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President Donald J. Trump welcomes the 2018 World Series Champion Boston Red Sox baseball team Thursday, May 9, 2019, at ceremonies on the South Portico entrance of the White House. To the president's left are players J. D. Martinez and Chris Sale. (Wikimedia Commons/White House/Shealah Craighead)



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People tend to like their sports the way they prefer their religion — free of politics. When it comes to the primordial U.S. civil religion of baseball, its founding myths and rituals have long been tied to politics and national identity. Played on both sides of the Civil War, baseball was presented by some as a tool for and image of reunification. Chicago based sporting goods entrepreneur, team owner and former ball player Albert Goodwill Spalding supported this connection in his efforts to ensure baseball was perceived as *America's National Game*, "The returning veterans, 'when the cruel war' was 'over,' disseminated Base Ball throughout the country and then established it as the national game of America." (366) Among the liturgies that grew around the game, securing its ties to national identity, were ceremonial presidential first pitches, patriotic hymns, homage to veterans (especially the wounded), and White House visits.

Béisbol in Latin America, with its complicated history entwined in U.S. economic and military colonization, contains as well a powerful thread of resistance and intersection with African American professional baseball. The rosters of the Negro Leagues were replete with Spanish surnames and included the Latino-owned New York Cubans. The team rosters of Mexican and Caribbean leagues employed professional ball players of all hues from across the Americas playing together as teammates long before the re-integration of the racially exclusive U.S. major leagues.

The use of béisbol in manipulating political control has a legacy, for example, in Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua. The deployment of the sport as creative political resistance to both colonial powers and oppressive governments is even more compelling. Nineteenth century Cubans turned to baseball as a means of symbolically countering bullfighting, the violent sport of their Spanish overlords. Across territories experiencing U.S. interventionism, locals defeating American military teams at their own national pastime was a subtle form of reclaiming agency.

Given the complex histories of baseball and béisbol, it is hard to imagine visits to the White House are apolitical. Even the scheduling of the recent visit of the 2018 World Series Champion Red Sox was mired in politics. The original February 15th date for

the visit landed in the midst of a federal government shutdown. A concern for optics shifted it to the 9th of May, a politically motivated move on the part of both a team and a president not wishing to disturb their respective fan bases. From January through the day of the visit, a slow drip of who-was-in and who-was-out preoccupied Boston's sportswriters as they carefully documented the ever-changing scorecard of attendees, rejections and participation status unknown.

Professional athletes often go out of their way to insist their actions are not political, a response that suggests an awareness of possible consequences including economic ones. The frequently cited "Republicans buy sneakers too," allegedly uttered by basketball icon and single season minor league baseball player Michael Jordan, underscores that reality.

A number of the Red Sox players, both those who chose to go and those who chose not to attend, echoed a brief but familiar refrain denying any political intent behind their decisions. In January, Rafael Devers from the Dominican Republic was the first to opt out. While he assigned no deep or political meaning to his decision, some in the media speculated that he "like many of Major League Baseball's foreign-born player base, might not be happy about Trump's immigration policies. Understandably, he is being tight-lipped about his motivation, but it wouldn't be surprising if Devers is making a silent protest by choosing not to attend."

Next, African American stars Mookie Betts and Jackie Bradley Jr. declined, with Bradley tweeting that his absence was apolitical, he would not go even "if Hillary was in office either." Heath Hembree, a white relief pitcher attending, explained, "Politically, it didn't matter who was in the White House. If I have an opportunity to go to the White House and meet the president, I'm going to go."

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Two members of the Red Sox wore their politics on their sleeves like a commemorative uniform patch that serves as constant reminder of loss and pain. Mexican pitcher Héctor Velázquez took offense at the insults Trump had directed against his homeland and his people. He chose solidarity with his fan base in México choosing to offend no one over there, allá, because "yo soy de allá," "I am from there!" Velázquez also defended immigrants as people trying to work hard to support their families, causing problems for no one.

Alex Cora, the Puerto Rican manager, released a written statement to *El Nuevo Día* announcing his decision not to accompany his team to the White House. His public absence was consistent with his words and efforts over the past 20 months drawing attention to the ongoing struggles of the people of Puerto Rico in the aftermath of Hurricane María. Cora pointed to the long road to recovery ahead, hinted at the inadequacy of the federal government response, and noted that his time at home in the winter revealed that some Puerto Ricans continue to lack basic necessities, others were still without electricity and many homes and schools remained damaged, "esa es NUESTRA realidad." In light of that daily lived experience that he identified as "OUR reality" he would "not feel comfortable celebrating in the White House."

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In his book *Rounding the Bases: Baseball and Religion in America*, religion and sport scholar Joseph Price reminds us of the power of ritual to connect participants to larger worlds of meaning, "And because rituals are repeatable acts whose meaning is well-known by the participants, they often lend the participants a sense of comfort." (138) Watching the ceremony play out on the South Lawn of the White House evokes profound discomfort. From the opening procession of President Trump with Chris Sale and J. D. Martinez accompanying him, as if they were acolytes, through their presentation of a team jersey, the optics were of a liturgy of exclusion that all too accurately reflects the current crisis of national identity.

Intentional or not, the use of Martinez in a prominent role escorting the president and in effect vesting him as an honorary member of the team communicated a stark contrast to the majority of black and Latino Red Sox who chose to resist through their absence. The failure to name any of the missing in the narrative retelling of events that led to a championship modelled erasures experienced daily in society, Church and academy by people minoritized on the basis of race, ethnicity and language. The visuals of an overwhelmingly white team should not be read as a shining example of respect for individual choice in the context of a franchise and

sport whose history is deeply stained by racism and an exploitation of migrant labor. The image of an obviously incomplete team cannot be read as tolerance for different opinions on the lawn of la Casa Blanca inhabited by a president who demonstrates through his actions, policies, words and tweets a callous disregard for human dignity on matters of race, immigration and the recovery of Puerto Rico.

Presence and absence are performative political actions. Sport, like religion, is intertwined in the affairs of the polis and a major player in the public plaza. To ignore that reality is dangerous business when respect for human dignity is on the line.

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