

# Rethinking Baseball in the Dominican Republic

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## Introduction

Baseball in the Dominican Republic has many different roles— cultural connector, economic power, political tool, social divider. Since baseball migrated from the United States to the Dominican Republic in the late 1800s, cultural ideas and economic connections have flowed between the two vastly different countries: one a “first world” economic powerhouse and global leader, the other a “third world” poverty-stricken, but culturally vibrant island. Perhaps the most prevalent commonality between these two seemingly opposite nations is their shared passion for the sport of baseball. Many scholars have likened baseball to a colonial institution like the sugarcane industry (which originally brought baseball to the island of Hispaniola, when sugarcane companies formed baseball teams during the offseason of sugar farming). In this neocolonial institution, the United States treats young Dominican players like a commodity: scouting them, refining their talents, shipping them to the mainland, and exporting the product (Major League Baseball) back to the island for economic gain in the form of television and merchandise sales. This neocolonial structure delineates how the United States reinforces its hegemony through the sport of baseball, mistreating and keeping the Dominican Republic at a disadvantage in the global capitalist system. However, rethinking this role of baseball delves deeper into the cultural power of baseball to challenge this economic and political power structure. Rethinking baseball (and therefore, colonial structures), means to peel apart the difference between baseball as a form of cultural hegemony, where Dominicans slavishly follow American culture, and baseball as a form of cultural resistance, where Dominicans succeed and thrive in making baseball a product of national pride reflecting their own unique values, thus becoming creators of their own identity instead of imitators. For the Dominican Republic, baseball is a form of cultural resistance, as the subordinate country turns a tool of cultural

hegemony against the imperial power of the Major League Baseball (MLB) and the United States.

This paper examines how the sport of baseball mediates the relationship between the United States and Dominican Republic. In part based on Walter Mignolo's idea of "decolonial thinking," which undoes the power structures of knowledge in our Western-centric world, the aim of this paper is to examine baseball through this decolonial lens of delinking the world from colonial matrices of power (2009). This colonial matrix of power is institutionalized in our inherent biases, where the United States dictates to Latin America what the United States think is best for them, not taking into account what the country and its people themselves have to say. While it is virtually impossible to fully undo our deeply embedded biases, as colonialities of power invade all aspects of our epistemology and language, it is important to understand this fundamental truth in order to challenge our way of knowing and thinking. To organize this argument, I begin by providing a brief overview of the history of baseball in the Dominican Republic, in order to explain how the United States reinforces its hegemony over subordinate Latin American countries. I describe how the processes of globalization has influenced the growth of the sport and led to inherent structural problems. I proceed to analyze the current state of the sport to see how Dominicans co-opt baseball as a symbol of national pride to push back against this American hegemony, and how Major League Baseball and the United States attempt to maintain their control and power. Finally, as the United States and Dominican Republic work together for the survival of baseball, I examine how proposed future actions reinforce problematic neocolonial values and suggest considerations for the future that acknowledge the inequalities of the global capitalist system. Addressing the problem of cultural hegemony can

provide solutions that give power and responsibility to both sides, instead of one-sided solutions that reinforce the colonial imbalance of power.

### **Neocolonial History**

To understand the role of baseball in mediating the relationship between the United States and Dominican Republic, it is crucial to examine the broader history of the sport and relations between the two countries. The history of baseball in the Dominican Republic can be seen as a battle for control between the home country and the imperial United States. Despite the myth that Americans introduced baseball to the Dominican Republic, Cubans actually brought the sport to the island of Hispaniola. This myth is an important element of American ethnocentrism, as Americans held the naïve view that spreading baseball was benefitting the U.S., while this was an underestimation of Dominican resentment towards the United States (Klein, *Dominican Baseball* 11). In reality, Cubans fleeing the Ten Year's War brought their passion for the game of baseball to the Dominican Republic in the 1880s<sup>i</sup> (Klein, "Baseball as Underdevelopment" 96). The game grew in popularity relatively quickly, as sugar companies subsidized teams of workers to play during idle months in the field (97). These American-owned sugar companies greatly expanded in the Dominican Republic under the eight-year occupation by the U.S. Marines from 1915 to 1924 (Klein, "American Hegemony" 301). While Americans saw the growing popularity of baseball overseas as the spread of American ideals, Dominicans did not view baseball as an American import, but rather their own game they took great pride in playing. U.S. Marines actually invaded the Dominican Republic and occupied the nation twice, on behalf of the Roosevelt Corollary which was intended to "protect" Caribbean countries from potential European threats; this involvement has led some to conclude that the Dominican Republic is "the most unsovereign sovereign country in the world" (Klein, *Dominican Baseball*

7-8). Ironically, the brutal dictator General Rafael Trujillo, who ruled from 1930-1963, furthered the sport by promoting the organized professional league and funding teams (Klein, "Baseball as Underdevelopment" 96-97). This shows how baseball is intrinsically tied to U.S. domination from the beginning and explains why baseball often draws comparisons to colonial institutions like the sugar industry.<sup>ii</sup>

This increased organization and competition from the sugar company teams led to the development of a Dominican league in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s (Klein, "Baseball as Underdevelopment" 97). At this time, the Dominican league was free of outside influence from the U.S., even though the Dominican league was secondary to the leagues in the U.S. and Cuba, where Dominican players hoped to reach, and American players resorted to the Dominican leagues when pushed out of the better leagues (97). Racism in the United States, which excluded darker-skinned players from playing in the major leagues, not only led to the development of the Negro Leagues in the U.S. but also inadvertently fostered the growth of the Dominican leagues (Klein, "Culture, Politics, and Baseball" 115). In 1937, Dominican teams controlled by General Trujillo brought Negro League baseball stars like Satchel Page to come play in Santo Domingo by paying them exorbitant salaries (Klein, "Baseball as Underdevelopment" 97). Although this bright spot was short-lived, as team finances were exhausted from paying high salaries, this period formed the stepping stone for the apex of Dominican baseball. This period from 1950-1954 was known as "béisbol romántico," when game was at its high point, in terms of national sovereignty and competition (97). During this time, even though baseball was an American game, Dominican baseball was a proud national phenomenon with players, fans, and sports journalists who were passionate about the sport in their home country, but unconcerned with the game in the U.S. (97). During this time, "Dominican culture placed its stamp" on the game of

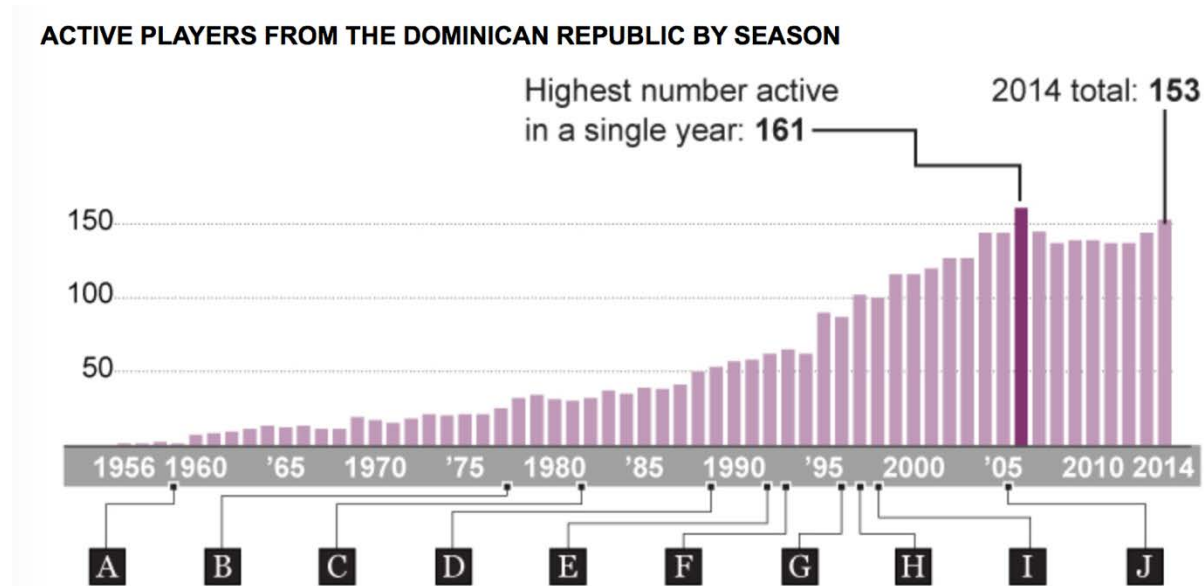
baseball; this imprint was characterized by raucous fans, loud music, and a style of play full of flair, smartness, and hustle that fans loved (Klein, “Culture, Politics, and Baseball” 115). This “artistry” style of play was the antithesis of the American style, characterized by brute force and power (115). Astoundingly, this style difference is exemplified by the Estrellas of San Pedro de Macoris, who cut Roger Maris in 1959, the player who would hit 61 homeruns two years later to break Babe Ruth’s single-season record, because he “wasn’t a hustler” (115). This elucidates the fact that even though American baseball at that time was arguably better than the Dominican game, but one of America’s better players was cut from a Dominican team because Dominicans valued a different style of play. However, Dominican baseball was portrayed as inferior by Americans, in part by means of language used to describe the different style of play. Some people described the Dominican style as “wild ball” or “trick baseball,” which implies that Dominicans are some type of wild savages who are not as sophisticated and do not play the game the way it is supposed to be played (115). This is a prime example of how the dominant culture controls the narrative of historiography in order to tell a story that reinforces its superiority rather than reflect reality, with Americans insisting their style valued skill and results over the hustle and passion of the Dominicans. Even when the United States did not directly control baseball in the Dominican Republic, its cultural dominance was displayed through this colonial structure of epistemic knowledge.

This high point of “béisbol romántico” marks the end of major U.S. influence on baseball in the Dominican Republic, with American and Dominican baseball becoming steadily more intertwined thereafter. After Jackie Robinson paved the way for racial integration in the MLB in 1947, Ozzie Virgil became the first Dominican-born player to reach the major leagues in 1956 (Klein, “Baseball as Underdevelopment” 97). As the number of Dominican players in the MLB

slowly increased, with Dominican teams sending players to the United States.<sup>iii</sup> At this point, this U.S. influence actually provided a boost to Dominican baseball, as there were high expectations in the Dominican Republic because most players returned each winter to play in the Dominican leagues in order to supplement their salaries and “show gratitude to...a more appreciative audience” (Klein, “Baseball as Underdevelopment” 97-98). While this was described as a “healthy tension” between the U.S. and Dominican Republic, this displays another example of American dominance and ethnocentrism, as the MLB decided that the Dominican league should change its season from summer to winter to avoid conflict with the MLB season (Klein, “Baseball as Underdevelopment” 98; Klein, *Dominican Baseball* 12). During this time, the increasing number of Dominican signings and the success of players like the Alou brothers (Felipe, Matty, and Jesus) and Juan Marichal (who would become the first Dominican inducted in the National Baseball Hall of Fame) drew the increasing attention of many scouts to the Dominican and other Latin American countries like Puerto Rico, Venezuela, and Mexico (98). Ironically, two major U.S. political interventions in Caribbean countries in the early 1960s led to increased involvement in the Dominican Republic through baseball. The first was the assassination of General Trujillo in 1961 through the extensive involvement of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (Klein, “Culture, Politics, and Baseball” 116). Before his assassination, Trujillo refused to send the best players from his club, Escogido, to the United States, ensuring his club from the capital city Santo Domingo always won the Dominican championship (116). Once he was removed by the CIA, the opportunity for U.S. teams to sign the best Dominican players greatly increased. Secondly, and perhaps playing an even bigger role, the United States’ political intervention in Cuba led to an increase of U.S. involvement in the Dominican Republic and Dominicans in the MLB. With the U.S.’s embargo of Cuba in 1961 in

fear of Fidel Castro's socialist revolution, the significant supply of Cuban talent was cut off, and the MLB turned more of its attention to the Dominican Republic (116).

While these previous developments slowly augmented the United States' relationship with the Dominican Republic in the sphere of baseball, the advent of free agency and the subsequent development of the academy system revolutionized U.S.-Dominican baseball relations changing the course of baseball forever, marking what Alan Klein argues is the beginning of the modern era of baseball (Klein, *Dominican Baseball* 13).<sup>iv</sup> After free agency began in 1976, the number of Dominicans in the major leagues and their salaries skyrocketed (Klein, "Culture, Politics, and Baseball" 116). While 49 Dominicans made it to the major leagues in the 15 years prior to free agency, 58 Dominican players made it in the next 9 years, with hundreds more playing in the minor leagues (Klein, "Baseball as Underdevelopment" 99). Figure 1 shows this increase in number active MLB players from the Dominican Republic each year.



**Figure 1.** This graph shows the number of active MLB players from the Dominican Republic for each year from 1956-2014. The letters on the timeline correspond to the debut years of the following famous Dominican stars: A- Juan Marichal, B- Pedro Guerrero, C- Julio Franco, D- Sammy Sosa, E- Pedro Martinez, F- Manny Ramirez, G- Vladimir Guerrero, H- David Ortiz, I- Adrian Beltre, and J- Robinson Cano. (Source: Chicago Tribune Graphics, "Dominicans in Major League Baseball (Infographics)," *The Chicago Tribune*, 2015.)



With free agency, player salaries also skyrocketed: the minimum MLB salary jumped from \$12,000 in 1970 to \$68,500 in 1988, while the average salary increased from \$29,300 to \$420,000 (Klein, "Baseball as Underdevelopment" 99). Even though Dominicans were paid less than their American counterparts, this salary increase was still a net positive for the Dominican players. However, increased salaries in the United States severely harmed the professional baseball structure of the Dominican Republic. As MLB salaries rose, the Dominican salary structure could not keep pace. The Dominican winter leagues paid only \$10,500 in 1988, significantly less than the minimum MLB salary and a tiny fraction of the million-dollar earnings of many of the best Dominican players; the 34 Dominican players on MLB rosters at the start of the 1988 season collectively earned over \$15 million for the season (Klein, "Baseball as Underdevelopment" 100). For this reason, many Dominican players decided to no longer play in the Dominican winter league, as the risk of injury was not worth the small salary that was no longer needed to supplement their MLB salary. This severely hurt the level of competition in the Dominican winter league, and many Dominican fans viewed it as a betrayal by their fellow citizens (100). In this way, the economic superiority of the United States directly led to the decline of autonomous Dominican leagues, pulling more players and fans into the business of American baseball.

This increase of Dominican players in the MLB corresponded directly with the decline of African-Americans in professional baseball. The percentage of African-American's in the MLB, after steadily increasing since Jackie Robinson's debut in 1947, plateaued in the 1980s (Armour and Levitt). This is theorized to be partly due to increased African-American participation in other sports, like basketball and football, which in 1991 had 75 percent and 62 percent African-American athletes, respectively, compared to 17 percent in baseball (Klein, "Culture, Politics,

and Baseball” 117). With the dwindling pool of talent within the United States, MLB teams were increasingly motivated to look towards Latin America for talented players (118). The attitude of MLB executives, who saw Latin America as potentially valuable market of talent, can be summed up by a quote by Branch Rickey in 1954, then the president of the Pittsburgh Pirates; after seeing the talented Puerto Rican prospect Roberto Clemente, he said to a scout, “If there’s any more of those ‘creatures’ down there, I want ‘em!” (Regalado 16). This attitude is alarming because it dehumanizes Latin American players, seen as savage “creatures,” who are valued only for their potential profits. Latin American players were profitable for major league teams because they could be signed for a “fraction of the cost of American talent” (Klein, “Baseball as Underdevelopment” 98). In 1975, a study found that MLB clubs paid on average \$60,000 to an American signee, while Latino signees only received \$5,000 (Regalado 18). While this is inherently unequal, Dominican players, who are still often children, and their parents will sign any contract for almost any amount of money, as even a small amount of money is a fortune compared to the poverty in which the majority of Dominicans live. These children, and their parents, gladly accept these small contracts as they chase their dream of making the major leagues, fantasizing of the success of Dominican superstars they see in the MLB. In this way, MLB teams exploit the vulnerability of Dominican people created by institutionalized poverty, in order to turn a profit. MLB teams have developed a principle of “quality in quantity,” where they sign as many Dominican (and other Latin American) players as cheaply as possible, in hopes that a few would make the major leagues (Regalado 18). This “boatload mentality,” where teams could sign 20 Dominicans or 4 Americans for the same price, treats the Dominican players like commodities, no different than “pieces of exported fruit” (Vargas 27). In this sense,

underprivileged players are exploited by the MLB for profit the same way as sugar and bananas were during colonial times.



**Figure 2.** This picture shows Raymel Flores at his small house in the Dominican Republic, in which he shared a bedroom under a tin roof with his brothers and mother, a week before being signed a professional contract for almost a million dollars. (Source: Michael Hanson, “Republic of Baseball,” *Michael Hanson Photography*, 2016.)

As required by the U.S. Department of Labor, each MLB team was only given 24 work visas to be used for foreign players (Klein, “Culture, Politics, and Baseball” 119). This became a problem because with few visas relative to how many players were signed, teams had to ascertain which players were most likely to develop into stars in order to provide the best return on their investment (119). The academy system was created as a way to circumvent this problem. Instead of signing players and directly shipping them to the U.S., teams would bring talented prospects to their academy facilities in the Dominican Republic where they would evaluate talents to see who they wanted to bring to the United States (Klein, “Baseball as

Underdevelopment” 103). This first academy was built in 1977 by the Toronto Blue Jays, and included playing fields, a dorm complex, dining hall, weight room, and administrative offices (103). At these academies, teams put the players through long days of weight training, nutrition programs, field workouts, drills, and scrimmages where team personnel instruct them and evaluate their skills. Sadly, for many young men this is the “first time they have ever eaten nutritionally balanced meals or slept in comfortable beds” (103). In essence, this is a short tryout where after 30 days they are either signed as rookies to remain in the academies or released back to their families (103). In the 1980s and 1990s these academies were not glamorous, some teams were sophisticated with satellite television and air-conditioned rooms, while others were more modest and simple, like one team’s academy where players simply slept on cots underneath the stadium grandstand (103). This academy system resembles a colonial outpost, operating the same way as a sugar plantation: locating raw material (the talent), refining the resource (training the players), and shipping them abroad for American consumption (the MLB) (Klein, “Baseball as Underdevelopment” 103; Klein, “Culture, Politics, and Baseball” 119). In this sense, the MLB is a neocolonial institution operating in the Third World in order to maximize profit.

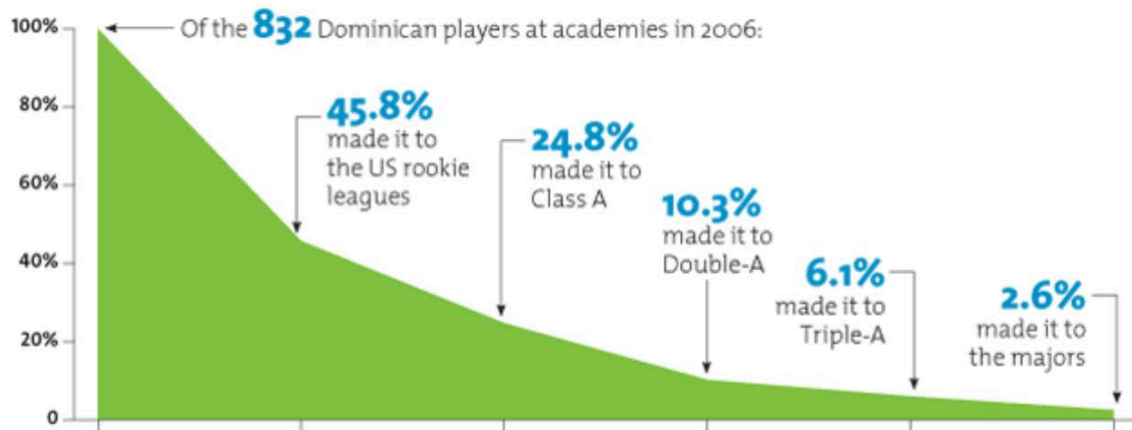
### **Problems of Globalization**

The globalization of the sport of baseball reflects the notion that Major League Baseball is more than just a national pastime, but a multinational corporation that acts as a big business. As American intervention in the Dominican Republic and the academy system grew, baseball in the Dominican Republic “emerged as a major domestic industry, rivaling agriculture” (Klein, *Dominican Baseball* 3). In the globalized world, the power of U.S. corporations, including the MLB, is greater than many small countries like the Dominican Republic (Wasch 122). These corporations wield this great power to control developments in other countries in order to make a

profit. In this way, Major League Baseball is comparable to multinational corporations like Standard Oil and the United Fruit Company in Guatemala, who use their monopoly to control the rules of the game, often at the expense of impoverished people in Third World countries. Luis Rosario, the former Dominican Commissioner of Professional Baseball, has said that “the MLB is a monopoly...they’re the ones who govern the business and make the rules of the game. People take advantage of poverty” (Klein, *Dominican Baseball* 7). The MLB uses its wealth to ravish these young Dominican players and impose its will upon not only the sport of baseball in the Dominican, but its power also impacts the culture and way of life in the Dominican Republic.

While most fans only see the multimillion dollar superstars, they do not see the exploitation of the thousands in the Dominican Republic who do not make it (Marcano and Fidler 532). Young Dominicans hear the rare success stories of stars like Sammy Sosa more so than the thousands of failure stories (Wasch 104). This bias of success stories perpetrates the “rag to riches” mythology, skewing the perceptions of both young baseball players and fans (Marcano and Fidler 543). The large number of Dominican children (the legal signing age to attend an academy is 16) in the academies are treated like “cannon fodder,” as teams know that the vast majority of them will not pan out but hope that a couple will become stars (Echevarria). Figure 3 shows a graph of the percentages of players from Dominican academies who make it through different levels of minor league baseball in the U.S. all the way up to the major leagues. Of 832 total players in Dominican academies in 2006, just under half (45.8%) made it to the U.S. rookie leagues, and 2.6% made it to the major leagues. For these many who do not make it, they are released back into an already impoverished country without an education, helping to reinforce structural poverty in a negative feedback loop. Most academies in the 1990s and early 2000s failed to provide players with a formal education, which violates key provisions of

international child labor law, and instead only provide basic English classes (Wasch 101; Hanlon 243). However, many scholars dispute this failure by the MLB, pointing out that there is no



**Figure 3.** This graph shows the percentages of Dominican players from academies in 2006 who made it to each level. (Source: Baseball-Reference.com, through Ian Gordon, “Inside Major League Baseball’s Dominican Sweatshop System,” *Mother Jones*, March/April 2013.)

correlation between education and employment in impoverished countries (Klein, “Culture, Politics, and Baseball” 112), and that many children do not attend school anyways due to lack of quality education opportunities in the Dominican Republic (Wasch 114). Additionally, as previously mentioned, many of these academies provide better quality necessities like housing and nutrition than these youths would otherwise have access.

Due to socioeconomic advantages and lack of a formalized system (like the draft in the United States), scouts and teams have tremendous power and leverage over Dominican prospects. Unlike American players, who have the leverage in contract negotiations because they can often choose to stay amateur and play in college, Dominican players have no other options, and teams know that they will agree to almost any contract (Kalthoff 384). One way that MLB teams take advantage of young Dominicans’ desperation and ignorance is by systematically discouraging them from hiring agents, who could help young prospects fight for better contracts

and conditions (Marcano and Fidler 532). However, even players who hire agents are subjected to the capitalist greed of the agents themselves, who are just as eager to exploit children by getting a cut of the signing bonus (Vargas 25). Agents often employ “bonus skimming” techniques, where they tell the player they are getting paid less than the team is actually giving them, keeping the difference for themselves (Kalthoff 364). Academies often serve to hide their kids from being seen by other scouts and teams, and there were even some extreme cases where scouts basically kidnapped players to prevent other teams from interfering with their investments (Regalado 18; Marcano and Fidler 545). Many players report that they experienced long, arduous days with extremely hard physical conditions and verbal abuse from coaches, only to get up again the next day to do the same thing over and over again (Marcano and Fidler 545). To make matters worse, if a player suffered an injury they would often times be released without medical attention and never get paid their signing bonus (545). Because the Dominican Republic has developed a financial dependence on the MLB, the MLB is allowed to operate relatively free of government regulation (Wasch 119). This proves yet again how the wealth and Power of the MLB allows them to exploit Dominican players. While the MLB cannot be held responsible for the deeply embedded socioeconomic inequalities and lack of education in the Dominican Republic, the MLB “should be held accountable for the exploitative nature of its practices” (White 699). Vargas poses an essential question putting the exploitation of Latino players in the perspective of the enduring global neocolonial structure: “Would it be tolerated if underprivileged Americans were treated by Major League Baseball the way Latinos are?” (Vargas 35). The short answer is, obviously, “no.”

Even as conditions at baseball academies improve, fundamental problems of the United States’ baseball relationship with the Dominican Republic persist. As the academy system has

developed, physical conditions and education have improved for the players, but the same basic idea of the academy as a neocolonial outpost has been reinforced. Now all 30 teams have academies, all in various locations near the capital city Santo Domingo, with 14 out of 30 located in Boca Chica (about a half hour drive from Santo Domingo).<sup>v</sup> The majority of teams have built new multi-million dollar state-of-the-art facilities in the past two decades, with the Red Sox in 2003 being the first to build a modern academy with dormitory style rooms instead of military bunks (Drysdale). Education has also improved after Sandy Alderson introduced an education initiative in 2010, with teams now teaching more than just basic English classes at their academies (White 724). For example, the Philadelphia Phillies in 2012 started offering a real high school education at their academy, graduating 26 players in the first four years (Gelb).



**Figure 4.** This picture shows the new state-of-the-art baseball academy built in 2009 for the Pittsburgh Pirates in El Toro, Dominican Republic. (Source: MLB DR, MLB Photo Galleries: Dominican Republic Baseball Academies, MLB Advanced Media, 2018, [mlb.com/dr](http://mlb.com/dr).)

While these improvements are steps in the right direction, they reinforce problems of American hegemony and neocolonialism. First of all, the academy system undermines the



sovereignty of Dominican baseball (Klein, "Baseball as Underdevelopment" 104). By bringing unsigned teenagers to tryouts alongside signed prospects at the academies, MLB teams blur the line between professional and amateur (104). This eliminates the reliance on the Dominican teams for developing prospects and weakens the amateur baseball system in the Dominican Republic by transferring control to U.S. teams (104). With this transfer of power, the United States makes the assumption that the Dominican Republic cannot develop its players well enough on its own, so the MLB must come in and do it for them. The teams by building academies act as if they are performing a favor to the Dominican community by enhancing the economy and creating opportunities for players, but really, they are merely acting in their own best interests in developing and controlling future talent for import. By presenting the Dominican Republic as inept and corrupt, the MLB justifies creating policy like the creation of the academy system to begin with, but also the more recent education initiative (Klein, *Dominican Baseball* 14). This inherent bias of western superiority leftover from dominant historiographies and colonial thinking justifies the increased intervention by the U.S. in order to eliminate Dominican autonomy. Overall, this illustrates the notion of global division of labor, where the United States represents the head and controls the brains of the game of baseball (league commissioner team presidents, general managers, coaches, trainers, etc.), and the south (Latin America) represents the body and performs the physical labor (the players). Generally, the MLB attempts to disguise this fact, as teams claim great diversity by hiring coaches of color. However, despite this proclaimed diversity, whites predominantly still hold more positions of power than Latinos and African-Americans. This is evident from the disparity between minority first-base coaches and third-base coaches: in 2010, 67 percent of first-base coaches were minorities, while only 23 percent of third-base coaches were minorities (Schmidt and Keh).

Third-base coaches carries greater prestige and pay and is often a stepping stone to the manager position, while the first-base coach usually does nothing more than high-five the baserunner and tell them how many outs there are. This again proves how the colonial matrix of power has extended its reach into the sport of baseball and U.S.-Dominican relations.

On the surface, the globalization of baseball may seem benign, as it brings Americans and Dominicans “together in mutual enjoyment of sport,” but this ignores the dark side of globalization where capitalism exploits the denationalization of markets (Marcano and Fidler 512). Marcano and Fidler explain that the 1998 season was a landmark season, as it “reflected the growing prominence of foreign baseball players” in the MLB (511). With this increased prominence of Dominican superstars like Sammy Sosa, who was involved in the historic single-season home run race with Mark McGwire, more foreign fans started following their “native sons” (512). The MLB seeks to capitalize on this growth of their global fan base by aggressively marketing its product overseas through lucrative sales of television broadcasting rights and MLB-licensed merchandise, which generates several billion dollars in revenue each year (Marcano and Fidler 518). The MLB is attempting to create the image of a “global ballpark,” which connotes benevolent ideas of togetherness and equality, but its goal is to make money in foreign markets (Marcano and Fidler 520). Because of the profit motivation, the MLB unequally applies their global marketing strategy. Despite the fact that the Dominican Republic produces more MLB players than Japan, Japan is the more appealing market for the MLB because of its more developed, modern economy (525). This strategy is clearly evident in the MLB’s Pitch, Hit, and Run competition. The MLB states its goal of these programs is to “teach boys and girls ages 9 to 12 the fundamentals of baseball” and give kids the “thrill of playing baseball” who have never experienced it before (526). However, curiously this competition is only hosted in

more developed countries like Australia, the United Kingdom, Japan, Korea, and Germany rather than Venezuela and the Dominican Republic that are more passionate about baseball (526). This proves that the MLB is not trying to develop the next Sammy Sosa, as much as it is to create consumers of the MLB's product overseas, as it targets those with more disposable income (526). This examination of MLB's global markets completes the picture of the global commodity chain, where baseball players (the raw materials) are produced in the periphery (Third World countries), sent to the core countries (First World) to be turned into manufactured products (Major League Baseball) to be sent back to the periphery for consumption (television, other media, and merchandise sales).<sup>vi</sup> In this system, the core accumulates most of the wealth while the periphery gets poorer. This reflects the basic fact that despite seemingly noble intentions, baseball is always a business at its core.

### **Cultural Resistance through National Pride**

Many scholars argue that the MLB's merchandise sales in foreign markets is a form of "cultural imperialism," as Dominicans wear American clothes, including MLB jerseys and caps. American cultural hegemony implies "willingness to take on an ideology or culture of one's superior" in a way that devalues one's own culture (Klein, "American Hegemony" 303). Key to this argument is the "uncritical acceptance" of cultural exports, which erroneously assumes that subordinate cultures are incapable of resistance (301). By using baseball as a source of national pride, Dominicans turn this neocolonialist tool against the imperial power. No matter how horrible conditions of exploitation and poverty created by the colonial power of the United States, the sport of baseball for Dominicans always represents cultural resistance more than cultural hegemony because it is a form of national pride. Baseball is susceptible to be "locally co-opted as a symbol" of national pride because it is one of the only areas in U.S.-Dominican

relations in which Dominicans can feel on par with Americans (Klein, “American Hegemony” 306; *Dominican Baseball* 7). Therefore, the success of Dominicans in the sport creates a national pride that is an “antidote” to cultural hegemony (Klein, “Culture, Politics, and Baseball” 125).

Cultural hegemony entails the dominant culture controls the narrative and suppresses the histories of the subordinate culture in an effort to reinforce its own cultural superiority. As detailed previously, this includes examples such as the use of language, like “wild ball,” to perpetuate the imagined inferiority of Dominican baseball in comparison to the superior American baseball. In this way, the dominant historiography pushes the Dominican people out of the history of baseball, despite which in reality, they play a fundamental role. Therefore, cultural resistance is an effort to reclaim these stories to create their own identity and heal the wounds of colonialism.<sup>vii</sup> Dominicans success in the sport of baseball allows them to reclaim stories and put their own stamp of identity on the game of baseball. Dominican stars like Sammy Sosa, Vladimir Guerrero, and David Ortiz influence the game of baseball with the passion and hustle with which they play the game. This different style of play that has been negatively characterized as “wild ball” in the past (Klein, “Culture, Politics, and Baseball” 115), causing baseball to be “Dominicanized” (Klein, “American Hegemony” 309). Even though the United States has institutional control, the Dominican players control the actual playing of the game. Fans back home in the Dominican Republic take tremendous pride in the success of their fellow Dominican players, as evidenced that many more Dominicans know who Sammy Sosa is than Omar Minaya, the first Dominican general manager of a major league team (Klein, *Dominican Baseball* 5).<sup>viii</sup> Alan Klein, who collected newspaper articles in the Dominican Republic in April and May in 1988, found that 20 out of 22 headlines about baseball “trumpeted [an individual] Dominican achievement rather than the [team] outcome of the game” (“Culture, Politics, and Baseball” 125-

126). When I went to the Dominican Republic as a kid, everybody was excited when they saw me wearing a St. Louis Cardinals shirt, cheering “go Albert Pujols!” This reflects the widespread attitude of Dominican fans who care more about their fellow Dominicans than the American teams. Klein also conducted a survey in the Dominican Republic asking fans if they would rather have an American team’s hat or a hat from a local Dominican team (Klein, “American Hegemony” 307-308). The results were surprising to some, as 78.1% opted for the Dominican



**Figure 5.** The Dominican Republic’s National Team celebrates after winning the 2013 World Baseball Classic. (Source: Getty Images from Bucher, Chris, “World Baseball Classic 2017: Dominican Republic Schedule,” *Heavy, Inc.*, 4 Mar. 2017. Heavy.com.)

hat, while only 21.9% chose the American hat (308). When asked to explain their choice, the overwhelming majority of fans framed their answer in positive terms of Dominican national pride rather than anti-American terms (308). This is also evidenced by the raucous and celebratory style of play of the Dominican players when they represent their country in play, such as in the World Baseball Classic. When my family attended a World Baseball

Classic game in 2017, they said the atmosphere of the crowd and players was the most enthusiastic and celebratory they have ever seen at a baseball game, and more people were cheering for the Dominicans against the Americans despite the game being played in California. Despite owing their monetary success to their adopted American teams they take great pride in representing their home country and in beating their American teammates, enthusiastically celebrating their successes along the way. This demonstrates how Dominican national pride can overpower neocolonial structures and resist American dominance. Rather than the penetration of American ideals through baseball, Dominican national pride reverses this process by imprinting their unique style of play on baseball that reflects their vibrant culture.

With their massive popularity both in the Dominican Republic and the United States, Dominican stars use their positions of power to lobby for issues that affect their home country and the unsigned prospects that come after them. This agency varies widely, from simple and informal social media posts to more complex and formal actions like forming charity organizations.<sup>ix</sup> For example, Jose Bautista wrote an article in *The Players' Tribune* in 2015 telling his firsthand stories of how his teammates from the Dominican Republic struggled with education and language barrier problems in the United States, urging more readers to understand the situation from outside their First World perspective (Bautista). Other players, like Edwin Encarnación and Nelson Cruz posted tweets and videos on both Twitter and Instagram openly expressing their opposition for the implementation of an international draft, a highly debated topic as the MLB's collective bargaining agreement was under negotiation in 2016 (Burgos). Dominican players have flourished in the league, and the academies develop a steady stream for the future, and this resource provides them with leverage against the league that needs their talent and flavor. These efforts were successful, as players were able to challenge MLB owners and

executives and speak up on behalf of their fellow countrymen, protecting international free agents by preventing the implementation of an international draft (Burgos). These are prime examples how the success of Dominican players can empower them to resist unwanted advances by the MLB. With the structural problems of American dominance, Matt Kalthoff suggests that “change must come from within,” with foreign players using their voice for those powerless in their home countries who have no voice (371). If foreign players unite and speak out they can successfully leverage their power both as talent and as a global market to grow their influence with the league.

Aside from players, other important Dominicans in the baseball industry, like *buscones*, trainers, and managers are regaining control and sovereignty of Dominican baseball in creative ways. These figures are key leaders in the counter-hegemonic push, resisting against advances made by the MLB who attempts to maintain control for economic gain. This resistance can be seen in the “unintended consequences” that arise from programs and policy created by the MLB (Klein, *Dominican Baseball* 153).<sup>x</sup> The notion of “consequences” is based on the assumption that the dominant group can impose their will on the subordinate group, while “unintended” signifies that something goes wrong, as the power of cultural resistance from below is underestimated (154). The academy system is an example of how the MLB tries to get direct control over the scouting and training players. As explained earlier, the academies undermine the autonomy of Dominican amateur leagues and weakens their level of play. However, MLB teams cannot legally bring players to their academy until they reach the minimum age of 16. Therefore, young Dominicans under the age of 16 have very few options available to play organized baseball. *Buscones* are Dominicans who scout and train talented kids under the age of 16, to later peddle them to MLB teams, who have risen to prominence by filling this vacuum created by the

academy system (158).<sup>xi</sup> While the MLB criticizes the *buscones*, as allegations of drug use, extortion, and bonus skimming have arisen, the MLB fails to recognize that they are responsible for the creation of this system in which the *buscones* now play a vital role (Wasch 100-101). In addition to *buscones*, Dominicans are gaining access to other formal positions in baseball like managers and trainers. Astín Jacobo is one of the leading trainers as part of the rise of the sector of Dominican trainers, who use cutting-edge tactics to develop players (Klein, *Dominican Baseball* 13). Omar Minaya became the first Dominican general manager of a major league team when he assumed the position for the Montreal Expos in 2002, and later for the New York Mets (14). These are just a couple of the most influential people who have started to regain control of the flow of Dominican talent and play an important role in cultural resistance against the American hegemony.

### **Looking Towards the Future**

Despite improvements in the treatment of Dominican players, underlying principles of United States hegemony persist as the MLB implements self-serving programs and unjust policies often disguised as benevolent advances. One of the most prominent examples of this is the building of shiny new academy facilities, which as previously explained, is justified by problematic assumptions of Dominican inferiority. Even though these improvements of the academy system are positive in some respects, as they provide better living conditions and education for prospects, this symbolizes all that is wrong with U.S.-Dominican relations and masks the fundamental issue of American neocolonial power. Another example of these disguised advances by the MLB is the implementation of an international signing bonus pool in 2011. This signing bonus pool stipulates that each team can only spend up to 4.75-5.75 million dollars on international free agents (International Amateur Free Agency). For comparison, the



second overall pick in the 2017 MLB draft Hunter Greene, a high-school graduate out of Sherman Oaks, California, signed a record 7.23-million-dollar bonus with the Cincinnati Reds (Fattal). In this inequitable system, a single U.S. player makes more than all the Latin American players signed by a team in a year combined. The MLB claims that this regulation promotes parity and equalizes competition between large-market and small-market teams, but in reality, it ensures the continued unequal treatment of Latin American prospects by artificially keeping their cost of international players down (Kalthoff 380-381). This unjust policy is representative of the larger goal of the MLB to sign players for the lowest price possible, maximizing profit at the expense of continued exploitation of Dominican and other Latin American players.

Another way the MLB and its owners try to conduct the business of baseball in the most cost-efficient manner is the proposal to implement an international draft in the future. While players in the United States (including Puerto Rico) are subject to the amateur draft, international players can negotiate the best contract in the competition of the open market of free agency. While an international draft would bring some benefits of working to eliminate some shady recruiting tactics like bonus skimming by making the process more formal and transparent, it serves more to reduce foreign players' contracts to the benefit of lower operating costs for MLB owners (Marcano and Fidler 534). With seemingly noble intentions, an international draft could in actuality harm Dominican players (Bouchet et al. 249). The potential harm to the Dominican Republic can be seen by the example of Puerto Rico's inclusion into the U.S. amateur draft in 1990 (Kalthoff 375). When Puerto Rican players had to directly compete for a limited number of draft spots with American players, far fewer Puerto Ricans were drafted by MLB teams than were previously signed (Burgos). At a time when Dominican players are fighting for equitable treatment in comparison to their American counterparts, the implementation of an international

draft would severely disempower Dominicans and harm the sport of baseball in the Dominican Republic.

While in many ways baseball reflects the exploitive neocolonial nature of the global capitalist system, it is also the most powerful form of cultural resistance for the Dominican people. Major League Baseball needs to take this decolonial approach to realize the power of Dominican national pride. It may be impossible to undo over five hundred years of exploitation that forms the basis for U.S.-Dominican relations, but a “structured approach” may help improve the situation (Kalthoff 386). Dominican, and other Latin American, players who have been fortunate enough to make it to the major leagues must use their agency to hold the MLB accountable. These possible paths forward might include forming a union of Latin American players to advocate on behalf of the powerless in their home countries, which can push the MLB to repeal counterproductive restrictions, like the international signing bonus pool. While the MLB cannot cure institutionalized poverty in the Dominican Republic, it can improve its treatment of prospective Dominican players. The MLB needs to view the development of Dominican players from not just a capitalistic business commodity, but as a partner for the future in globalizing baseball. The MLB needs to adjust their understanding of what plays in the global market by recognizing the characteristics of their international players and fans rather than attempting to impose their colonial imperialism and valuation. In this sense, the MLB finds itself in a unique position to promote education in the Dominican Republic and change the lives of the thousands of children. This education should embrace the revolutionary and cultural celebration of baseball in the Dominican Republic, rather than continue to suppress it. The MLB should recognize this enthusiastic national pride baseball creates in the Dominican Republic and use it to advance the game rather than fight against it. In order to move away from cultural hegemony, the

MLB needs to involve the Dominican players and leadership and further recognize the value that Dominican's style of play that brings to the sport. With this realization, the two countries can work together in a symbiotic relationship to use the game of baseball to make a difference in the world.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> The Ten Year's War was a conflict started by planters in Cuba who sought independence from Spain from 1868-1878. It was the first of a series of independence wars fought by Cuba against Spain, the last of which being the Spanish-American War. For more information, see Hernandez, Jose M., "Cuba in 1898," <https://loc.gov/rr/hispanic/1898/hernandez.html>.

<sup>ii</sup> Alan M. Klein has a book entitled *Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream*, Yale University Press, 1993.

<sup>iii</sup> One team, the Havana Sugar Kings, sent more than 30 players to the big leagues in 4 years during this time (Klein, "Culture, Politics, and Baseball" 1160).

<sup>iv</sup> For a more detailed account of the advent of the academy system, see Chapter 2, "The Rise of the Academy System," in Alan Klein's book *Dominican Baseball: New Pride, Old Prejudice*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 2014, pp. 33-67).

<sup>v</sup> This information was taken directly from the MLB's website on Academies in the Dominican Republic. For more information and pictures of many of the academies see <http://mlb.mlb.com/dr/academies.jsp>.

<sup>vi</sup> These classifications themselves of First World and Third World, which were theorized especially during the Cold War, obviously reinforce this western-centric historiography and colonial dominance of power in a major way.

<sup>vii</sup> This idea of reclaiming stories from the dominant culture is based on ideas of "epistemic disobedience" as explained by Walter Mignolo and Deborah Miranda, who explained to me that a "nation which does not tell its own stories cannot be said to be a nation at all." While Miranda said this in the context of Native American communities in the southwest United States

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in association with the mythologies of missions, I believe that the same principle applies to the Dominican Republic, and their story is baseball.

<sup>viii</sup> Omar Minaya became the first Dominican manager of a major league team when he became the general manager of the Montreal Expos in 2002. Minaya would later serve as the general manager of the New York Mets, as well. For more information, see

[https://www.baseball-reference.com/bullpen/Omar\\_Minaya](https://www.baseball-reference.com/bullpen/Omar_Minaya).

<sup>ix</sup> Lots of players, Dominicans and others, form charitable foundations committed to issues of particular importance to them. One such player is Carlos Martinez of the St. Louis Cardinals, who formed the Tsunami Waves Foundation to give back to underprivileged communities in both St. Louis and his hometown of Puerto Plata in the Dominican Republic by providing education and baseball supplies through various events like equipment donation drives and fundraising programs. Visit his website <http://www.tsunamiwavesfoundation.org> for more information.

<sup>x</sup> Alan Klein gets this concept of “unintended consequences” from Robert Melton, “The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action,” *American Sociological Review*, vol. 1, no. 6, 1936, pp. 894-904.

<sup>xi</sup> The term *buscones* comes from the Spanish verb “buscar” which means “to search for, look for” (<https://www.baseball-reference.com/bullpen/Buscone>).

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