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# A Necessary Signifier: The Adaptation of Robinson's Body-Image in "The Jackie Robinson Story"

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## **A Necessary Signifier: The Adaptation of Robinson's Body-image in 'The Jackie Robinson Story'**

### **The visuality of adaptation**

Robert Stam identifies a source of hostility towards adaptation in the distaste for the seemingly 'embodiedness' of the filmic image, its incarnated specificity against the non-corporeal substance of the literary work (6). *The Jackie Robinson Story*, however, is an adaptation whose success depends on its specific embodiment, an embodiment that precedes even the literary source that the film adapts. What sets this adaptation apart is that Robinson is not only the protagonist and the occasion for the narrative, but also the only individual who can embody it. In fact, his body-image occupies the center of a nexus of written and visual texts unified by an overarching emplotment of the integration story as the fulfillment of Baseball's and America's even playing field, which I will refer to as 'The Jackie Robinson Story' (in quotes), within which *The Jackie Robinson Story* - i.e. the title of both the book commissioned by Brooklyn Dodgers general manager Branch Rickey to his publicist Arthur Mann, and of the 1950 film, starring Jackie Robinson, directed by Alfred Green that adapted this book - are only two of the many textual manifestations.

One of the goals of recent adaptation theory (Stam and Raengo, Hutcheon, Elliott) has been to rethink the seemingly unidirectional process of adaptation from a literary to a visual text through the notion of intertextuality, thus acknowledging the presence of multiple sources and voices in any given text. In the case of the *Jackie Robinson Story* they all point back to the same visual source, i.e. Robinson's body-image,

which, I will argue in the remainder of the essay, performs a specific cultural work of reconciliation that precedes, supercedes and indeed inspires the literary and filmic version of his life-story. In more traditional language, Robinson's body provides both the 'source material' and its 'adaptation.'

As Robert Stam has suggested, an intertextual view of adaptation that underscores the dissemination, rather than the straightforward translation, of sources and signs, permits to appreciate adaptation in its evolutionary sense, as a "mutation" through media-specific environments that augments the longevity of its source. This idea of mutation disrupts the hierarchy between source and derivative text regarding it instead as a continuum folding onto itself, so that the derivative form connects back to, and magnifies, the original one. This seems to be the case with Robinson's body-image, appearing in the media in increasingly contrived forms, to the point that Robinson's sheer presence is enough to mean the integration story.

Adaptation is not only a useful concept to grasp the media circulation of the 'Jackie Robinson Story' but also what this story is about. The very concept of integration relies on a bidirectional process of adaptation: on the one hand Robinson's adjustment to an all-white public sphere and, on the other, America's accommodation of his presence. The subject matter of the 'Jackie Robinson Story' is not so much Robinson's life but rather the process of integration itself for which Robinson's body-image provided both the language and the channel of expression.

*The Jackie Robinson Story* challenges the question of fidelity as it has been posed in traditional adaptation studies at multiple levels. Most obviously, the film is supposedly a work of non-fiction because it adapts an early biography of a still rising celebrity.

However, both the production history (broadly conceived as including Mann's book) and the reception of the film indicate that this was not a concern. Later I will consider what factors entitled the poverty-row Eagle-Lion studio to depart from the historical data and provide instead a fictionalized account of baseball integration, factors such as the generic constraints of the biopic, the demands of Cold War propaganda, and the larger process of symbolicization of Robinson occurring in the press, in the popular imagination, and in visual culture. Second, the reception of the film shows no trace of what Robert Stam defines as the iconophobic prejudice that privileges the written text over its filmic incarnation (5). On the contrary, it is driven by iconophilia, the thirst and desire to *see* Jackie Robinson, so much so that, in discussions of the film, the Mann's book fades in the background as a simple intermediary among the multiple media incarnations of the Robinson image.<sup>1</sup> Borrowing Timothy Mitchell's term, the 'Jackie Robinson Story' belongs to the exhibitionary order, one in which the supposed authenticity of the object is constructed by the act of exhibiting itself (296). Within this mode, Robinson's body is

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<sup>1</sup> As early as 1947, and more after that, Robinson was visually available in a number of venues: at the ballpark, on stage, when he toured with a vaudeville show, on television, which was most often watched at the neighborhood tavern, and, in 1950 on the big screen. Stadium attendance, however, seemed overwhelmingly preferable for black fans who felt a sense of agency in connection to Robinson's struggle, by being physically present at the ballpark. The institution of a Robinson Booster Club in 1947 by 500 citizens of Harlem who agreed to buy two tickets for each home game exemplifies how the desire to see Jackie translated into concrete consumer activism on the part of the black fans.

both a spectacle to see and something to possess, to take in.<sup>2</sup> Thirdly, and more radically, in this adaptation the specific and individual carnality of the image hovers over all media permutations of a mythologized ‘original’ and living body, not a literary character, highly visible in various spheres of the surrounding visual culture.

It is therefore necessary to approach ‘The Jackie Robinson Story’ from the point of view of the surrounding visual culture, not only as the stage where the integration drama unfolds, but because the drama’s source material is a profoundly visual narrative. Charged with the burden of representing simultaneously the best of his race and the best of America, the burden of proving the soundness of its ideals and testifying to its greatness, Robinson was constructed not only as the spokesperson but as the signifier of integration and the spectacle of his presence in visual culture was equated with the spectacle of Assimilation.

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<sup>2</sup> In Robinson’s early years in the Majors there is a detectable need for blacks and whites alike to see what integration looks like. For the black public the stakes are much higher. The black press encourages supporting Robinson by going to the ballpark, at the same time as it cautions against conspicuous behavior. In fact, while Robinson is in the spotlight on and off the field, and given the burden of proving the worth of his race - white acceptance depending on his performance - the black fans’ behavior is also brought under scrutiny. Black crowds filling the stands become metonymic for blacks’ thirst for participation, and their public behavior is interpreted as a metonymy of their moral capital and also as an object-lesson in self-policing. In other words, blacks’ increasing presence in an integrated public sphere elicited also a corresponding increase in white surveillance.

Robinson entered a visual culture that a few years later Ralph Ellison described as Optic White because of the marginal and yet enabling black presence sustaining it. In the Liberty Paint episode in *Invisible Man* (1952), the narrator is let in to the secret of assimilation when he meets black boiler worker Lucius Brokway who has the task of dipping his finger into a white mixture to produce Optic White Paint. As Harriet Mullen has suggested, this episode is a metaphor for the process of assimilation understood as the production of whiteness via incorporation of the raw materials of blackness: Lucius Brokway is a miscegenating black presence indispensable to the production of a shining whiteness.

I argue that Robinson's presence in visual culture performed a similar cultural work. The biggest African-American celebrity in Post War America, Robinson made blackness visible at the heart of mainstream American visual culture while he provided a 'convincing' signifier of the successful realization of two post-war color blind utopias: the *even playing field* of sports and the promise of democratic citizenship through consumption that Lizabeth Cohen has called the Consumers' Republic.

The colorblind utopia behind the image of sport as an even playing field posits a player's performance as the only measure of value. Implicitly, it relies on the Marxian notion of 'abstract human labor,' the idea that labor power is indifferent to its individual source. Indeed, when taking the field instead of a white player, Robinson introduced, at least theoretically, the principle of exchangeability of labor, an idea that clashed again with the social roles enforced by a segregated society. This principle was nominally upheld in the press coverage of baseball integration and by Dodgers General Manager Branch Rickey, who insisted that his choice to integrate baseball was dictated by the sole

desire “to win pennants.” He famously dismissed his critics by stating: “If an elephant with pink ears were a better centerfielder for the Dodgers than the best player the team had for that position, I would sign the elephant to a contract and put him in center field” (Mann 142).<sup>3</sup> Along the same lines, the *Sporting News* remarked: “If Jackie Robinson hits homers and plays a whale of a game... the fans will *lose sight of his color*.” On the one hand, Rickey asked his critics to visualize a doubly improbable substitute – an elephant and with pink ears – to foreground the priority of performance over the identity of the laborer. He also urged the public to imagine something that was not/could not be there in order to appreciate someone who would. *The Sporting News* (Nov. 1 1945), instead, demanded that the public disregard aspects of what they see: skin color as that which would make Robinson appear not much different from the pink-eared elephant evoked by Rickey. That the mainstream press was committed to guiding the perceptual experience of Robinson’s presence in the field is indicative of the difficult negotiation between color-blindness and racial presence demanded by the idea of sports’ even playing field.

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<sup>3</sup> References to the animal kingdom seem to have been a sure sign of progressive minds, especially in conjunction with justifications of why skin color wouldn’t matter in a baseball field. Consider, for example, Leo Durocher’s speech to some southern Dodgers players who had circulated a petition against playing with Robinson, should he be signed by Brooklyn: “I don’t care if the guy is yellow or black, or if he has stripes like a fuckin’ zebra. I’m the manager of this team, and I say he plays. What’s more, I say he can make us all rich...” Golenbock 18.

Similarly, the presumption of a color-blind market inspired the promise of racial equality prefigured in the Consumers' Republic, the "strategy that emerged after the Second World War for reconstructing the nation's economy and reaffirming its democratic values through promoting the expansion of mass consumption" (Cohen 11). Postwar reconversion propaganda labeled thrift as un-American and mass consumption both as a civic responsibility and evidence of economic egalitarianism. The surest way to beat the Soviets in the creation of a classless society, the Consumers' Republic was aggressively marketed as an aspiration as well as a reality ushered in by federal legislation designed to boost the economy, such as the G.I. Bill, a color-blind piece of legislation whose application, however, was bogged down by pervasive racism (Cohen 167-173). The idea that a growth in consumption would boost production and increase everybody's share of the American pie allowed mass consumption to appear as a meeting point for the American melting pot and to represent the market as color blind. But not to black consumers: while Blacks recognized the symbolic privilege of entering a public space with the status of consumer citizenship, everyday purchases and choices as consumers augmented the dilemmas of blacks' double-consciousness, because of the continuing experience of a segregated market and a consumer culture prospering on racial caricatures (Mullins 190).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The symbolic world of commodities was laid out in advertising images that presented the "correct" interpretation of material culture and were pleasing to white consumers because they offered a "contrived historical basis for Black labor and social subordination." Consistently, blacks were never shown as consumers, until Robinson



Color blindness, it becomes clear, is a term fraught with tension between sensory and intellectual knowledge insofar as it describes an ethical stance with the language of sensory perception. Color blindness locates in skin color the fact of difference, which is apprehended by sight and then, with an ethical act, is “erased” by the mind’s eye in such an effective and complete way that color supposedly becomes “invisible” even to the corporeal eye. While implicitly acknowledging that race exists in the eye of the beholder, the ideology of color blindness in fact translates into a demand for color-absence, what Ralph Ellison described as the Optic Whiteness of the assimilationist imagination. It thus reinforces the disembodied notion of citizenship implicit in the abstract ‘person’ addressed by the Constitution (Berlant 112-3, Rogin 7-8). If the signification of the national body politic depends on a disembodied notion of citizenship that excludes by definition overembodied racial subjects, how could Robinson become a signifier for the nation? Furthermore, as I mentioned, Robinson’s entrance in the Major Leagues in the place of a white player introduced the principle of the exchangeability of labor, because a black man’s labor was exchanged with a white man’s. In other words, Robinson posed the problem of how to signify (abstract) citizenship and the exchangeability of labor, with a body-image that would be a constant reminder of the overembodiment of race and the persistence of an epidermal color line.

### **Manufacturing consent**

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began to play for the Dodgers and was charged with the burden of proving the color blindness of the Consumers’ Republic.

For the most part, the mainstream press created a sense of consensus around the integration story, assuming the task to provide an image of reconciliation between color blindness and racial presence. William Simons has shown that the press coverage of the integration of baseball was deeply informed by the theories formulated by Myrdal about the American Creed (39-64).<sup>5</sup> Claiming that the American dilemma was in reality a white people's problem Myrdal not only demanded that they live up to their Creed, but he also shifted the spotlight onto their moral character. Similarly, Branch Rickey's signing of Robinson brought the spotlight onto the unfulfilled promise of baseball as America's game.

In the mainstream press, the outcome of Rickey's "noble experiment," was protected either by ignoring most racial incidents or by attributing them to die-hard southern segregationist traditions, thus creating a convenient distance between *them* (the southern racists) and *us* (the northern liberals). For Simons, the attempt to downplay racial tensions in newspaper reports probably expressed the hope that the South would take advantage of this chance to move into the mainstream of American life. Secondly, reinforcing the idea that Americans had a deep sense of sportsmanship and merit (as evidenced by the rise of Joe Louis from sport champion to national hero, see Capeci and Wilkerson), the mainstream press resolved to tailor Robinson's public persona so that he

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<sup>5</sup> In 1944, Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal's published the findings of a research sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation under the title *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, in which he argued that American society was a living contradiction insofar as the permanence of racial discrimination clashed against the American Creed of liberty, equality, justice, and fair opportunity for everybody.

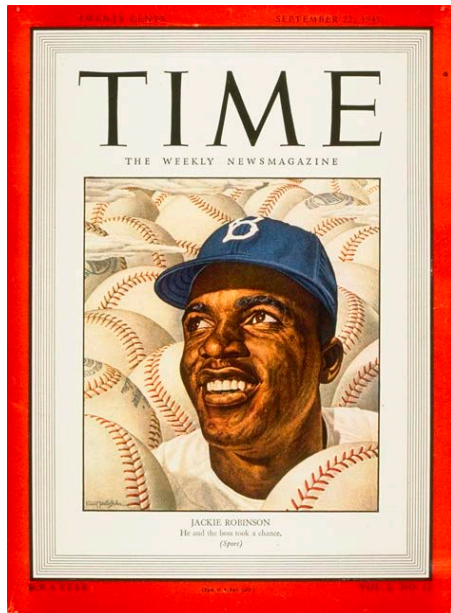
wouldn't come across as a critic, but rather as a supporter of the American Creed. In sum, the press insisted that, outside the South, the "right type" of black could expect the fair trial dictated by national ideology.

Consistently, since Robinson's first season with the Montreal Royals and even more after his entrance in the Majors, inter-racial images proliferate in the mainstream press: for example photographs of Robinson congratulated by Clay Hopper, his Montreal coach; Robinson cheered by his teammates after hitting a home run; Robinson assaulted by autograph seekers, and so forth. These images create a façade of consensus and cooperation by providing an everyday dimension to interracial contact in response to the so called "locker room argument" against integration, i.e. the idea of the unacceptable promiscuity of the team communal spaces.<sup>6</sup>

Other images, however, reveal the work of adaptation of Robinson's visual presence within the Optic Whiteness of the assimilationist imagination. At the end of the 1947 season, his first in the Majors, *Time* magazine features Robinson on its cover to celebrate his reception of the Rookie of the Year Award (fig. 1).

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<sup>6</sup> Another argument against the integration of baseball was based on the presence of the so called baseball Annies, upheld by baseball commissioner Judge Landis who was the insurmountable obstacle to baseball integration. Interestingly his crusade against racial promiscuity had been also behind the banning of the Jack Johnson fight films in the 1910s. See Hastings Ardell and Grieverson.



To summarize Robinson's full acceptance, *Time* portrays him emerging from a sea of white balls, as one of the saints of baseball's heaven. Such a chromatically polarized image repeats also the fascination with Robinson's blackness expressed in countless references to his physique and his skin color in the press. Skin color that, however, is toned down in order to offer a chromatic equilibrium between the baseballs' seems and Robinson's skin, and therefore a balanced image of a successful Assimilation. While the visual syntax of the image establishes a chromatic dialogue between Robinson's "blackness" and the surrounding baseballs, the difference in material densities between his face and the floating balls reproduces the dialectic of material/ideal or corporeal/spiritual underlying white supremacy (Dyer, White). Still, this fantasy of inclusion presents a contradictory scopic regime: despite featuring Robinson's reconciled double-consciousness (that is, he is both black and American) the image shows how America reconciles *its own* double-consciousness, how it imagines and visualizes the

successful accommodation of its Other: Robinson is “elevated,” “swallowed up,” but still, in James Snead’s terminology, ‘marked out’ as radically different.

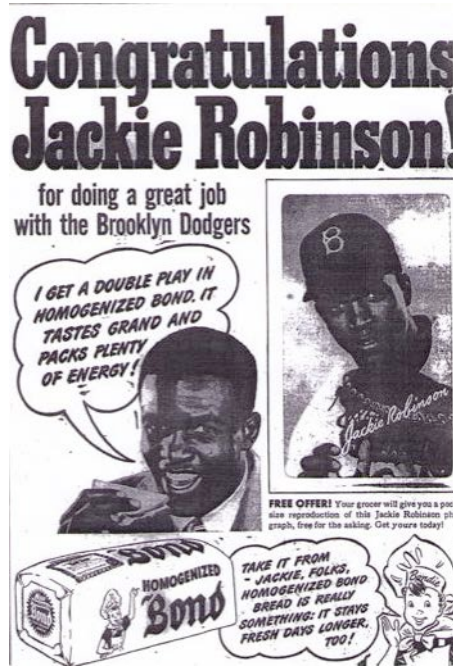
In fact, by 1947 it had become clear not only that Robinson’s playing style enlivened the sport but also, with increasing game attendance, the righteousness of integration had been confirmed by its financial reward. Rickey’s and the fans’ investment in Robinson had paid off and he appeared to happily conjoin social equality with profit. The compositional equilibrium of the *Time* cover expresses this reconciliation.

### **The Incorporation of America**

The sense of assimilation as incorporation, expressed metaphorically in the *Time* cover, becomes progressively literalized in Robinson-images in consumer culture, where he is given the task of testifying to the color blind democratic essence of the Consumers’ Republic. In the first year of his Major League contract Robinson could not endorse products or appear in ads, but by the end of the 1947 season Robinson had realized that, should his career end abruptly, he needed to capitalize on his image to secure a financial future for his family. He therefore turned to product endorsements, which appeared mostly, but not exclusively, in the black press. Between 1947 and 1949 he endorsed Homogenized Bond Bread, Borden’s Milk and Old Gold Cigarettes. In 1950, with the end of his contractual obligation to silence and to avoid retaliation against racist treatment he was able to “sell” his most precious commodity, i.e. the visibility of his blackness. His image appeared in association with Chesterfield Cigarettes, shorts, sport

shirts and T-shirts and in the “Wheaties, breakfast of champions” campaign in the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Ebony*, and on subway billboards (Rampersad ch. 10).<sup>7</sup>

Consider the ad for Homogenized Bond Bread in fig. 2, showing a close shot of Robinson, mouth open, about to bite into a sandwich.



Compared to the invisibility of blacks as consumers in advertising images, the segregation of eating facilities, and the history of disparaging associations of blacks with food (Witt), here Jackie Robinson appears finally sitting at America’s communal table, invited to share its bread. Yet, through the same process of incorporation visualized in the ad, consumers are “eating up” Robinson as they are “eating” Homogenized Bond Bread: Robinson is portrayed as a *subject* of consumption primarily to foster

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<sup>7</sup> According to Zinkhan et al. the presence of blacks in Magazine and Television advertising in the years 1946-1956 amounted to less than half a percentage point of the total amount of ads in both media.

identification between the bread and Robinson as *objects* of consumption. This ad pierces through what Berlant calls the prophylactic public sphere, the *cordon sanitaire* of mass advertised trademarks portraying overembodied racial subjects created to protect the disembodied ethnic purity of other “Americans.” As Coombe argues, the incorporation of America was “integrally related to the corporeality of others” and displayed *literally* “through the medium of the (consuming) body and the embodiment, on a national scale, of others whose claims to American subjectivity were complicated by contemporary relations of subjugation” (173).

Furthermore, as bell hooks observes, “eating the Other” is an apt description for the pervasive commodification of Otherness which turns “the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals [into] an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices, affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other.” As a primitivist metaphor of incorporation, ‘eating’ does not simply indicate the desire to possess the Other but also “to be changed in some way by the encounter” (23, 24). The sense of transformative effect of ownership of a “piece of Robinson” – in this case represented by a free pocket size reproduction of a Jackie Robinson’s signed photograph – is frequent in ads of this period.

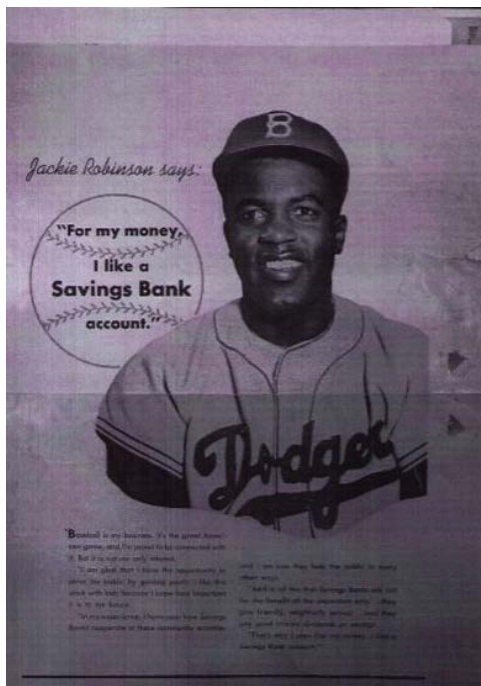
Even though baseball’s symbolic qualities – health, vitality, strength, and perfectibility – had been previously exploited in advertising featuring most prominently Ty Cobb and Babe Ruth,<sup>8</sup> Robinson added personal connotations, such as endurance and

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<sup>8</sup> Endorsements by baseball figures began in full during the sport’s golden age (1920s) with Babe Ruth and Ty Cobb’s “pictorial frequency” complementing their baseball records (Tygiel 2000, 85ff). See also Newman and Hathaway.

fierce competitiveness, and historic ones: his very presence testifies to the sport's increased moral capital. Evidence of this fact dates to a few years following the release of *The Jackie Robinson Story*, and therefore allows us to read retrospectively the simultaneous process of abstraction and overembodiment occurring through that literary and film text.

Robinson's recognized trustworthiness and pedagogical role are the ostensible subject of an ad for a Savings Account published in the *Amsterdam News* in 1955 (fig.3).



The caption, inscribed inside a baseball, reads: “*JACKIE ROBINSON SAYS: FOR MY MONEY, I LIKE A SAVINGS BANK ACCOUNT.*” Below Robinson’s cutout photograph there is an extended explanation of why Robinson is an authority in the matter: because of his connection with baseball and Americanness, his work with the youth and belief in the future, his personal experience and community values, Robinson





The context for the ad is Robinson's work with the youth and his recognized value as a role model. Subscribers are given a free "Sports Authority Card" with a dotted line to write their names, possibility that transforms them into sports authorities, guaranteed by Robinson's signature. This rhetorical structure of the "conversion experience" (Lears 56-57) allows the ad to draw attention to the personal transformation, while the monetary transaction slips into the background. The ad emphasizes Robinson's editorial role in the magazine and even the act of subscribing is designed as a personal address to him: "Dear Jackie, Please enter me as a charter subscriber to OUR SPORTS Magazine..." Between the street address (where the money is going) and the subscription form, there is a cutout of his face. Not only is he already answering the letter, but he is also personally receiving the subscription: our money is in good hands.

### **Pursuing the "Original" Body**

Considered in the context of the contemporary visual culture, it appears that Robinson-images are not only increasingly exchangeable in previously segregated public spheres, but they are also becoming a signifier of exchange just as Robinson is no longer just a valuable signifier but rather a *signifier of value*. Robinson's starring role in *The Jackie Robinson Story*, further enhanced this process. Unlike other biopics, by having Robinson perform himself, the film conflates the usually visible distinction between the actor and the character in a tightly sutured and suturing text, because it offers only one point of identification for the spectator: the body, the voice, the movements and presence of Jackie himself. As the tagline announced: "You'll hit with him! You'll run with him! You'll slide with him!" (Fig. 5)



“Personal biography on the screen will reach a new high in verisimilitude with the release of *The Jackie Robinson Story*,” wrote the *New York Times* (“From Sports to Screen”). With this and similar statements, the press coverage of the shooting and release of the film praised its verisimilitude in remarking that, “for the first time the persona concerned will be seen in the starring role portraying himself.” It reacted to the conflation between performer and performed by seeing authenticity and truthfulness, in other words, *transparency* there where the image is coded the most. The film is defined as “probably the most authentic film ever made in Hollywood,” a “sincere dramatization,” an “honest portrayal.” As the slippage from authenticity to honesty indicates, Robinson’s sheer presence guarantees the moral value of the story. Furthermore, there is an expectation of verisimilitude connected to the spectacle of Robinson’s performance in the field, and the realization that nobody else could reproduce his distinctive playing style: “Jackie Robinson, the only man alive who can show [such] blinding speed and smooth batting style,” writes the press, “Who could portray him better?” This reception further indicates how the burden of fidelity that screen adaptations bear in relation to their literary sources was instead displaced onto Robinson’s body as the source text.

Overall, Robinson's performance of himself on screen was received as an authenticating and authorial presence: not only guarantee of higher verisimilitude, but indication of Robinson's endorsement of the narrative of his story. This endorsement allows the press to voice also a claim of ownership on the integration drama. Bosley Crowther, for example, writes: "The film tells the story of Jackie Robinson with honest pride, and that's a story of which all Americans, with respect and gratitude, may be proud, too". Through this process of appropriation, an individual's story and image are co-opted to signify an All-American Story, a fiction of belonging, the imagination of a more inclusive collectivity, in other words, an expression of the assimilationist imagination that found in Robinson's integration drama and bodily image the perfect morality play.

### **A Cold War Biopic**

The Green film then, was overdetermined at many levels: not only did the public consider integration already successfully resolved, but it was already acquainted with the symbolism of Robinson's image. The script is an adaptation of the first Robinson biography written by Arthur Mann, Branch Rickey's personal assistant and publicist, who was given the task of producing a cogent narrative of the Great Experiment where the goodness of the integrationist impulse is proven by its overwhelming success. This operation was already a retroactive reading of facts and events – with an almost Hegelian sense of predetermination – written from the point of its perceived conclusion, as if to say: "mission accomplished." Indeed, Mann had already manufactured a selective account of integration that combined an insider's perspective sympathetic to the

Brooklyn manager with the 'raw' materials of mainstream newspaper coverage, which were already informed by an investment in creating an image of consensus around the Noble Experiment.

The film conforms also to generic standards of the biopic that George Custen describes as a conservative, ritualistic, standardized narrative of sanitation and moralization of tales of fame. During the war years there had been a considerable output of biopics about sports celebrities, but none of them focused on a black character and none of the celebrities played themselves.<sup>9</sup> Films such as *Pride of the Yankees* (Sam Wood, 1942), *The Babe Ruth Story* (Roy Del Ruth, 1948) were the perfect parables for a country determined to consolidate its image of democracy both at home and abroad. With the transition from the war against Nazism to the cold war against communism the biopic underwent a transformation too, and it was designed to symbolize democracy and patriotism in opposition to the communist threat. Not just the values of the American Creed were showcased, but also the American Way to greatness: anybody, although disadvantaged, can earn acceptance, by proving better than what his lot in life would produce.<sup>10</sup> This approach is clear from the first sequence of the film where we see a

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<sup>9</sup> George Custen counts only 12 films (4% of the studio era production) focusing on nonwhite North-American characters. The black characters are only athletes or professional entertainers thus reinforcing the sense of limited career options for blacks. Furthermore, blacks are always shown "fitting in" rather having a culture of their own.

<sup>10</sup> The all-American story proposed by the film is in continuity with the construction of Robinson as a model for youth of all colors that resulted in a number of publications for the children, for example the comic book issued by Fawcett Publications detailing the

young Robinson offering to field balls thrown by two white men who are conspicuously ignoring him, until he catches a difficult ball with his bare hands. Persuaded by his skills, they fetch him a beat-up glove with which to practice. From the opening, American democratic fairness is portrayed as the universal accessibility to success: America embraces excellence even if, when it comes from the Other, the burden of proof lies on him.

Gerald Early considers the film as the sanctification of a new cultural paradigm that makes the integration drama attractive and, through the lens of the Jackie Robinson experience, it provides it with a sense of self-sacrifice and nobility. He also reads it as an update of the Booker T. Washington uplift story – i.e. a tale of success of the disadvantaged that never challenges the systemic inequalities creating such disadvantage – and as conveying the triumph of a self-redeeming Western liberalism: America takes notes of the injustices of race and corrects its past mistakes.<sup>11</sup>

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story of his life and other successful life-lessons in connection with him (notably the story “A Rookie on Trial”)

<sup>11</sup> Black film criticism also recorded the apparent change in Hollywood’s attitude towards African-Americans, but with the awareness that it was not indication of Hollywood’s conversion to progressive social ideals but rather the desire to cater to black spectatorship that was increasingly turning to private forms of entertainment (most importantly records and radio). In *The Journal of Negro Education* Lawrence Reddick wrote that, however improved the black image in Hollywood’s post war turn to a new form of gritty realism, “the ceiling above which the Negro on the screen is seldom, if ever, permitted to rise is

As Mary Dudziak and Derrick Bell suggest, desegregation became a Cold War imperative, beginning as early as Truman's re-election campaign and culminating in *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954), in order to counteract an image of American democracy abroad tarnished by the obvious contradiction between American values and racial segregation. The increasing identification of peoples of color throughout the world with the plight of the American black made the race question a precious currency in the Cold War fight for political alliances. Bell contends that the consensus around racial integration that led to the landmark decision to desegregate public schools was made possible by a convergence of interests of both blacks and whites rooted in the anticommunist sentiment of the time, so pervasive that "it set the terms of the debate on all sides of the civil rights issue" (in Dudziak 65). Hailed by the *Chicago Defender* as a "vehicle to depict democracy at work," *The Jackie Robinson Story* was the perfect occasion to showcase America's fulfillment of its democratic ideals.

To fit the generic and ideological constraints of the Cold War biopic, both book and film contain a number of strategic omissions deliberately concealing systemic racism. For example, they ignore Jackie's alienation from the Negro Leagues, especially the controversy with Newark Eagles' owner Effa Manley, which played itself out publicly in the black press after Robinson's signing.<sup>12</sup> Interested in the recognition of black players'

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[significantly] lower than the ceiling for the Negro in American life itself," quoted in Everett 289.

<sup>12</sup> Robinson's experience in the Negro Leagues is described as long bus rides where the players are forced to sleep, horribly low pay, and lack of formal contracts: his fellow Negro Leaguers tell him that the safest way to have a contract is to borrow money from

talent and in justifying his own choice to jump his obligations for a more lucrative position, in the pages of *Ebony* Robinson wrote that his presence in the majors would foster integration and encourage the black players in the Negro Leagues to “play harder, train harder and give the fans much better baseball.” In response, Manley accused Rickey and Robinson of taking business away from the black community, not only because Rickey had not compensated the Kansas City Monarchs for their loss of Robinson, but also because she knew that black fans were going to flood Major League Parks to see Robinson, rather than continue to support their own local Negro League teams.<sup>13</sup> The book and film’s refusal to mention this controversy was functional to defending Major League Baseball’s use of the Negro Leagues as a labor pool (Early 1997, B5). As Vignola argues, “Major League Baseball never saw Negro League Baseball as a direct threat. However, it was in Major League Baseball’s long-term economic interests as a monopoly to swallow up its competition for its own needs” (77).

The handling of Robinson’s experience in the military is particularly intentional and follows the tone set by the press, where Robinson’s court martial had been consistently omitted. An army report on race relations compiled one year after Robinson joined claimed, with a hardly concealed sexual panic, that “social *intercourse* between

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the owner. This will insure that one will be employed long enough to allow him to pay his debt.

<sup>13</sup> The controversy was started by Jackie Robinson’s article “What’s Wrong with Negro Baseball,” in the June 1948 issue of *Ebony*. Effa Manley replied two months later with an article on another Johnson publication *Our World*. For more on this controversy see Early “American Integration.”



the races has been discouraged, yet Negro athletes such as Joe Louis, the prizefighter, and Jackie Robinson, the All-American football star...are today greatly admired in the army” (Tygiel 2002, 14). Only a few weeks before the incident involving Robinson, in Durham, North Carolina, a black soldier had been shot dead by a bus driver. In response to pervasive harassment of black servicemen, the army had begun to provide its own integrated bus lines, one of which Robinson boarded on July 6, 1944 with Mrs. Jones, the light-skinned wife of a fellow black officer. Robinson’s conduct was permitted under the new policy, but the bus driver was obviously unsettled by the sight of a black soldier sitting next to a “white” woman and ordered him to move to the back of the bus. Initially charged with insubordination, disturbing the peace, drunkenness, conduct unbecoming an officer, insulting a civilian woman (the stenographer, who repeatedly interrupted Robinson’s testimony with racist comments and refused to transcribe some of his statements), and refusing to obey the lawful orders of a superior officer, Robinson was eventually court marshaled not “for refusing to move to the back of a bus, which was within his rights, or for responding to the racial slurs of a civilian, but for acting with ‘disrespect’ toward Captain Bear [his superior] and disobeying a lawful command given by that officer” (19). This meant that the entire case had to be argued without referring to the Army’s failure to uphold its policy, and it revealed the discrepancy between the inner and outer face of the army who had gone so far as instituting its own bus lines in order to tame increasing racial tensions from within and without. Ultimately Robinson’s popularity within its ranks contributed to his acquittal and honorable discharge.

In the book Arthur Mann actively re-writes the incident without mentioning the new army policy. He explains Robinson’s refusal to move to the back of the bus with his

lack of experience with Southern segregationism and legitimizes the driver's actions which, he points out, were demanded by his role as a municipal employee simply upholding local laws. Despite recognizing that this was an isolated incident in Robinson's otherwise impeccable army career, Mann dares to state that "Jackie Robinson was ignorant of the social decorum expected of a Negro in the South," a claim followed by a more precise, and prophetic, assessment: "To him obedience was a matter of will, rather than hereditary habit" (94). None of this appears in the film, which instead presents the army as the only employer above racial discrimination and as a prestigious career path.

Another active manipulation that had been initiated in the press is the omission of racial tensions during Robinson's first Spring training. Chris Lamb has given a detailed account of the ordeal that the Robinsons faced from their departure from California for the Daytona Beach Training Camp. Bumped off from two flights, unable to find something to eat, the Robinsons' eventually finished the trip on the back of a bus which is the only fact shown in the film: a two shot of Rachel and Jackie, their faces displaying an unlikely patience and anticipation. Obviously, racial incidents that went unreported in the press at the time were not going to be acknowledged in this Hollywood hagiography.

Because of Robinson's perceived authorizing and authenticating presence, the film displays a fluidity of boundaries between facts and fiction that Hollywood is confident won't bother spectators: people and places that resisted Robinson's entrance in Organized Baseball are ignored or renamed; selected individuals who initially opposed the integrationist Experiment are shown developing admiration and affection for Robinson, thus functioning as stand-ins for an American public who learned to love him. To compensate for its "poetic license" the film constructs its own marks of authenticity,

grounding the narrative on what are traditionally considered documentary sources: fabricated newspaper headlines, letters, and occasional archival footage. As the narrative catches up with present time it also increasingly conforms to already known facts and statistics, but with a notable exception: Robinson's HUAC testimony, solicited to counteract Paul Robeson's remark that African-Americans would not fight in a war against the Soviet Union, is moved to the end of the 1947 Season (rather than 1949), the scene re-enacted and the text of the testimony modified. In the film, after scoring the winning run that gives the Dodgers the pennant, Robinson seeks Rickey's advise about the invitation he received to speak in Washington: "You have earned the right to speak" replies Rickey, "about a threat to peace that is in everybody's mind. Now you can fight back." Robinson is emancipated from his contractual obligation to silence because of the force of the message he needs to deliver to the nation. As the image dissolves onto the Capital building and then on a medium shot of Robinson speaking into a microphone we hear a tinkered version of his testimony, now expressing a collective "we," rather than the carefully foregrounded "I" that Robinson used in front of HUAC.

I know that life in the United States can be mighty tough for people that are *a little different* from the majority ...I can't speak for any 15 million people. No one person can. But I'm certain that I, *and many other Americans of many races and faiths*, have too much invested in our country's welfare to throw it away or to let it be taken from *us*.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Emphasis added. The original text goes as follows: "I can't speak for 15 million people any more than any other person can, but I know that I've got too much invested for *my wife and child and myself* in the future of this country [ ] to throw it away because of a siren song sung in bass." (emphasis added)

That the climactic conclusion of the film coincides with Robinson's HUAC testimony is indicative of the need to correct the image of black defection and defiance represented by Paul Robeson (Smith, Dorinson). Against this threat HUAC showcased Robinson because of his demonstrated devotion to core American values - capitalism included - and gave him the burden of proving that black loyalty and anti-communism were one and the same. Implicitly, the HUAC testimony also confirmed that both are necessary requirements for a successful assimilation.

### **A Historical Hieroglyph**

The process of mythopoeia woven through the press coverage was magnified in the Mann book and even more in the Green film. In both cases, Robinson's life previous to the Dodgers signing is handled as if it did not belong to History: the facts don't matter and cannot be checked against historical documents. What this really means, though, is that Robinson cannot enter into the national imaginary until proven fit to be there, a fact that Rickey has the task to assess at his first encounter with Robinson. Here is how Mann describes it in the book:

Who was this boy? Of course, Rickey knew his name and his deeds and that he came from California somewhere... college... soldier. What was underneath, deep down? Who were his forebears?  
That's the trouble with the Negro, you can't probe too far into his heritage. It's mixed... lost... clouded. And yet, you can't say that any one is or isn't what you want or need. If a boy hasn't had the opportunity, Rickey reasoned during this long silence...If he hasn't been tried, how can you say he'll be found wanting?  
(30)

The Robinson saga enters into the national imaginary through this primal scene, which is reminiscent of the scene often found in colonial literature of the encounter

between the West and the natives. In Homi Bhabha's terminology, standing before an inscrutable black man, Rickey is experiencing the Other as a historical hieroglyph. Assuming the perspective of the colonizer, Mann voices Rickey's thoughts but also, as Mann's shift from free indirect discourse to the indefinite 'you' suggests, those of the nation.

As written in the book, Rickey's attempt to decipher and evaluate Robinson is pervaded by an anxiety that the embodied film image cannot reproduce. The Robinson the spectators see is no longer the inscrutable Robinson Rickey met back in 1945, because his image has been already pacified and deciphered for the public at large. The drama captured by the following notorious scene, in which Rickey insults Robinson to determine if he will be capable of handling, without reacting, the abuse he will receive on and off the field, is therefore tempered down in the film: not only are the racist slurs excised but the test of fitness for integration loses its dramatic uncertainty because the Robinson the viewers see has already proven himself fit. That this exchange became a myth of origin in the narrative of post-war nation-building suggests that Robinson's claim to be willing to turn the other cheek provided a desirable image of the racial subordination that America was hoping to maintain through Robinson's entrance in Organized Baseball.

Since from the point of view of spectatorial knowledge the film doesn't need to prove who Robinson is, it focuses instead on further enhancing Robinson's capacity to signify universal ideals by adopting visual and narrative solutions that transform his individual story into a collective one. The film in fact opens and closes with a trope of the everyman: a black boy walking down a tree-lined road is shot from behind and backlit to

appear as a silhouette, an unspecified individual, while the voice-over describes baseball as every American boy's dream (fig. 6).



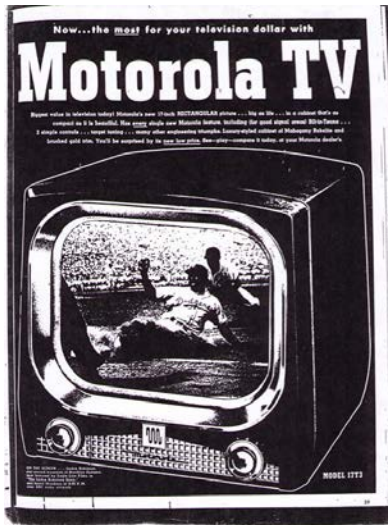
Similarly, the closing sequence is a series of dissolves against the background of the Statue of Liberty: a medium shot of Robinson giving his HUAC testimony (fig. 7), the boy seen in the opening, a two-shot of Jackie and Rachel; the door to the 215 Montague Street Dodgers' office featuring the plate "Brooklyn baseball club, Branch Richey, private;" Jackie at bat.



The voice-over emphasizes that this is not Jackie Robinson's story alone, or his victory alone: "It is a story that can happen in a country that is truly free. A country where every child has the right to become president or play baseball for the Brooklyn Dodgers" as we see, still superimposed on the Statue of Liberty, Robinson sliding home (fig. 8).



The circular and tautological structure of the film sutures the anonymous black boy of the beginning with the image of Robinson's signature play. 'Stealing home,' was not only an emblem of Robinson's vernacularization of baseball insofar as it brought the Major Leagues the aggressive and creative running style practiced in the Negro Leagues, but also what placed him at the center of baseball's archetypal drama, i.e. the quest for safety at home. 'Stealing' his way into the heart of baseball symbolism, this play was made particularly daring by the contested notion of 'home' that baseball – and America – represented for Robinson. Through this play, Robinson makes America his 'home' as well as entering the American home as suggested by the ad for a Motorola TV set, published in *Ebony* in 1950 (fig. 9).



The screen image of the television set features Robinson sliding home and towards the viewer. Aesthetically, the energy and the forward movement of the play reinforce the spatial confusion between the electronic space of the image and the physical space of the viewer emphasizing the promise of proximity of live television, which, as Spiegel shows, was often accompanied by a rhetoric of commodity enchantment. It therefore enhances what Jane Feuer has called television's ideology of liveness, the idea that television not only connects to events *live*, but is *alive*. Consequently, Robinson appears metaphorically and fetishistically as the life of the object, that which brings the medium to life.

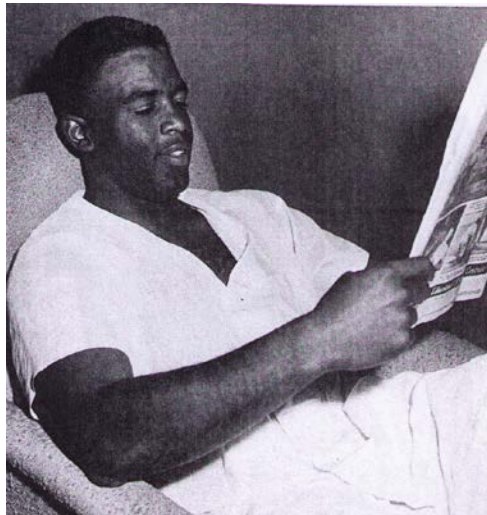
Addressed to the black consumer, the ad makes clear how the association with Robinson allows television to advertise itself as a progressive medium. The effect of *mise-en-abyme* created by the ad's multiple frames offers a visual correlative of the magnifying process that oversaturates Robinson's image. As the caption reminds readers of the intermediatic circulation of the integration story - including mention of the release of *The Jackie Robinson Story* and an ABC radio program - television places itself at its center, as the medium that brings this story, live, into the home. By appropriating this emblematic



play, television attempts a conflation of its institutional image with the democratic content it makes available while the ad's multiple frames produce a flickering effect that makes Robinson visible alternatively as the message and the medium: Jackie *is* the integration story and his body has become its necessary channel of expression.

### **Robinson's Star Body**

The teleological and tautological structure of the *The Jackie Robinson Story* would not have been sustainable had Robinson been played by someone else. Visualized in Robinson's body, race becomes palatable, even beloved, in film in a manner not possible before. Indeed, as late as 1953, Robinson's body-image was still mobilized in the press to exorcise racial tensions. When death threats on Robinson's life were received at the eve of a doubleheader between the Reds and the Dodgers in the northern city of Cincinnati, the news agency ACME dispatched a photograph of Robinson, wearing a white T-shirt and reading an illustrated magazine, "relaxing in his hotel room" (fig. 10).



The fact that this photograph of an unperturbed Robinson appeared alongside accounts of racial tensions shows how his image was offered up as an apotropaic object

and an icon of reconciliation. In the same occasion, one of Robinson's teammates suggested that all Dodgers players wear no. 42 so that the shooter wouldn't know where to aim. Both visual solutions strike for their absurdity, one for showcasing Robinson's presumed tranquility so that the public would identify with his composure, and the other for imagining that an inscription of belonging (the team's uniform) could project an impossible color blindness onto the field.

This negotiation between the specificity and representativity of the Robinson-image, its carnality and its textuality, had already played itself out in reviews of the film in black press, where it was noted that while the 'real' Robinson (in flesh and blood) guaranteed authenticity to the screen Robinson, the screen and media Robinson was progressively becoming a free-floating signifier.

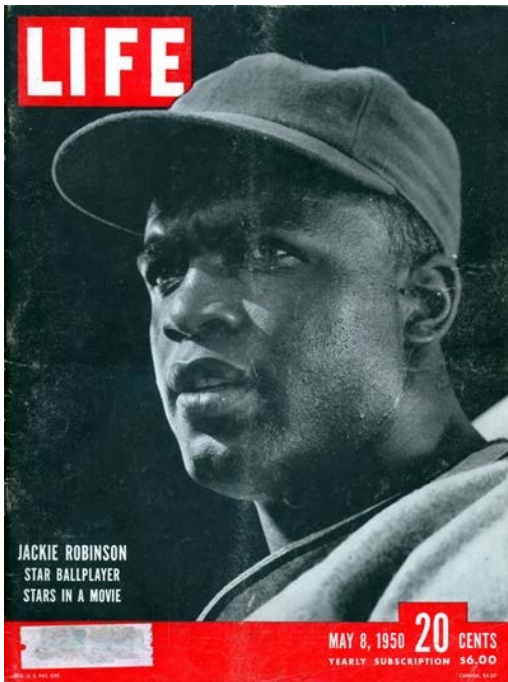
The *Chicago Defender* claims:

We'd like to see a real story, told with all the tears, joy and heartbreak as the Jackie Robinson story was honestly lived... and we just can't see Jackie able to relive his life 'effectively' for millions of movie goers to grasp its meaning. They will be so busy criticizing... his *acting*, which all could be eliminated if a *real* actor played the part...(Mar. 04, 1950) [emphasis added]

The reviewer argues that the only way to put the *real* story on screen would be to have it played by an actor, since Robinson's lack of expertise makes him susceptible to criticism, not to mention that he cannot/should not be expected to re-experience it. The actor, the reviewer implies, is the socially designated person who has the task to translate – adapt – an individual's story into a collective one. Robinson cannot be expected to be able to reconcile who he *is* with what he *means*. The reviewer also suggests that Robinson is too embodied to belong in the cinematic signifier: his individuality prevents the suspension of disbelief required for an actor to be seen as a character and his body cannot dissipate in

the glamorous immateriality, in the pure textuality, of the star image. Too little as an actor, and too much as a body, Robinson's screen image is captive of its carnality and almost in contradiction to the iconic – exchangeable – Robinson-images circulating in visual culture.

A *Life* magazine cover advertising the release of the film addresses a similar question about Robinson's star quality (fig. 10).



It features a high-contrast close-up of Robinson against a black background. Despite the stately composition and the expressive lighting, which draws a V across his face as if to signify his position at the intersection of competing historical forces, it is the texture of Robinson's skin that pierces the image. It creates a visual tension between the iconic and the carnal reinforced by the caption: JACKIE ROBINSON / STAR BALL PLAYER / STARS IN A MOVIE. The term "star" appears twice, as descriptive term and as a verb, indicating his role in the story of his life. But it also foregrounds the process of

production of the star persona - as Richard Dyer remarks, “stars are involved in *making themselves into commodities*; they are both labor and the thing that labor produces” - as a dialectic between a disembodied, merely textual, presence and the embodiedness of the commodity produced. Through the implicit reference to labor, the cover also expresses Robinson’s currency across socio/cultural arenas and signifying series. Furthermore, the repetition of the word “star” echoes the repetition of his performance of the integration story reminding readers that Robinson is a necessary signifier: he *necessarily means* the integration story, which seems to naturally flow across media and social spheres, and only *he* can express such story.

### **Indexes of adaptation**

Robinson’s body had represented a great source of morbid fascination from the beginning. At the news of the signing, *Life* magazine, for example, published close ups of his hands while the caption described their anatomy and muscular power, putting him on display in a sort of updated auction block – what Hoberman defines the Darwin’s athlete - for the public to determine his physical (and therefore moral) fitness. Instead, when he reported for Spring Training in 1948 his body was written about because of its heaviness. He had put on 30 pounds in the off-season as result of his public life. The press interpreted Robinson’s weight as an index of his newly achieved celebrity status - as if consumer citizenship had left a bodily mark on him - and an undesirable byproduct of his popularity. One reporter went as far as to read his excessive weight as representative of an augmented ego, claiming that “Jackie Robinson was developing a swelled head to

match his mid-section” (Mann, 206). A similar reaction is voiced again in conjunction to the shooting of the film:

An unpublished chapter in the Jackie Robinson story came to light last week when the start second baseman of the Brooklyn Dodgers stripped to his T shirt, on location for film, *The Jackie Robinson Story*.... The unpublicized, unwelcome chapter is about the Jackie Robinson stomach. The 30 year-old most valuable player in the National League is sporting the kind of paunch that makes managers lose their hair. .. Robinson is carrying a roll around with him –around his middle, that is... a spare tire.”

The article expresses uneasiness with the visual *differànce* introduced by the fact that Robinson is heavier in the film than at the time of the events portrayed. The excess weight functions as a signifier of dislocation introducing a subtle alienation effect: it exposes the impossibility to reconcile the Robinson-image with Robinson himself. The article also foreshadows the visual spectacle of Robinson in the years to come: a signifier bearing the indexical traces of its own burden of representation.

When, before the 1947 baseball season, Rickey had gathered black community leaders in Brooklyn to warn them against an over-investment in Robinson and recommend policing the black fans’ reaction to his presence in Organized baseball (Tygiel, Barber),<sup>15</sup> he had also predicted that the invisibility of Robinson’s pain would

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<sup>15</sup> Rickey believed that the black public’s response to Robinson had the potential to jeopardize the integrationist experiment and that its success depended not only on the “right type of man” but also on the “right type of reaction” from the black public. For this reason he orchestrated a conjunct effort with prominent members of the black community, religious leaders, businessmen, and the black press to appeal for proper crowd behavior. See Tygiel and Barber.

encourage an unrestrained symbolization: “Every step of racial progress you have made has been won by suffering and often bloodshed. This step in baseball is being taken for you by a single person *whose wounds you cannot see or share.*” Rickey identified Robinson’s burden of representation in his simultaneous singularity and universality: “You’ll symbolize his importance into a national comedy... and an ultimate tragedy – yes, tragedy!” (Mann 163). Despite using the term “symbol”, he was more precisely describing the dangers of blacks’ metonymical investment in Robinson: if he is seen as the part for the whole, Rickey reasoned, he will not survive.

At the Hall of Fame induction ceremony in 1962 baseball was honoring Robinson’s achievements as a ballplayer as well as celebrating, yet again, its own democratic essence. But some contradictions plagued this moment. Robinson had been very vocal about the absence of front office or management jobs for blacks in baseball and yet his induction was partly a way in which baseball publicly declared to have fulfilled its promise of an even playing field. Robinson was inducted alongside Bob Feller who, however, had requested not to share the same platform. To the participants at the ceremony these unresolved contradictions appeared visible in Robinson’s body: “Anyone who saw him now noticed that his hair had become almost snowy white, that his gait was slower, the bulk of his body more easily recognizable as fat” (Falkner 295).

The visual oxymoron created by his prematurely whitening hair on a youthful face (and voice) will increasingly appear as the embodiment of the larger adaptation process that led to his allegedly accomplished assimilation. Once the visual cacophony of integration

was fully on display in Robinson's body, the image of his 'adaptation' could no longer be disentangled from the sight of its price.

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