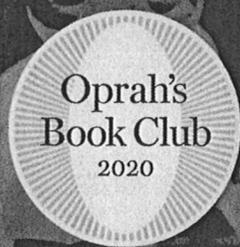


Caste

The Origins
of Our
Discontents



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anthropology at the University of Chicago, thus becoming the first African American university. But in the 1950s. Faculty colleagues openly refused to teach white students, and the faculty dining room for

African American in the first half of the century were among the only field of caste subordination to be inspired by St. Clair Drake, Martin Luther King, Jr., among others, all of whom were white and saw themselves in

the history, but he has become a man who seeks to understand the caste system in hopes of doing as if his life had depended on it did.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Satchel Paige and the Illogic of Caste

His fastball shot toward home plate like a pistol bullet, once he was clocked at 103 miles an hour, fast enough to “tear the glove off the catcher,” in the words of the sportswriter Robert Smith. LeRoy “Satchel” Paige was one of the greatest baseball pitchers ever to step onto a mound. Yet, coming of age in the early twentieth century, when Jim Crow was at its cruelest, he never had the chance to become all that he could have been. And the world of baseball forwent a talent that surely would have changed the fate of matchups and pennant races, perhaps entire teams, and the sport itself.

Here was a man who threw so hard and so fast that “catchers had to cushion their gloves with beefsteak so that their hands wouldn’t be burning after the game,” his biographer Larry Tye told National Public Radio.

Here was a man so confident that he told whoever was paying him that he would strike out the first nine batters with a money-back guarantee and told the outfielders to just take a seat.

The beloved Yankee center fielder Joe DiMaggio, who went to bat against Paige at exhibition games before Paige was hired by the majors, called him the best pitcher he had ever faced. In his day, Paige “may well have been the fastest pitcher in the nation,” wrote Smith in *Pioneers of Baseball*, “or even in history.”

He didn’t get the chance to make the most of it. The distorting

lens of caste can cloud the senses, make the dominant group willing to deprive itself of the benefit of talent outside its ranks, allow the gifts of those from groups deemed inferior to languish, as it did with Satchel Paige, to keep the castes separate or to uphold the fiction that all talent resides within one favored group.

It happened that Paige was not only fast but threw with such precision that teammates let him practice knocking lit cigarettes out of their mouths with his fastballs. "That we know of, he never knocked out a ballplayer," Tye told NPR. "He knocked out one cigarette after another, and that was extraordinary faith."

For more than half a century, America's pastime was rigidly segregated, the very best players of either caste rarely getting to meet on the field and never in an official game. Paige got into baseball in the late 1920s and thus spent most of his career playing on all-black teams that were every bit as talented but lacking in the resources and infrastructure of the all-white majors. The full measure of his and his teammates' talents cannot truly be known because of the incomplete record-keeping and scant media coverage in the devalued world of the Negro Leagues.

Paige was widely considered superior not solely because of his innate talent and ingenuity but because he worked so long and hard at it—a work ethic that had him barnstorming the country, pitching for the Negro Leagues and then for whoever else was willing to pay him. He pitched nearly every day, all year long, not just during the traditional baseball season and without the luxury of the relief pitchers in the majors. He gave his pitches names like the bat dodger and the midnight crawler and the hesitation pitch, where he would pause after planting his left foot, psyching the batter into swinging prematurely.

Though he was one of the greatest pitchers in baseball history, the limits of the caste system reduced him at one point to picking up spare change by pitching batting practice for white players in the minor leagues. By the time major league baseball opened up to African-Americans in 1946, when Jackie Robinson signed with the

Brooklyn Dodgers, Satchel Paige was already forty and considered too old for the game.

But two years later, the Cleveland Indians were in the midst of one of the tightest pennant races in American League history, and the owner thought Paige might put them over the top now that the color bar had been lifted. The owner, Bill Veeck, approached Paige in the middle of the 1948 season and signed him as a free agent.

Paige was well past his peak when he finally got his shot at the majors. At forty-two, he was the oldest rookie in baseball, old enough to be his teammates' father. Still, at one of his first starting games in the big league, fans stormed the turnstiles to see him play at Comiskey Park. There, he pitched a 5-0 shutout for Cleveland over the Chicago White Sox, helping Cleveland make it to the playoff, and ultimately to the World Series, just as the team owner had hoped.

That year, Paige would become the first African-American to pitch in the World Series, though given the assumptions about his age and the politics of a championship season, he was assigned as a relief pitcher. When it was his turn at the mound, he pitched for two-thirds of an inning while the Indians were trailing the Boston Braves and did not allow a hit. The Cleveland Indians won the World Series that year.

He would go on to pitch in the majors for a few more seasons, but his best years were behind him, the career he should have had in a fairer world deprived of him, and there was nothing that anyone could do to make up for what had been withheld. The majors turned to him one more time, in the fall of 1965, to pitch at the age of fifty-nine. By then he was older than most of the managers. The Kansas City Athletics were last in the standings, and attendance had plummeted. The owner got the idea to recruit Paige, who had always been a showman, to pitch for the A's to fill the stands as a publicity stunt.

The fans turned out. They loaded onto the stands for the spec-

tacle. But Paige came to play. The oldest pitcher in baseball history threw three scoreless innings that day against the Red Sox. Paige left the field with his team in the lead, a lead that the Athletics blew after he returned to the dugout, losing the game in the end. He had salvaged the team momentarily and was serenaded by the audience, who had come out mostly to see him pitch one last time.

Afterward, reporters asked him how it felt to pitch at nearly sixty years old to batters who could be his grandsons. "It was no big deal for me to come back up here," he said, "because I had no business being out. Now folks can see that I must have had a lot more going for me, and I deserved to be in the big leagues when I was in my prime."

Satchel Paige was cheated by a caste system at the height of its injustice and absurdity. But he was not the only loser to the illogic of caste. "Many critics agree that it was actually American baseball that was the loser in the Paige saga," wrote the sportswriter Mark Kram. "Any number of major league teams would have done better with Paige in their ranks when he was in his prime. Marginal teams might have won pennants; championship teams might have extended their domination."

Under the spell of caste, the majors, like society itself, were willing to forgo their own advancement and glory, and resulting profits, if these came at the hands of someone seen as subordinate.

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