I will show played an important part in developing an American settler subjectivity through the erasure of Indigenous presence on the land.

Spalding convened a special commission that would help to establish baseball as being a game of American origin with an underlying desire to expand the game of baseball as a 'modern' sport steeped in US 'tradition' and open up a global market for his sporting equipment business.⁴⁰ The commission's method of inquiry was to solicit testimony from baseball old-timers in an effort to garner their earliest memories of the game. Naturally the results were varied and contradictory and as the commission came to a close in 1907 there was no clear evidence to substantiate that baseball was indeed of American derivation. Albert Spalding and Abraham G. Mills' desire to establish the game as American became so dogmatic that they eventually settled on taking the evidence of a single man named Abner Graves of Denver, Colorado. In his letter Graves recounts the now fabled myth that Abner Doubleday, who would later go on to become a general in the US Civil War, invented the game of baseball on a summer day along the shores of Lake Otsego in Cooperstown, New York. The protagonist, location, and folkloric origins of the story fit perfectly with the narrative arc that Spalding and before him John Montgomery Ward sought to establish.

While some baseball historians have established a personal connection between Abner Doubleday and Albert Spalding that could conceivably explain why the commission so eagerly endorsed Abner Grave's story at the time, I think the protagonist and location of baseball's origins advocated by Spalding's Special Baseball Commission warrants closer examination.⁴¹ Even though this origin story was founded on spurious accounts from a single source, the American public eagerly adopted Abner Doubleday as a national hero and Cooperstown, New York as the site of the first baseball game. Block describes how 'the Cooperstown tale rapidly found its way into children's school books, taking its place alongside other historical anecdotes like Ben Franklin and his kite, and George Washington and the cherry tree'.⁴² Why? It is my contention that the Cooperstown myth was so easily adopted precisely because it followed three recurrent storylines pivotal to historical narratives about the foundations of the US settler-state.

First, the Cooperstown myth sets the origins of baseball in a pastoral setting near an old colonial outpost. In doing so, Crepeau argues

baseball tied itself to one of the most historically enduring and powerful myths in American culture. Baseball writers stressed the rural origins of the players, expressed the rural resentment of the growing

urban dominance, praised rural simplicity and virtue, and condemned the corrupting forces of urban decadence.⁴³

The pastoral nature of the game helped to confirm a sense of rural belonging for the mainly urban practitioners of the sport. While indeed the game has been played in small towns and rural areas, its popularity and organization were, in fact, rooted in the urban metropolises.⁴⁴ Since the game of baseball represented for many urban workers their sole connection to land and nature, the Cooperstown story helped to reinforce the mythical agrarian past commonly shared among all who became American. In claiming an unmediated relationship to the ‘frontier’, ‘nature’, ‘wilderness’, settlers seek to escape from the confines of European tradition and to assert a unique American identity.⁴⁵

The thought of baseball as a surrogate for the colonial frontier permeated much of the early discourse on baseball’s origins and was at the heart of the Doubleday myth. Historian Steven M. Gelber suggests that the myth of Cooperstown as the game’s pastoral birthplace aligns closely with the idea that the west acted as a corridor for American colonial expansion. He notes,

The city and its businesses were closed crowded interior places of darkness, noise and bad air. The frontier was open, uncrowded, light and healthful. In this view, baseball is seen not merely as a safety valve like the west but as a miniature version of the west. For example, Murray Ross writes that baseball was ‘conceived in nostalgia in the resuscitation of the Jeffersonian dream. It established an artificial rural environment.’ This belief that baseball represents the agrarian ideal became so prevalent that some scholars still think that it was ‘a game of rural origins’.⁴⁶

Second, the erasure of Indigenous presence from these pastoral depictions of the American frontier is paralleled by the way in which the Doubleday baseball myth denies the presence of Indigenous peoples within and around the village of Cooperstown, New York. This disavowal underscores the second recurrent narrative evident within the Cooperstown myth: the desire of settlers to imagine themselves ‘a legitimate part of the continent’s ancient history’.⁴⁷ Cooperstown, New York sits on the traditional territories of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. The tract of land where William Cooper founded the village in 1786 was purchased as part of a questionable land deal from the estate of Colonel George Croghan, an early fur trader who had come in possession of the land through his ongoing relationships with the Six Nations Confederacy in the early eighteenth century.⁴⁸ The timing of the land transfer in 1785 occurred only two years after the end of the US war of independence and followed the mass expulsion of Haudenosaunee peoples from their traditional territories in what is now upstate New York as retribution for allying with the British during the war. Thus, the claims to Cooperstown as holding deep historical significance for baseball erases the long-standing histories of the Haudenosaunee people on those territories. Interestingly, the town of Cooperstown’s most famous resident, James Fenimore Cooper, the son of William Cooper was famous for his novels that helped to established the narrative of the noble savage and the disappearing Indian whose historical role is to endow European settlers with a sense of belonging on these lands.⁴⁹ In the vein of James Fenimore Cooper’s most highly regarded work, *The Last of the Mohicans*, the narrative of baseball originating on the shores of Lake Otsego in Cooperstown, New York seeks to legitimate American historical traditions on the land and unequivocally erase Indigenous presence from it. Kevin Bruyneel explains that this persistent process of claiming history by disavowing Indigenous presence,

is an important example of how the re-iteration of the event serves critically in the re-production and legitimization of settler colonialism as a structure, as a form of absolutism that is to most Americans so self-evident as to not be evident at all; as an absence and a presence at once.⁵⁰

This absence/presence paradigm is consistent within the history of baseball and continues to permeate its mythos today, including the way in which settlers make an annual pilgrimage to Dyersville, Iowa, the site of the filming of the baseball movie *Field of Dreams* in order to experience the deep histories of baseball's frontier.⁵¹ Similarly, the Cooperstown myth does much to cement the trope of 'baseball as America' through the mechanisms of nationalism, settlement, and group destiny that create clear-cut boundaries between settler insiders and outsiders by disavowing Indigenous presence in baseball's history.

Finally, like the protagonist Natti Bumppo in Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, Abner Doubleday plays the role of the noble white male hero who connects America's present with an ancient rural past. He is the self-made man that proves the values embedded within the American dream or as Brunyeel puts it, 'a nation of Horatio Algiers who give birth to their own success and therefore are not reliant on others or on the state'.⁵² Thus, the dominant narrative perpetuated by the Spalding Commission was that the game of baseball originated from the genius of a single boy and it was widely accepted and embraced in American society. Abner Doubleday is said to have cleverly come up with the game in 1839, showing the type of ingenuity that would also come to define American identity.⁵³

Robert Henderson, however, traces the ancestral origins of baseball to fertility rites ceremonies played during the springtime in western Europe with an emphasis on the collective roots of its origins, noting that the game was both Christianized and secularized thereafter. In his extensive historical work on bat and ball play, Henderson describes the traditional purpose of stoolball, one of baseball's antecedents, as such: 'There can be no doubt that this characteristic of Easter stoolball festivities has a direct association with the ancient pagan rites, with connotations of human fertility and child-bearing'.⁵⁴ For Henderson and most other serious historians of the sport, baseball's evolution into the modern game did not occur through a series of genius moments from enterprising young men, but rather evolved out of spiritual and cultural traditions that were collective in nature and were influenced by the socio-historic events of the given period. Relying on the work of Harold Peterson, who studied baseball-like games descending from multiple cultures, Block notes, 'these studies support a hypothesis that baseball did not spring from a single linear evolutionary path but is the ultimate product of a common cultural memory extending back thousands of years'.⁵⁵ This common cultural memory was transplanted from communal lands into cities during the period of *proletarianization* in Europe and then as part of the early settlement and *dispossession* of Indigenous territories in present-day North America.

Thomas Altherr, in his work on the agricultural and surveying contexts of baseball, ponders whether the game resonated with early colonial Americans and with urbanizing Europeans because of its allusion to property rights.⁵⁶ Altherr's work gives credence to the idea that the game of baseball appealed to early colonists because they were primarily concerned with colonial property relations. He notes,

by the 1780s the federal government had envisioned a more orderly geometric plan that would rationalize American westward expansion. Rectangularity based on squarely surveyed sections would add a more consistent precision missing in previous decades. Second, from the colonial era onward, matters of surveying, mapping, and territorial ownership preoccupied Euroamericans.⁵⁷

Henderson, in the midst of firmly debunking the Cooperstown myth, suggests that Abner Graves' letter came from a man groping dimly into his youthful experiences' and that he had

seized upon one of the outstanding members of his group, a boy of some years older than himself and perhaps an object of 'hero worship' and sixty-eight years later thrust upon him a fame to which he was no more entitled than any other boy of his time.⁵⁸

Henderson's contention that baseball emerged from a long and slow adaptation of traditional games to suit the social context of the children and adults who played it provides an opening in terms of how we can explain baseball's origins in a way that centres the material conditions of the time of its popularization in the American settler state. While financial considerations, personal prestige, and American jingoism played a significant part in the disagreement between Chadwick and Spalding over baseball's origins, the long-standing desire among settlers to claim belonging within the colonial context played an important role in stabilizing the Cooperstown myth.

Consistently lurking in the narrative background of both Chadwick's appeal to the process of migration and naturalization and Spalding's claims of the game's long-standing roots in America is a story of what it means to be American. Block argues that, indeed, both stories have been preciously maintained for nearly 150 years precisely because they appeal to the notion of baseball as America. He suggests that while the Doubleday myth has now been debunked, Chadwick's rounders theory continues to persist because:

It is conceivable that some in this country safeguard the theory because, in a certain way, it renews national pride in baseball's American provenance that was formerly stoked by the Doubleday Myth. After all, there's no special glow for Americans if baseball itself was English born and needed only patience to transform gradually into our modern pastime. Instead, if we contemplate an English children's game of a different name, rounders – which alone was nothing remarkable, but then upon arriving on our shores blossomed magically into beautiful baseball – then that is something to crow about.⁵⁹

Building on Block's analysis we can see how the desire to claim pride in baseball's American provenance also helps to construct an American cultural identity to legitimize claims to the settler colonial state. While 'emptied' Native lands are critical to the foundational myths of baseball's origin, Native people are purposely eliminated from the historical narrative. They do not get re-integrated into the narrative (and then only marginally) until the appearance of professional players of Indigenous descent within organized leagues, most coming from residential schools after being torn from their traditional cultures, communities, and languages. The narrative also deviates, as both Block and Henderson remind us, from the traditional communal origins of bat and ball games in Europe toward a decidedly more individualistic story. The following sections will delve more deeply into these questions by considering baseball as both a contact zone and as a site of traditional knowledge. I will then analyse the political context in which baseball organizes itself based on an insider/outsider binary. Finally, I will return to baseball's origins and the historical records on bat and ball play to imagine what decolonizing the story of baseball's history might look like.

Sliding into the Keystone Sack: baseball as a contact zone

A number of baseball historians and theorists have grappled with the question of why the game of baseball in particular appealed so deeply to Americans.⁶⁰ Drawing from anthropologist Clifford Geertz, Gelber suggests that we can gain a greater understanding of how the ordinary every day experience of a community or society can be understood by the games that we play.⁶¹ In the case of baseball in America, Gelber asserts: 'the techniques of the play-game are the techniques of the life-game reduced to manageable proportions'.⁶² With this in mind the overall structure and goals of the game and the physical manifestation and layout of the field are critical to our analysis. Additionally, the timing, the participants, and the frequency of play all help us to gain an understanding of the way in which baseball as a game resonates broadly with the lived experiences of those who play it.

The origins of baseball have been traced back to medieval ball games played during pagan ceremonies that were eventually Christianized and brought into Easter celebrations. In Block's work he attempts to create a theoretical flow chart that shows the evolution of European bat and ball games into a number of contemporary sports (i.e. baseball and cricket). One of the direct predecessors of the game that would come to be known as 'base-ball', was the English game of stool-ball. Henderson's research links stool-ball to Eastertime rites performed during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, but suggests that 'they went much further back than that to the ancient pagan festivals, such as the *Saturnalia*, when license and abandon were the order of the day'.⁶³ As Henderson observes, the game of stool-ball as well as other bat and ball games was often incorporated into spring-time fertility rites and commitment ceremonies between new lovers.⁶⁴ These ceremonies were connected to the changing of the seasons and incorporated numerous references to the land, nature, and sexuality. Even after the Christian adaptation of pagan ball play, the strong sexual component of the ritual was slow to disappear. For instance, Block states, 'virtually all early references to the game portray it as an Easter-time pastime practiced in churchyards, but infused with strong suggestions of courtship and sex'.⁶⁵ It is my suggestion that the game of stool-ball's transition and evolution into cricket and baseball is influenced not just by the change in game-play, but also the social conditions in which people lived.

By understanding the material context of a particular group or community we are better able to understand why some games become a vital part of their sense of identity and belonging while others fade away. We are also able to understand how those same games are then transformed by the social conditions, geographies, and temporalities of a given historical period. As communal bonds and ties to the land were broken in medieval Europe through enclosures and the proletarianization of the population, the meanings and purposes of the games people played were also transformed. Life and work conditions for many English peasants deteriorated during the transition to the capitalist mode of production and so did the overall goals of the game that came to be baseball. For instance, the notion of returning 'home' safely likely resonated with those who were displaced from their lands. It is also more likely that since adults and even most children were put into work in factories for significant hours at a time, bat and ball games became secularized and associated more closely with the children of the bourgeoisie who would have more time for leisure. Similarly, as rapid urbanization occurred in colonial America, the geography and social context of New York City in the early-to-mid 1800s produced the appropriate conditions for men of professional standing like Alexander Cartwright and the members of the Knickerbockers Baseball Club (i.e. those with enough wealth or standing in the community to be afforded leisure time) to codify and organize the game they must have played in their childhoods in a way that was unprecedented.

As early settler colonists arrived in the eastern woodlands areas of Turtle Island, their games were adapted to reflect the social conditions and geography in which they were played. Altherr suggests that the 'staggering abundance of forests ... allowed even the most amateur carpenter the choice of very prime wood and encouraged profligacy with wood supplies'.⁶⁶ Since wood became such an integral building component in settler societies, Gelber proposes that the game-play of baseball appealed to settlers because it incorporated some of the woodworking and farming skills that were fundamental to their daily life.⁶⁷ Following the work of Altherr and Gelber, we can identify two important foundational characteristics of the game of baseball that appealed to colonists: the relationship of baseball to the common-use of fields and the goal of returning 'home' safely.

While in agricultural spaces the commons were multi-use spaces of land that were shared among community members for 'farming, grazing, militia trainings, sermons and speeches, public punishment and occasional executions, and, last but not least, recreation', the breaking

down of social connections in cities was partially the result of a lack of shared common spaces.⁶⁸ For many urban dwellers baseball fields were one of the few public spaces that were held in common and helped to maintain some of the social bonds in community. While acknowledging the urban organization of the game, Altherr suggests that some of the rules of baseball and the structure of the field of play developed in an agricultural context and thus follow agricultural seasons.⁶⁹ Altherr's analysis centres on the historical period between the signing of the 1763 Royal Proclamation and the end of the US war of independence. Not coincidentally, this is the time when the new US government promised significant colonial westward expansion to settlers that had been prohibited by treaties between the British Crown and Indigenous peoples. He notes, 'from the colonial era onward, matters of surveying, mapping, and territorial ownership preoccupied EuroAmericans'.⁷⁰ Altherr offers an important and key contribution to this analysis by suggesting that perhaps the surveying and mapping processes that were ongoing through colonial expansion were being replicated on a micro level to construct the ball field in particular ways. This included infields and outfields; fair and foul territories; the square shape of the baseball 'diamond' and its exact measurements. And although the playing of baseball in pre-industrial communities was still often connected with days of congregation (such as Easter or the Fourth of July holiday) and peaked during the times in which farmers were waiting for the maturation of their crops, 'the game gaining American favor as the rallying phrase of Manifest Destiny sounded as a clarion call by the mid-1840s was baseball'.⁷¹

A hypothesis as to why baseball's main goal – to return 'home' safely – has been one of the constant and enduring parts of this evolving game in America is that perhaps early settlers and colonial soldiers could relate to the feeling of moving from base-camp to base-camp all under the pretense that their mission was ultimately to return home safely. But to explore this hypothesis requires that we engage seriously with settler colonial wars of expansion, extermination, and genocide against Indigenous peoples, something that baseball historians have largely disavowed. Altherr finds some of the earliest mentions of playing baseball in America in the diaries of Henry Dearborn, a New Hampshire officer who was a member of a military force sent to attack the Haudenosaunee peoples in the spring of 1779.⁷² In fact, a number of the first references to the game can be found in military journals, including those of soldiers and officers fighting in the US war of independence, the War of 1812, the Mexican-American War, the US Civil War and numerous exercises of colonial expansion and war against Indigenous peoples. For many soldiers the game of baseball resonated with the day-to-day realities of their lives. While played by a variety of people, baseball spread and resonated most thoroughly in the military experience of territorial expansion undertaken by settlers against the long-standing Indigenous communities whose lands they coveted. In this sense it would be easy to understand the game's popularization as being reflective of the experience of longing for home and belonging by settler colonists and the unconscious attempt to rationalize the taking and partitioning of land. As Altherr suggests, 'every run around the bases presaged the later land runs and booms that energized Manifest Destiny, a phenomenon that coincided with the Knickerbockers and the concretization of baseball in Manhattan in the 1840s'.⁷³ Thus, the connection to pastoral longing and a desire for common space are weaved into the settler colonial myth of American belonging and connection to the land in the urban centres where the debates of the games origins took place. This conceptualization of the baseball diamond as a communal space follows the logic of what Mark Rifkin describes as 'settler common sense'. The narration of baseball's history as a reclamation of 'the commons' in an urban context follows the storyline of Native disappearance, individual agency, public land as authentic/pure, and the insistence on strict property rights that Rifkin suggested are necessary to construct the USA as distinct from international ones.⁷⁴ It also ties baseball's history to the formation of the nation-state and the emergence of Americans as a people.

Mary Louise Pratt refers to such a process as a ‘contact zone’. Contact zones are ‘social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today’.⁷⁵ When trying to theorize baseball as a contact zone, it is important to understand that we are not simply speaking about a historical context but rather the conditions of contact that are lived out in our day-to-day lives right now. This is the structural nature of settler colonialism. For instance, the current debate over the use of racist logos and team names in professional sports (including those of the Cleveland Indians and Atlanta Braves) is part of a long-standing relationship between the desire to play Indian and to claim belonging on these territories.⁷⁶ By understanding baseball as being a contact zone of American identity we can put colonialism into focus in terms of how the game is played to this day. The colonial processes embedded in baseball history have not ended and are, in fact, pervasive throughout the game and how it is played today. Not only through the use of racist mascots or team monikers, but also in the way in which the game evokes an unquestioning nationalism and American identity that erases ongoing processes of colonization and imperialism. Morgensen argues,

The biopolitics of settler colonialism results from global political and economic processes, which displace Native peoples in Diasporas on Native lands, and form a transnational proving ground *within* settler societies to produce a white settler state for imperial projection abroad.⁷⁷

As baseball started to contribute to the stabilization of American identity in the settler colonial context, the importance of spreading American cultural hegemony through the exportation of the game abroad became of central importance to its promoters and to political leaders alike.

Line drive to the hot corner: baseball and America’s insiders/outside

At the dawn of the nineteenth century, with the consolidation of the US nation state through forced displacement, genocide, and the removal of Indigenous peoples from their lands, the game that had become synonymous with American national identity was now too in a position to expand its hegemonic reach. Organized baseball was becoming a key instrument in constructing insiders and outsiders within the American settler colonial state most evidently in the way in which Black baseball players were first informally and then explicitly barred from the professional leagues. Snelgrove et al. explain that the colonial process of ‘settling’, ‘remains differentiated in terms of race, national-origin, religion, class, dis/ability, sexuality, and gender. All of these differentiations though are underwritten by the dispossession of Indigenous lands and eschewal of Indigenous governance orders’.⁷⁸ As such, baseball became a site of contestation *within* the nation-state over who belonged and who could be considered American and a site of imperialist ambition *outside* the nation-state as the desire to assert American cultural dominance paralleled the military expansionism of Manifest Destiny.

No other event exemplified this process more than Spalding’s World Tour of 1888–1889 in which the sporting goods monopolist sought to expand his market globally by taking his own team, the Chicago White Stockings, and a team of ‘All-Americans’ on a tour through the colonial west and to five different continents with the jingoistic mission to spread the American game. As Edward Said notes, ‘ideas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied’.⁷⁹ Thus, to understand baseball’s cultural expansion requires us to delve into the ways this process was embedded in EuroAmerican colonialism and imperialism.

From the onset of the world tour, Spalding had advertised the players as ‘exponents not just of America’s national game but of America itself’ and to a great extent the tour was designed to

perpetuate US cultural imperialism.⁸⁰ The narrative that enveloped the tour included two major and recurrent themes in baseball history: the first the desire to ‘civilize the savage’ or to bring a modern version of a traditional game to ‘backwater’ places, the second to assert a culture distinct and superior to that of old world Europe. Through the writings of players, Spalding himself, and journalists who joined the trip, we get a sense of how important it was for the tour to assert baseball as a key component of American cultural hegemony. For instance, it was Spalding’s belief that ‘sport, both professional and recreational, would provide a physical outlet for the restless pioneer energy that had gone into conquering the frontier’.⁸¹ The first two legs of the trip crossed through newly conquered and colonized territories in what was now seen as the ‘American heartland’ and continued onward to the occupied island nation of Hawai’i. A news report by Harry Palmer, a noted sports writer, describing the overall reaction of the tourists on the first leg of their trip, asserts:

The days of the bison, the Indian scout, and the red raiders of the immigrant settlement are over, it is true, yet on every hand one sees evidence of life so crude, when compared with the methods and surroundings of an existence in the large cities of the East, that people, their striking characteristics, their broad Western accent, their evident thrift and enterprise, and the apparent, though as yet imperfectly developed, resources of the country, are as interesting a study as any to be met with in a journey around the globe.⁸²

The transfiguration of the baseball narrative on this trip from one of pastoral origins to an urban and civilizing activity is instructive as to how the game came to be seen as a symbol of American modernity and cultural ascendancy. For the frontier settlements to be transformed from the wild and crude cowboy west that had just recently ‘vanquished the Indian’ to a modern and culturally acceptable part of America required that civilizing culture be exported from urban industrial cities of the east. However, even along this civilizing mission there is a desire to keep intact the nostalgic and rugged story of the enterprising and thrifty white settlers and their relationship to the taming of the land and the ‘disappearance of the Indian’. This discourse gets complicated as the players themselves are faced with the ongoing process of colonial genocide during their trip. For instance, Jimmy Ryan a player for the All-Americans wrote in his diary while sitting on the train heading west towards San Francisco, that ‘There is nothing to amuse the passengers save a few forlorn looking Indians, who are always found around the railway stations, clothed in a red blanket and trying to look as majestic as the Bartholdi statue’.⁸³ Ryan’s musings are instructive as to the way in which the presence of Indigenous peoples, glaringly consistent along the tour, are erased in the greater narrative of baseball’s westward expansion. And while it might seem as though Ryan’s comments should be attributed to his own personal individual reflections and biases, Jafri reminds us that settler colonial desire ‘manifests itself at the collective level even as it expresses itself at the individual level. When settler desire installs itself as individual desire, it makes invisible its structural dimensions’.⁸⁴

The construction of a national identity within settler colonial states like the USA is predicated on developing a collective notion distinguishing ‘us’ Americans against the internal ‘them’ of Indigenous, Black, and other non-white peoples and the external ‘them’ of both European and non-European peoples and cultures. As opposed to nationalism tied to language or place seen in Europe, settler colonial nationalism must claim an identity that is both descendent from and superior to its European ancestors, but at the same time superior to and incorporating Indigenous peoples and territories.⁸⁵ Deloria argues convincingly that ‘Indian Others’ are constructed by settlers along two critical axes:

They imagined one axis – the noble savage – in terms of the positive and negative values that could be assigned to Indians and that could then be reflected back upon a Self, either as a cultural critique

or colonial legitimation. Equally important, they imagined a second axis focused not on Indian good or evil, but upon the relative distance that Indian Others were situated from this Self-in-the-making.⁸⁶

The conceptualization of Indigenous Hawaiians by the mostly working class players and journalists who took part on the trip as barbaric and lascivious played on the sexualizing and dehumanizing tropes that helped to construct the upright and dignified American. Ironically, after all of the bluster and celebrations of their arrival in Hawai'i, the teams were never given permission to play because the only opportunity to do so was on a Sunday and game play had been banned by the occupying US administration. The attempt by Spalding and the players to convince the administrators to allow for the game to be played on Sunday, in fact, created a situation in which King Kalakaua attempted to assert sovereignty over his territories by urging the players to ignore the colonial policy and play the game. In a sign of the growing adoption of baseball as a tool to assert their own national sovereignty, Indigenous Hawaiians (including the King himself) had attempted to turn the imperialist baseball tour into a defiance of American colonial rule by demanding that the games be played on Sunday.⁸⁷ Spalding, whose National League held a similar ban on the play of games on Sunday, finally acquiesced to the colonial administrations desires and no game of baseball was ever played during the tour in Hawai'i.

The rest of the tour through Australia, Sri Lanka, Egypt, and Europe presents us with important insights into the complicated relationship that the mostly working class players had with colonialism and the deepening ideologies of Orientalism and white supremacy. For instance, as their boat travelled between Australia and Sri Lanka, Lamster describes how the players' fascination with scientific classification and racial hierarchy became a dominant theme of the trip. Referring to the player's interest in systems of racial classification, he notes:

[The players applied a] skewed application of the Darwinian project that would somehow allow the Occidental observer to render his Oriental subject separate, inferior, and harmless. The sad irony in this instance was that the players themselves were predominantly first-and-second-generation emigrants – several had made the journey to America in steerage themselves. But sympathy for these other strivers seemed to elude the men.⁸⁸

Because the ideologies of racial hierarchy were already fundamentally entrenched through the doctrine of white supremacy among the players, they failed to see commonality with non-whites who themselves were in the process of migration. This contradiction was most apparent when during a celebration called *la bataille des fleurs* in Nice, two players of Irish ancestry, Mark Baldwin and John Healy took the opportunity to throw a heavy bouquet of flowers at fast-ball speed at the head of Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, who was among the revellers. They would recount this feat to the other players as striking a blow against the 'colonial oppressor'. In this case, the players could identify and act upon the structural forces of colonialism as it impacted them directly, but could not extend solidarity or empathy with the ongoing struggles of non-whites in their touring party, the places that they visited, and most glaringly in the places they now called 'home'. Within this discourse, the importance of baseball as both a mission of civilization among non-whites and a mission of legitimization of American identity among Europeans could happen simultaneously. In a sense, it mirrored the quintessential Creole American nationalist experience of attempting to claim sameness and difference at the same time.

The spread of baseball globally was influenced greatly by US imperialism and Christianizing missions in places like Japan, Korea, Latin America, Puerto Rico, Hawai'i. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the notion of 'Baseball as America' (as a recent Baseball Hall of Fame

exhibit was named) had deep resonance in the USA. As such, baseball became a site of contestation over who belonged and who was an outsider within the American settler state. This insider/outsider work is conducted primarily as a means of identifying who could claim belonging within the settler colonial state. These boundaries, however, are constantly shifting and at various times of crisis throughout history some 'Others' or outsiders will be re-incorporated within the realm of American identity or those who had been previously included would be eschewed in order to help stabilize the settler colonial state. During the Second World War the internment of baseball players of ethnic Japanese-origin (many of whom were American-born), included the vaunted Asahi Tigers who were a dominant force in the early twentieth century history of baseball in the Pacific Northwest.⁸⁹ For many of these players, it was the baseball diamonds constructed within the internment camps that provided them the space to re-affirm their belonging within Canadian/US society and to humanize themselves in the eyes of the forces that were sent to contain them. Morgensen argues that by 'positioning non-Native people of color *outside* a power relation all defined as Native are made to *inhabit*,' white settlers consolidate their control of 'emptied' land by both eliminating Indigenous people from that context (through genocide, erasure, or assimilation) and absenting non-Native people of colour 'from the very power relation *producing* them as racialized populations' within the settler state.⁹⁰ Baseball, through its appeal as the 'national pastime' is used as a tool to maintain this continued relationship of power.

Safe at home: decolonizing baseball's origin stories

Throughout this paper I have attempted to show how baseball provides us with an important cultural example of the structure of colonialism within our society. Baseball metaphors help to explain our everyday life, our relationships to each other, and our relationships to land. They are an important part of what it means to think of oneself as American. The game's historical emergence at the side of the American nation-state has been of paramount importance in instilling a sense of belonging among settlers and in forming the desire of new immigrants to be incorporated into the polity of American settler society. However, to resist the transhistoricity of the settler colonial context of baseball's origin stories requires that we denaturalize settler presence on Indigenous territories. Snelgrove et al. warn that if 'we don't understand how settlers are produced we run the risk of representing settlers as some sort of transhistorical subject with transhistorical practices'.⁹¹ Clearly in re-examining baseball's origin stories I do not want to risk falling into a defensive move to innocence that is commonly undertaken by settlers to deflect complicity in the colonial process.

So, what might a process of decolonization look like in this context? While it may seem trite or peripheral to discuss decolonization in the context of a mere game, particularly given the way in which settler radicals have tended to incorporate acknowledgement of stolen lands in a performative and complacent manner. However, I believe that the historical role of baseball as foundational to an American settler identity warrants serious critique and a re-interpreted history. Tuck and Yang presciently warn us about the risks of using the concept of decolonization as a stand-in for things that we want to improve in society. They note:

When metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future. Decolonize (a verb) and decolonization (a noun) cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist, even if they are justice frameworks. The easy absorption, adoption, and transposing of decolonization is yet another form of settler appropriation.⁹²

As a game so invested in the project of identity-creation, the practice of decolonizing baseball should pose some important and discomfiting questions. First among those is what decolonizing baseball would mean in terms of disrupting property relations and the settler conception of 'home'? Coulthard contends that the settler-colonial relationship is characterized by a particular form of domination, the 'interrelated discursive and nondiscursive facets of economic, gendered, racial, and state power' that continue to facilitate dispossession of Indigenous peoples and undermine struggles for self-determination.⁹³ In this sense, the unravelling of baseball's origin stories to unveil their roots in settler colonialism plays only a partial role in challenging the discursive elements that stabilize American national identity. Baseball is not a sideshow or stand-in for on-the-ground and material change needed to disrupt our conceptions of settler futurity and to ease settler guilt.⁹⁴ But by delving into the history, traditions, and structure of a game like baseball, we can temporarily disrupt the unquestioned normalcy of the racist and colonial beliefs and assumptions that help to legitimize settler belonging on these lands.⁹⁵

To begin a discussion about what it might mean to decolonize our relationship to baseball requires us to examine the game in both its historical context and in its role in maintaining a hegemonic identity myth about what it means to be American today. Kanien'kehá:ka scholar Taiaiake Alfred provides a particularly useful way for us to think about that process, noting, 'Transformations begin inside each person, but decolonization starts becoming a reality when people collectively and consciously reject colonial identities and institutions that are the context of violence, dependency and discord in indigenous communities'.⁹⁶ Thus the process of decolonizing the story of baseball may provide us with useful tools and strategies to do the important work of rejecting colonial identities and institutions and building relationships of solidarity, respect, and mutuality with Indigenous peoples and nations on a broader level. As a means of opening up this discussion, I share some preliminary thoughts on the types of processes we might engage in to decolonize our relationship to baseball and its origin stories.

First, we need to reflect on the roots of the origin stories. We can be pretty certain that on a summer day in either 1839 or 1840 on the shores of Lake Otsego, young children from the families of recent settlers played a game of baseball. New to some of the kids and possibly handed down by tradition to others, the game so captivated the memory of at least one of the youngsters on the field that nearly 70 years later he would pen an impassioned letter claiming that on this site and at that time something new, something genuinely American was born. The problem with that story is that there have been dozens of others bearing the same claim. For instance, Dr Adam Ford penned a similar letter recollecting that, in fact, the first game of baseball took place across the northern colonial border in a town called Beachville, Ontario in 1838.⁹⁷ Regardless of the location, the underlying storyline should be a familiar one, the desire to claim place and history as one's own, which is the exact story told by settlers to justify their place on stolen Indigenous territories. For many of the old-timers who recounted stories of playing baseball in their youth, the game helped them to form a sense of American identity. As Nigel Dyck reminds us,

the politics of identity can be seen to revolve around the definitional processes by which boundaries are noted, maintained, relaxed or shifted over time. To draw attention to the boundaries that are said to separate 'us' from 'them' is to proclaim a programme for managing social relations behind as well as across boundaries.⁹⁸

It is important to disrupt and challenge the way in which this boundary work is used to legitimize occupation, displacement, and settlement in the USA today.

Some of this work has occurred through the writing of Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars and baseball enthusiasts who have attempted to re-position Indigenous peoples and territories

within the story of baseball's history. Jeffery Powers-Beck, for instance, provides an important history of American Indian integration in baseball from 1897 to 1945 that problematizes the 'chief' nickname given to almost every Indigenous ball player and the way in which the tropes of the noble savage play out in the fetishizing of these players in the game's history.⁹⁹ Dennis J. Banks, a member of the American Indian Movement writes about the early struggles against racist mascots and iconography in Major League Baseball and other sports by re-inserting the role of baseball as an assimilationist and colonialist tool through residential schools like the Carlisle Indian School.¹⁰⁰ Philip Deloria sketches the way in which settler adoption fantasies, what Tuck and Yang describe as 'the settler colonial imagination in which the Native (understanding that he is becoming extinct) hands over his land, his claims to the land, his very Indian-ness to the settler for safe-keeping', permeated assimilationist policy towards Indigenous peoples through sports like baseball and football.¹⁰¹ While these reaffirmations of Indigenous presence and the historical conditions of their participation in the history of baseball is vital to the process of unsettling the myths of baseball's origins, it is also the responsibility of non-Indigenous peoples to problematize the history of the game within our societies. For instance, more historical research needs to be done to explore the way in which the game of baseball expanded during the height of colonial expansion, Indian wars, and early settlement. Altherr's important contribution to the field of study around the agricultural and surveying contexts for baseball's organization provides some useful direction to begin this pursuit.¹⁰² Gaining a greater understanding of the way in which the game's structure and play is shaped today by the historical processes of colonization, property rights, urbanization, and desires for belonging would begin to reframe our relationship to this game and to the history of colonial occupation, genocide, and displacement that are as intertwined as a ball stuck in the webbing of a player's mitt.

However, there is tangible work to be done at this very moment. The growing struggle against racist depictions of Indigenous peoples as the mascots or monikers of professional and amateur baseball teams is a tangible place to develop relationships of support and solidarity. The long-standing protest against the Cleveland Indians by the American Indian Education Center among other Indigenous groups has gained mainstream attention in recent years.¹⁰³ There is a need, however, to steep the analysis of this anti-racist movement in a deeper understanding of baseball history and the role of colonialism in the emergence of the game. Current mainstream responses to these protests rely heavily on what Coulthard refers to as the politics of recognition by seeking to adjust and re-incorporate a less offensive portrayal of Indigenous peoples into baseball's history without acknowledging or acting on the multiple ways in which the sport has been shaped by and contributes to the process of colonialism.¹⁰⁴ More broadly, as a pedagogical tool, the process of retelling the story of baseball through a decolonial or anti-colonial lens could help to challenge the dominant myths of American identity formation. This would require settlers to take the responsibility to sever our emotional attachment to the 'Baseball as America' myth and as Alfred suggests, reimagine ourselves

not as citizens with the privileges conferred by being a descendent of colonizers or newcomers from other parts of the world benefitting from white imperialism, but as human beings in equal and respectful relation to other human beings and the natural environment.¹⁰⁵

This reimagined relationship would require us to consider the environmental impact of creating new stadiums or baseball fields, to challenge the nationalistic and jingoistic tropes that become ritualized at the beginning of and during baseball games (i.e. the singing of the national anthem, the wearing of camouflage jerseys to promote militarism, the singing of God Bless America, et cetera), and to re-evaluate the underlying principles and structures that dominate the exploitative labour conditions of the game today. This work can also be done on a grassroots

level on the diamonds and fields that typify amateur, unorganized, and informal baseball. For instance: how can the baseball diamond be used as a community space? What might it look like to use games like baseball as a stepping-stone to re-engaging in respectful relationships with Indigenous peoples? I believe that there are elements embedded in the baseball's ancient history that can help us along this journey, particularly its traditional relationship with the spiritual and the sacred which remains palimpsestic within the way that we relate to the game even today.

Finally, we should reflect on the core principles of baseball in order to re-imagine the game outside of the logics of colonialism. The game's preoccupation with home and returning 'home' safely should make us question our own relationship to place and belonging. What does 'home' mean to us in a settler colonial context? This long-standing principle of the game may have meant different things in different eras. For Europeans who practiced pagan ceremonies and rituals, the sense of home could very well have been rooted in connections to land and place and the passing of the seasons. Christianized Europeans may have seen a resemblance to the stations of the cross and the journey to Heaven and incorporated it into Easter traditions. Peasants being proletarianized at the dawn of the industrial revolution and longing to return to the pastoral lands from which they were displaced could have adapted the game to reflect that reality. And for the colonist in America it might have been a way to assert belonging and proprietorship over land. If we are to decolonize or disrupt this sense of belonging and to re-imagine our relationships with Indigenous peoples and the territories we call home in the current context, we too will need to shift the meanings ascribed to the games that we play and the stories that we tell about their origins. In a sense baseball is a tradition, a practice, a way of being that has shifted and evolved to remain relevant to those who have played the game within multiple historical contexts and geospatial locations over hundreds of years. Yet, its underlying principles continue to follow the seasons, appeal to the sacred, defy linear time constraints, and offer a glimpse of ways of being outside of the dominant logics of our time.

Notes on contributor

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Notes

1. On the history of exclusion in baseball based on the basis of gender, see Ann Travers, 'Thinking the Unthinkable: Imagining an "Un-American," Girl-friendly, Women and Trans-Inclusive Alternative for Baseball', *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 37, no. 1 (2013): 78–96; Jennifer Ring, *Stolen Bases: Why American Girls don't Play Baseball* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008). On the intersections of gender, class, sexuality, and racial exclusions in baseball, see Richard C. King, 'On Being a Warrior: Race, Gender and American Indian Imagery in Sport', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 23, no. 2 (2006): 315–30; Lisa Doris Alexander, *Race on First, Class on Second, Gender on Third, and Sexuality up to Bat: Intersectionality and Power in Major League Baseball* (Unpublished Doctoral diss., Bowling Green University, 2007). For more on racism and racial exclusion in baseball history, see Dave Zirin, *Peoples History of Sports in the United States* (New York: New Press, 2009). For a discussion of how immigration status plays a part in creating difference in baseball see, Anthony Burgos Jr., 'Left Out: Afro-Latinos, Black Baseball, and the Revision of Baseball's Racial History', *Social Text* 98 27, no. 1 (2009): 27–58.
2. Dave Zirin, *Bad Sports: How Owners Are Ruining the Games We Love* (New York: New Press, 2012) on the way in which owners of professional sports teams hold a stake in controlling the history and narrative of their respective sports. See Steven A. Riess, *Touching Base: Professional Baseball and American Culture in the Progressive Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999) for a greater discussion on the way that baseball's history has been intimately tied to American culture.
3. David Block, *Baseball before We Knew It: A Search for the Roots of the Game* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 1.

4. Mark Rifkin, 'Settler Common Sense', *Settler Colonial Studies* 3, no. 3–4 (2012): 322–40.
5. Harold Seymour and Dorothy Seymour Mills, *Baseball: The Early Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960); Riess, *Touching Base*.
6. Scott Lauria Morgensen, *Spaces between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. ix.
7. Robert W. Henderson, *Ball, Bat and Bishop: The Origin of Ball Games* (New York: Rockport Press, 1947); David Block, *Baseball before We Knew It*; William Humber, *Diamonds of the North: A Concise History of Baseball in Canada* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Steven A. Riess, *Touching Base*; John Thorn, *Baseball in the Garden of Eden: The Secret History of the Early Game* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011).
8. Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Kevin Brunyeel, 'The American Liberal Colonial Tradition', *Settler Colonial Studies* 3, nos. 3–4 (2013): 311–21.
9. Turtle Island is a term used by several Northeastern Woodland Indigenous nations, especially the Haudenosaunee Six Nations confederacy for the continent of North America.
10. Arthur Waldo, *True Heroes of Jamestown* (Miami: American Institute of Polish Culture, 1977). David Block was the first to make the connection between Waldo's writing on early Polish settlers and their relationship to bat and ball play in the USA.
11. Waldo, *True Heroes of Jamestown*, 101.
12. Thomas L. Altherr, 'A Place Level Enough to Play Ball: Baseball and Baseball-Type Games in the Colonial Era, Revolutionary War, and Early American Republic', *Nine* 8, no. 1 (2000): 5–50.
13. Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 5.
14. Morgensen, *Spaces between Us*.
15. *Ibid.*, 52.
16. Patrick Wolfe, 'Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native', *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409.
17. Ken Burns, 'Baseball, The American Epic', *American Antiquarian Society Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Fund Lectures on American History*, 1995. Lecture conducted in Worcester, Massachusetts, 19 October 1994, 249.
18. Burns seems conscious, however, of the settler colonial myth of American that he continues to perpetuate. For instance he notes,

We must look to so-called ordinary people whose lives and examples animate the best in me, animate the best in us. And we need to look at how we make our national myth, that is to say how we lie and invent ourselves for posterity. (p. 250)

19. The interrelationship between baseball and belonging in America is central to the work of a number of historians of the sport, see Steven A. Riess, *Touching Base* and Thorn, *Baseball in the Garden of Eden* for an analysis with this particular focus.
20. Kevin Brunyell, 'The American Liberal Colonial Tradition', *Settler Colonial Studies* 3, nos. 3–4 (2013): 311–21.
21. Lorenzo Veracini, 'Review: Settlers of Catan', *Settler Colonial Studies* 3, no. 1 (2013): 132.
22. Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2003), 153.
23. Eric Selbin, *Revolution, Rebellion, Resistance: The Power of Story* (New York: Zed Books, 2010); William H. Sewell Jr., *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005); Francesca, Polletta, *It Was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
24. Selbin, *Revolution, Rebellion, Resistance*, 53.
25. Block, *Baseball before We Knew It*.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
27. Noel Dyck, *Games, Sports and Cultures* (New York: Berg Oxford International Publishers, 2000), 32.
28. See, Philip J. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004) for a detailed discussion on the way baseball was central to the assimilationist practices at the Carlisle Indian School. See, Mark Lamster, *Spalding's World Tour: The Epic Adventure that Took Baseball Around the Globe – and Made it America's Game* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007) for a broader discussion on how baseball was advertised as a modern game through imperialist capitalist ventures like Spalding's 1888 World Tour.

29. Jeffery Powers-Beck, "'Chief': The American Indian Integration of Baseball 1897–1945', *American Indian Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2001): 512.
30. Patrick Wolfe, 'After the Frontier: Separation and Absorption in US Indian Policy', *Settler Colonial Studies* 1, no. 1 (2011): 13–51.
31. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, 119.
32. Bruno Cornellier, 'The "Indian Thing": On Representation and Reality in the Liberal Settler Colony', *Settler Colonial Studies* 3, no. 1 (2013): 50.
33. Brunyell, 'The American Liberal Colonial Tradition'.
34. John Montgomery Ward, *Baseball: How to Become a Player* (Self-Published, 1888).
35. Block, *Baseball before We Knew It*, 9.
36. James Mooney (1889) is cited in Block's *Baseball before We knew It*, 9.
37. Jodi A. Byrd, 'Follow the Typical Signs: Settler Sovereignty and its Discontents', *Settler Colonial Studies* 4, no. 2 (2014): 151–4.
38. Morgensen, *Spaces between Us*, 48.
39. Beenash Jafri, 'Desire, Settler Colonialism, and the Racialized Cowboy', *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 37, no. 2 (2013): 79.
40. Lamster, *Spalding's World Tour*.
41. David Block makes the link between Doubleday and Spalding through their mutual involvement in an occult group called the Theosophical Society. While technically only Doubleday and Spalding's wife Elizabeth were members of the group, from his research it seems certain that Albert Spalding was firmly committed to the work and had prior knowledge about who Abner Doubleday was and what the importance of this 'discovery' would be to his legacy as part of the group. Block even goes so far as to show how the initial publications about Doubleday being the founder of baseball ran in a journal that was printed by the Theosophical Society itself.
42. Block, *Baseball before We Knew It*, 17–18.
43. Richard C. Crepeau, 'Urban and Rural Images in Baseball', *Journal of Popular Culture* 9, no. 2 (1975): 317.
44. Crepeau, 'Urban and Rural Images in Baseball'.
45. Mark Rifkin, 'The Frontier as (movable) Space of Exception', *Settler Colonial Studies* 4, no. 2 (2014): 176–80.
46. Steven M. Gelber, 'Working at Playing: The Culture of the Workplace and the Rise of Baseball', *Journal of Social History* 16, no. 4 (1983): 6.
47. Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 25.
48. William G. Beardslee, 'An Otsego Frontier Experience: The Gratzburg Tract, 1770–1795', *New York History* 79, no. 3 (1998): 233–54.
49. Deloria, *Playing Indian*.
50. Brunyell, 'The American Liberal Colonial Tradition', 316.
51. Stephen D. Mosher, 'Fielding Our Dreams: Rounding Third in Dyersville', *Sociology of Sport Journal* 8 (1991): 272–80.
52. Brunyell, 'The American Liberal Colonial Tradition', 315.
53. Henderson, *Ball, Bat and Bishop*.
54. *Ibid.*, 71.
55. Block, *Baseball before We Knew It*, 104.
56. Thomas L. Altherr, 'Basepaths and Baselines: The Agricultural and Surveying Contexts of the Emergence of Baseball', *BaseBall* 5, no. 2 (2011): 63–76.
57. *Ibid.*, 70.
58. Henderson, *Ball, Bat and Bishop*, 188.
59. Block, *Baseball before We Knew It*, 29.
60. Vaught, 'Abner Doubleday, Marc Bloch, and the Cultural Significance of Baseball in Rural America', *Agricultural History* 85, no. 1 (2011): 1–20.
61. Gelber, 'Working at Playing'.
62. *Ibid.*, 8.
63. Block, *Baseball before We Knew It*, 74.
64. Henderson, *Ball, Bat and Bishop*.
65. Block, *Baseball before We Knew It*, 111.
66. Altherr, 'Basepaths and Baselines', 64.
67. Gelber, 'Working at Playing'.
68. Altherr, 'Basepaths and Baselines', 67.

69. Altherr, 'Basepaths and Baselines'.
70. Wolfe, 'After the Frontier: Separation and Absorption in US Indian Policy', *Settler Colonial Studies* 1, no. 1 (2011): 13–51.
71. Altherr, 'Basepaths and Baselines', *BaseBall* 5, no. 2 (2011): 71.
72. Altherr, 'A Place Level Enough to Play Ball'.
73. Altherr, 'Basepaths and Baselines', 73.
74. Rifkin, 'Settler Common Sense'.
75. Mary Louise Pratt, 'Arts of the Contact Zone', *Profession* 91 (1991): 33.
76. Deloria, *Playing Indian*.
77. Morgensen, *Spaces between Us*, 161.
78. Corey Snelgrove, Rita Kaur Dhamoon, and Jeff Corntassel, 'Unsettling Settler Colonialism: The Discourse and Politics of Settlers, and Solidarity with Indigenous Nations', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3, no. 2 (2014): 5–6.
79. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Vintage, 1979), 5.
80. Lamster, *Spalding's World Tour*, 151.
81. *Ibid.*, 61.
82. *Ibid.*, 61.
83. *Ibid.*, 78.
84. Jafri, 'Desire, Settler Colonialism', 79.
85. Benedict Andersen, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).
86. Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 20–21.
87. For further discussion on the ways in which baseball has been taken up as an anti-colonial site of resistance, see Sumei Wang, 'Taiwanese Baseball: A Story of Entangled Colonialism, Class, Ethnicity, and Nationalism', *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 33, no. 4 (2009): 355–72.
88. Lamster, *Spalding's World Tour*, 157.
89. Ron Hotchkiss, *Diamond Gods of the Morning Sun: The Vancouver Asahi Baseball Story* (Victoria: Freisen Press, 2014).
90. Morgensen, *Spaces between Us*, 21.
91. Corey Snelgrove, Rita Kaur Dhamoon, and Jeff Corntassel, 'Unsettling Settler Colonialism', 22.
92. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization is not a metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 3.
93. Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 7.
94. Tuck and Yang, 'Decolonization is not a Metaphor', 1–40.
95. Taiaiake Alfred, 'Colonialism and State Dependency', *Journal of Aboriginal Health*, November (2009): 42–60.
96. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
97. Humber, *Diamonds of the North*.
98. Dyck, *Games, Sports and Cultures*, 32.
99. Powers-Beck, 'Chief'.
100. Denis J. Banks, 'Tribal Names and Mascots in Sports', *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* 17, no. 1 (1993): 5–8.
101. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization is not a Metaphor', 1–40.
102. Altherr, 'Basepaths and Baselines'.
103. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/04/native-americans-cleveland-indians-protest-logo>, dated 4 April 2014 (accessed 10 November 2014).
104. Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
105. Taiaiake Alfred, 'What is Radical Imagination? Indigenous Struggles in Canada', *Affinities: A Journal of Radical Theory, Culture, and Action* 4, no. 2 (2010): 6.