

Daniel A. Nathan
Miami University

***Bearing Witness to Blackball: Buck O’Neil, the
Negro Leagues, and the Politics of the Past***

For approximately the last twenty years the Negro leagues — which existed because white team owners colluded to exclude African Americans from the Major Leagues — have enjoyed a steady historical revival. They have been the subject of numerous

popular and oral histories, newspaper and magazine articles, theses and dissertations, museum and photographic exhibitions, autobiographies and memoirs, documentaries, and two feature films, most recently *Soul of the Game* (1996). Negro League replica baseball jerseys and caps and retrospective baseball card sets have become popular collectibles. Surviving Negro League ballplayers now frequently make appearances and sign autographs at baseball card shows. The Negro Leagues Baseball Museum in Kansas City, Missouri opened in 1990 there is now a (very active) Negro Leagues Committee of the Society for American Baseball Research. Arguably the best indication that the Negro Leagues have finally earned some mainstream American respect and legitimacy occurred in 1996 when General Mills issued a special edition Wheaties box honoring Hall of Fame ballplayers Josh Gibson, Leroy “Satchel” Paige and James “Cool Papa” Bell.

Collectively, these and other cultural texts lead me to believe that more white people may be aware of and knowledgeable about the Negro Leagues today than when the leagues actually existed. At the same time, they raise a variety of difficult questions: What explains the current wave of interest in the Negro Leagues? How (and by whom) have the Negro Leagues and the ballplayers associated with them been remembered and represented? What ideologies or whose interests do these memories and representations advance or reinforce? What does it mean that the Negro Leagues have become a relatively popular subject — and commodity — at this particular historical and cultural moment? And perhaps more important, what does this phenomenon suggest about American collective memories, the tension between representation and social reality, and, more broadly, the relationship between the past and the present?

This paper engages these questions and issues by examining the ways in which and the reasons why Buck O’Neil — a former Negro League all-star first baseman with the Kansas City Monarchs (1938-43, ’46-54) a successful scout, coach, and manager, and the man who earned the admiration of viewers of Ken Burns’ documentary *Baseball* (1994) — has become a celebrated national icon, and in effect the personification of the Negro Leagues. A spry octogenarian, John Jordan O’Neil, Jr. (b. 1911) is by most accounts charming, intelligent, generous, kind, self-deprecating, and wise. Most people who have seen Burns’ film would agree that O’Neil is an excellent storyteller and ambassador for the game. (A few observers think that he is also a shrewd self-promoter and revisionist historian.) But perhaps O’Neil’s most remarkable and (especially to white audiences) attractive quality is that he displays no anger or bitterness about being excluded from the Major Leagues until 1955, when he was hired by the Chicago Cubs as a scout. Seven years later he became the first African-American Major League coach. As O’Neil has said many times, “Waste no tears for me. I didn’t come along too early — I was right on time”. Using an interdisciplinary method, I argue that Buck O’Neil’s recent rise to fame (his “discovery”) has multiple sources and meanings, and that his life and celebrity provide us with an opportunity to consider the renewed interest in the Negro Leagues, and by extension how race is represented, memory is reconfigured, and nostalgia is produced in *fin de siecle* America.