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Review of *Playing in Shadows: Texas and Negro League Baseball* by Rob Fink

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One of the most underappreciated aspects of American life and history is that of black baseball. Shortly after the invention of the game, African American men began playing as an expression of their status as middle-class professionals. These particular black men had access to leisure time and the disposable income necessary to acquire the proper equipment and pay the necessary fees to participate in organized play. During Reconstruction, formerly enslaved African American men who had been introduced to the game by Union soldiers used their ability to play the game as an expression of their independence, as well as a form of social mobility and economic prosperity. By the end of the nineteenth century and well into the early twentieth, the game spread throughout the United States and became an integral part of the development of various African American communities and individuals seeking to lay claim to the American dream.

In Playing in Shadows: Texas and Negro League Baseball, historian Rob Fink examines the impact that African American communities throughout the state of Texas had on the development of America’s pastime. What is more, Fink accounts for the invaluable contributions made to the game by luminary figures from the Lone Star State such as Andrew “Rube” Foster, Louis Santop, “Smokey” Joe Williams, and Raleigh “Biz” Mackey, to name a few. Fink’s analysis suggests that within the converging social, economic, and political contexts of the early twentieth century, black Texans used baseball to achieve a positive identity, solidify communal ties, and develop leagues of their own, which provided access to the promises of democracy thought to be woven in the game and transferable to those privileged with the opportunity to take to the field.

One of the major flaws of Playing in Shadows is its lack of exploration into the ways in which African Americans in general and black men in particular responded to the ritual violence of lynching. Moreover, the assertion that African American baseball players were the most prevalent image of African American masculinity discounts the efforts of early civil rights leaders, businessmen, ministers, and the working class men who served as the bedrock in the various black communities throughout the state of Texas. Although an important aspect of community life, baseball was and is still just a game. It is through our desire to make sense of the world, however, that we designate certain athletes and performances as being important.

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