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## STRIKING OUT GENDER: GETTING TO FIRST BASE WITH BILL BROWN

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BILL MAURER

Bill Brown writes in "The Meaning of Baseball in 1992 (With Notes on the Post-American)," *Public Culture* 4, no.1 that "the very difference of sport lies in its erasure of differences: to watch the evening news is, in the closing moments, to join the irrational crowd" (43–44). Brown's erasure of *gender* difference, however, prompts me to call attention to the gendered meanings and politics of baseball and "American" nationalism. Although he mentions the genderedness of sports-viewing, Brown does not examine the deeper, constitutive gendering of sports, and misses the gendered foundations of nationalism. Thus, he writes that "sport can serve any end" (45). His analysis of baseball — seeing sport as having "become" politicized through its articulation with a U.S. nationalist project — neglects that sport and nationalism are mutually constitutive and founded upon the politics of gender.

While Brown calls attention to the institutionalized exclusion of African-Americans from baseball in the beginning of this century (51), he forgets that, still today, there are no women in the Major Leagues. He neglects the profound differences in men's and women's socialization into sports culture, and fails to draw out the implications of his recognition that the sports-viewing public, while surely made up of both men and women, is widely *conceptualized* as male (consider the famous "Swimsuit Issue" of *Sports Illustrated*, which is certainly not geared to straight or lesbian women). And

he does not address the gendered metaphors surrounding the notion of the playing “field” itself. As Delaney has discussed,<sup>1</sup> such agricultural metaphors are integrally connected to theories of procreation that historically have been coupled with monotheistic religious traditions: the “seed” is gendered masculine; the “soil,” fertile and receptive — but inert — is gendered feminine. Baseball and other sports played on “fields” and institutionalized to exclude women thus do not just “render America visible to itself” (Brown, 52). Like the Clarence Thomas hearings and the William Kennedy Smith trial, they render an “America” gendered male in which the rights of women as “players,” as citizens, can not be taken for granted.

In the eighteenth century, Giambattista Vico noted the etymological connection between “nation,” “nature,” and “natal.” Nation, for Vico, came into being out of the “Chaos . . . [of] confusion of human seeds in the state of the infamous promiscuity of women” (Vico 1744: 212). With the institution of monogamous heterosexual marriage with father as sovereign, the true state of nature — as a reflection of the Divine — was established (Vico 1744: 376). For Locke, the state becomes possible when “sovereign” male heads of households come together as rational and free individuals to form civil society. As Pateman (1988) argues, the notion of civil society on which nationhood is based rests on a fundamental opposition between public (rational, male) and private (irrational, female). Those who opposed women’s suffrage often maintained that civil society would succumb to the “disorder of women” were women (and their “irrational passions”) allowed into the public arena of politics. As Vico had it, it was women, after all, whose promiscuity kept men from proper knowledge of their progeny. Thus, in the space between notions of conception and conception of the nation (to slightly modify Delaney’s phrase; 1986: 504), men are “naturally” citizens, while women are “granted” citizenship rights by the male nation-state (see Delaney 1991b).

When Brown writes of the “disappearance of both ideological and geographical frontiers” as causing a “crisis for the national symbolic,” he highlights, and rightly, I think, that “America” has always been defined differentially, against an “enemy” (60). Yet the “crisis” in American nationalism seems to be resolving itself rather neatly by asserting difference

<sup>1</sup> Carol Delaney, “The Meaning of Paternity and the Virgin Birth,” *Man* 21 (1986), 494–513, and Carol Delaney, *The Seed and the Soil: Gender and Cosmology in Turkish Village Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991a).

from an age-old “enemy within”: “woman.” We need only remember the increasingly doubtful future of procreative rights, the resurgence of the ideology of the male-headed nuclear family, and the concomitant rise of the remarkably un-selfreflexive “men’s movement” to realize this.

Brown’s discussion of the baseball movie, *Field of Dreams*, thus misses the crucial point that the film, much more than being “about” baseball, attempts to signify the supposedly “archetypal” male quest for a return-to-(God-)the-father. This quest has been popularized by books like Robert Bly’s best-selling *Iron John* (1990). Tortured by decades of emasculating feminism and the hypermasculinity of their fathers, “today’s men” need to reconcile themselves to and reclaim the power of the caring, (life)giving father. The first two words spoken in *Field of Dreams* are “My father ...” (who — dead — “art in heaven”). Ray Kinsella, the protagonist, then recounts the story of his childhood: his mother died when he was a baby, and so “dad did the best he could.... Instead of Mother Goose, I got stories of baseball.” The 1960s came along and Ray rebelled against the authority of his father, only to realize in the 1980s that he needs to reconcile himself with his father to reach the father within him:

- Ray: “I’m 36 years old, I have a wife, a child and a mortgage and I’m scared to death I’m turning into my father.”
- Annie (his wife): “What’s your father got to do with this?”
- Ray: “I never forgave him for getting old.”

After Ray ploughs over his cornfield to build a baseball diamond, Annie, while taking care of the finances of the farm, points out to him that they are about to go bankrupt. Keeping the baseball field, she tells him, spells financial ruin. Just then, the ghost of “Shoeless Joe Jackson” appears on the playing field, legitimating Ray’s vision. Annie, put back in her proper place as woman and wife, says to Ray, her eyes on the apparition, “I’ll put up some coffee. Why don’t you go outside?” Later, when Ray embarks on his quest across the country to find his 1960s Black activist hero Terrence Mann, he leaves Annie behind — quite literally “in the kitchen” — to deal with auditors attempting to foreclose on their failing farm. We learn later that the conflict between Ray and his father began when, at age fourteen, Ray refused to play catch with his father because he had just read one of Mann’s books against authority. At the end of the movie, all past injustices

are righted: Mann ascends into Heaven — the heaven of the baseball players (redressing, as Brown notes, the historical exclusion of Blacks from baseball), Annie keeps her place as devoted wife and homemaker, Ray plays catch in his baseball diamond with his dead father, while thousands of baseball fans come to his field in Iowa to indulge their nostalgia (see Brown, 68-69).

The “American dream” of nation and baseball is rooted in gender. Knowledge produced about that dream ought to be accountable to the gender relations that constitute it. In closing, and only partially in fun, I note that, by my rough count, Brown cites or quotes works by fifty-one men and five women. As Lutz (1990) argues, citation is a social practice, and as a practice in the production of knowledge it is integrally connected to the interests of power. “Keeping score” on Brown’s citation practices is part and parcel of the numerical “will-to-knowledge” he discusses regarding the connection between score-keeping in sports, censuses, and war (Brown, 56, 48). Yet to claim we can step outside the numerological will-to-knowledge — and to argue that baseball is not, by “nature,” politically gendered — is to deny our continual constitution within the (gendered) terms of the game.

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