

Immigrant Misappropriations: The Importance of Ichiro

by Jay Caspian Kang

Like most 6-year-olds in the METCO-serviced suburbs of Boston, I spent the last two weeks of October 1986 with a Red Sox cap on my head. When school let out, those of us who did not take the early bus into the city huddled up in the pick-up/drop-off circle and practiced our lines. Most of us could list only the names of the ballplayers and our arbitrary preferences, but those boys who had been born into families of fanatics wowed us with jargon that seemed to provide them with a greater stake in the excitement of those two weeks. The morning before Game 3, I got up early to read the sports section and came to school with these phrases locked up in my head: “Let’s get out the Oil Can! Rocket is throwing tonight, watch out! Can Hendu recreate his ALCS magic?” When I tried them out in the bus circle, the kids nodded along. That night, I asked my father to teach me how to read a box score. He complied with the sincerity and gravity expected of that situation. The mornings after Games 4 and 5, I came to school with a ripped-out square of newspaper in the pocket of my raincoat and ran my classmates through the significance of those numbers and columns. The Red Sox were up three games to two. We in the bus circle were just starting to feel invested in the team.

Then Mookie Wilson’s grounder rolled through Bill Buckner’s legs, and I joined in as all of Boston exhaled bitterly.

Ichiro Suzuki arrived in Seattle in the spring of 2001 to mixed expectations. When news of the signing broke the previous winter, Bobby Valentine, then the manager of the New York Mets, declared to the media that the slightly built right fielder was one of the best five players in the world. Despite Valentine’s endorsements, baseball pundits around the country openly questioned how a player who had spent his entire career hitting fastballs that rarely hit 92 mph on the radar gun would adjust to the power pitching in the major leagues. Rob Dibble, who in the early 1990s joined up with Norm Charlton and Randy Myers to form a hard-throwing Cincinnati Reds bullpen known as the Nasty Boys, spoke for the doubters when he predicted Ichiro’s batting average would never break .300. A week before the season began, Dibble, then a commentator on ESPN’s *Baseball Tonight*, made the following statement on the air: “I will run naked through Times Square in the dead of winter if Ichiro wins the batting title.” Nine months later, Ichiro took home the lion’s share of the postseason hardware and Dibble made his run, albeit in a Speedo. In addition to the batting title, Ichiro took home the American League MVP award, a Gold Glove, the stolen-base title and the AL’s Rookie of the Year. No rookie had won both the MVP and Rookie of the Year awards in the same season since Boston’s Freddy Lynn did it in 1975, and no player in baseball history has taken home all five awards. More impressively, the Seattle Mariners, a franchise that had lost three first-ballot Hall of Famers in Alex Rodriguez, Ken Griffey Jr., and Randy Johnson over the course of the previous three seasons, broke a league record by winning 116 games. At the center was an enigmatic, 160-pound man from Japan who spoke only through an interpreter and was rarely seen without his trademark wraparound sunglasses.

I moved to Seattle the November before Ichiro’s arrival because I had been kicked out of a small, liberal arts college in Maine that I, in part, had chosen to attend because it offered me a chance to be surrounded by Red Sox fans again. I don’t remember much about that first winter in the Pacific Northwest, except that I waited it out alone. I spent most of my time in used bookstores because I was convinced that I could feel balls of radiation hurling out of the lead paint that hung in

cracked sheets on the wall. On Sunday mornings, when the hallways of my converted hotel filled with the dull stink of Nag Champa, I walked down to Aileen's Sports Bar on Broadway and watched football on a shaky 13-inch TV screen, accompanied by a cast of regulars who reminded me of what might happen if a Raymond Carver story collection collided with a Russ Meyer film set. My favorite of these characters was a weekend transvestite named Karla. During halftime of a Patriots game, she insisted that we drive my car across the country to live with her sister and her husband in Nashua, N.H.

The nights I stayed in, I sat in the armchair, shucked oysters for dinner, and went through the canon of juvenile manuals of detachment. I read Dr. Alan Watts, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Chogyam Trungpa. I transcribed all the block quotes in *Franny and Zooey* into a memo book – the type with that irresistibly nostalgic black marbled cover – and went to the used bookstore down the street to buy up all the texts Salinger referenced. During my walks to the bookstore, I suppressed the hope that the girl with Bettie Page bangs and discolored thin arms that reminded me of dandelion stalks would be behind the counter. Her unbalanced recommendation shelf – Denis Johnson, Anne Sexton, Virginia Woolf, and Shirley Jackson – reminded me of someone back east who I had recently decided to stop talking to. For reasons still not clear to me, I stopped eating pork and red meat and practiced breathing every morning.

I listened to the Ichiro talk on the local sports talk radio station every morning during my drive to work. Throughout the winter, most of the writers and talk-show hosts echoed Dibble's skepticism that a Japanese position player could come over and make the adjustments necessary to become an impact player in the major leagues. When the small but vocal throng of Ichiro supporters brought up Hideo Nomo's success for the Los Angeles Dodgers in 1995, the conventional wisdom replied that the situations were different because Nomo relied mostly on gimmicks: an exaggerated windup in which he turned his back completely to the batter, and a baffling split-finger fastball the likes of which most major leaguers had not yet seen. It is a truism in baseball that in an at-bat in which both the pitcher and the batter know nothing about one another, the batter is at a disadvantage because he must react to anything the pitcher might throw. Ichiro would be learning on the job. But for the most part, this was not the argument made in the papers or on the radio. A month before Ichiro flew stateside to take his first cuts at the Mariners spring training facility in Arizona, one of the local sports radio hosts summed up the prevailing sentiment when he said, "Nomo could get by his first year by whirling around and throwing foreign junk at the American hitters. They hadn't seen it before, and so he did all right. Now that Nomo's been in the league a couple of years, the batters are starting to tear into his Japanese bag of tricks. Ichiro's not going to have that luxury. The first time he sees a Randy Johnson or Roger Clemens fastball, he's going to see that Japanese tricks don't cut it over here."

By the first week of June, Ichiro had piled up three four-hit games, back-to-back hitting streaks of 15 and 23 games, a .361 batting average, and was on track to break the major league record for hits in a season. In an April game in Oakland, he unleashed a throw from right field that traveled at a seemingly impossible low and accurate trajectory to nail a stunned Terrence Long at third base. After the game, a bewildered Long told reporters, "I'm not the fastest guy in the world, but that's got to be the best throw I've ever seen." On the eve of the All-Star break, Ivan Rodriguez proclaimed, "Ichiro is the best player in baseball right now." The city of Seattle, which usually splits its sports enthusiasm between the Seahawks and the University of Washington's football team, went

Ichiro-Gaga, prompting many Asian-Americans in the community to come forward with praise for the city's embrace of a Japanese sports idol. Shawn Wong, a professor of English at the University of Washington, went as far as to credit Ichiro with a heightening of cultural awareness within the city. In a guest editorial that appeared in the *Seattle Times*, he wrote, "I'm learning something about race, ethnicity and understanding that I didn't know. As a professor, I think it's important for my students to articulate their opinions and understanding about what it is they learn. I often use theoretical terms such as 'racialization' to explain the dynamics of race, culture and society. Now I'm beginning to think an entire city can understand how race changes their culture and society, and they can embrace and even encourage that change, but not necessarily understand how to describe that change."

Like Wong, I believed I was witnessing the collapse of stereotypes about Asians. My letters back to the East Coast, which during the winter had alternated between a weird austerity and cloying anger, focused now on the importance of sports in a society: how a meritocracy like baseball offered anyone a chance to showcase the talents of a people.

The Bookstore Bodhisattva life I had tried over the winter gave way to the restorative energy offered up by the start of baseball season. (Strangely, I find that the warier I become of Opening Day's nostalgia-trap, the weaker I feel in the knees whenever I walk into a stadium. It is almost as if my resistance to baseball's sentimentality is also what feeds it.) Ichiro was my guy. I attended every home game that spring, usually by myself, and even enjoyed those rare nights when Ichiro went 0-for-5 and let us all down.

Before a sold-out Sunday afternoon ballgame, my fifth in a row to watch Ichiro, I spotted a kid loitering underneath the Alaskan Way Viaduct. He had on an oversized velour sweatshirt printed by a hip-hop label and a black-on-black fitted Mariners cap, two items of clothing that I usually associate with young gamblers and ticket scalpers. As he saw me approach, he produced a single ticket out of one of his cargo pockets and handed it over, muttering under his breath, "Thirty-five, best price for today's game." After looking over my shoulder, I palmed over two twenties crumpled into a sweaty ball. When he told me he didn't have any change, I waved him off and told him to just remember my face for any future transactions. He nodded, pumped his fist, and said, "Go Ichiro."

The seat was in Area 51, the section of bleachers directly behind the right-field fence that still serves as the unofficial Japanese cheering section. An older Japanese couple sat to my right. Both wore blindingly white Ichiro jerseys and flat-billed Mariners caps. They nodded, using the jerky, polite motion that many older Japanese use when greeting young Americans, and the husband offered me a bite of his plate of garlic fries. When I said, "No, thank you," his wife smiled, revealing a gold canine tooth that reminded me, strangely enough, of a photo of my great-grandmother taken when she lived on an orchard in what is now North Korea, a few years before the Japanese occupation during World War II that forced her to flee to the South. In the photo, her hair is pulled back tightly and she is smiling and pointing at a yellowed tooth that my father explained was a gold implant and not the product of some old-world hygienic deficiency.

When a group of Japanese students sitting in front of me passed around a red sign on which some indistinguishable Japanese slogan had been written, obscuring my view of the field, I could do nothing but sit back and mutter astonished, bitter words into the back of my hand. It finally occurred to me that I had been ignoring the elephantine irony of this happy scene: I was born in Korea to

Korean parents, meaning the only history I share with Ichiro is that on several occasions over the past thousand years, his people have brutally occupied my home country. Rooting for a Japanese baseball player because he fit in the same constructed minority category was like if an Irish ex-pat began rooting for Manchester United because the good people of China couldn't distinguish between his accent and Wayne Rooney's. And in most ways, it was a lot worse than that.

When I got home that night, I thumbed through my copy of James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* and read the following passage, heavily underlined back in my days as a malcontent freshman:

If you know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go. The details and symbols of your life have deliberately been constructed to make you believe what white people say about you...Please try to be clear, dear [nephew], through the storm which rages about your youthful head today, about the reality which lies behind the words acceptance and integration. There is no reason for you to try to become like white people and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that they must accept you.

As I read that passage, I realized that the images of the Civil Rights Movement and the multicultural education I received as a child in Boston had never lost their buoyancy, always floating on the surface of my consciousness, but that the rhetoric that underscored those images etherized, not completely into the air, but into a strange, misappropriated residue. I could watch Ichiro stretching in the on-deck circle and conjure the image of Jackie Robinson sliding home in 1947, but that association never brought hope, but rather a wariness that both told me that the association was wrong and that the only reason why I was cheering for Ichiro was because someone, something else had lumped us together.

Even back then, at the age of 19, I knew that the comparison was catastrophically wrong. But I still made it, and even today, when I certainly am old enough to know better, every time I see Ichiro, I still feel both the warmth and the embarrassment of that particular misappropriation. In my defense, I will say that when you are a first-generation immigrant, the templates for assimilation always belong to somebody else. You can staple your assimilation to Ichiro, Jackie Robinson, Joe DiMaggio, or Hank Greenberg, but you will always be wrong. But I don't know how else anyone is supposed to stumble toward American-ness than through these categorically wrong, sentimental avenues.

Ten years later, it seems to me that what I should have done was to shrug off Baldwin and understand that some ideas are better left on the pitch of the academy, where no score is kept and nothing is really ever at stake.

I also understand that doing so would be dishonest.

Philip Roth, in an essay entitled "My Baseball Years," wrote that he loved the game for "the mythic and aesthetic dimension that it gave to an American boy's life – particularly to one whose grandparents could hardly speak English. For someone whose roots in America were strong but only inches deep, baseball was a kind of secular church that reached into every class and region of the nation and bound millions upon millions of us together in common concerns, loyalties, rituals, enthusiasms and antagonisms. Baseball made me understand what patriotism was about, at its best." For those who might find Roth's quote as overexplanatory and nostalgic as I do, there is the first line

of Don DeLillo's *Underworld*. As far as first lines to epic American novels go, "He speaks in your voice, American, and there's a shine in his eye that's halfway hopeful" might not rank up there with "Call me Ishmael" or "In my younger and more vulnerable years, my father gave me some advice," but as far as baseball writing goes, there isn't a line written that better captures the nation-mending appeal of the game for those that might not always feel included in other places. The boy with the halfway hopeful shine in his eye is a black boy from Harlem named Cotter who jumps the gate at the Polo Grounds to witness Bobby Thomson's "Shot Heard 'Round the World." He finds a seat in the bleachers next to a seemingly well-meaning white man named Bill Watterson, who buys him a soda and says nice things like, "[You and I are] a couple of sportsmen taking their ease." When Thomson's home run lands in their section, Cotter and Watterson both get a hand on the ball. A struggle ensues with Cotter eventually wrestling the ball from Watterson's hands. A frustrated Watterson reneges on his good will and chases Cotter out of the stadium. Following Cotter for several blocks, he tries to cajole and then intimidate the boy into giving him the ball. Cotter runs back home to Harlem, ball in hand, leaving Watterson behind.

The metaphor is obvious, but all baseball metaphors are obvious. Few are as accurate. If baseball is indeed America's testing ground for understanding – as almost every piece written on Jackie Robinson in the past 10 years has argued – DeLillo is right to point out that those on the outside will only be able to muster up a halfway hope about the follow-through.

Still, it is Roth's feel-good story that is the most common to baseball writing, and undoubtedly the most compelling. As long as baseball has been said to exist, writers have tried to wrest patriotic metaphor out of its history, its players, its stadiums, and its fans. Roth languishes in the redemptive possibilities that a shared interest in baseball might offer people who are separated along other lines. Similarly, my own stake in baseball comes from the fact that I am the foreign-born child of Korean immigrants, and that sometimes finding acceptance in this country is as simple as shouting out in a crowded bar that you know who started each game of the 1986 World Series because you, like the rest of the people there, watched every game on TV and talked about it the next day at school. Although nearly 25 years have passed since Buckner's error, I do not think I have been removed very far from the pick-up/drop-off circle. The kids still nod along. It would be incorrect, however, to say that my participation in the dialogue surrounding the national pastime makes me feel like "more of an American." The phrase is too abstract for me to grasp.

At the same time, I cannot bring myself to mirror Baldwin's rejection of acculturation, or the bitterness expressed by Jackie Robinson in his autobiography about playing in his first World Series game, because this sort of scorn comes naturally only to those for whom the national promise of baseball is either a given or a nonapplicable. The irony of our multicultural education is that it provides us with only the vocabulary of the thoroughly entitled and the thoroughly disenfranchised. Asian immigrants stand somewhere in between, but lack the context and the words to express our place.

I don't feel comfortable evoking James Baldwin or Jackie Robinson or Philip Roth to explain my relationship with baseball. I understand there is a militia of smart people who will line up to bash me over the head with the word "problematic." I suppose what I am asking is this: how else am I supposed to talk about it?

Perhaps, then, the best way to enjoy the game is to simply stop reading about it. Or, if at all possible, to follow the advice of Steven Jay Gould, who wrote “the silliest and most tendentious of baseball writing tries to wrest profundity from the spectacle of grown men hitting a ball with a stick by suggesting linkages between the sport and deep issues of morality, parenthood, history, lost innocence, gentleness, and so on, seemingly ad infinitum.” (Gould, for his own part, later wrote his own lengthy essay, published posthumously, about the meaning of his love for baseball and his relationship with his father.) After all, one of baseball’s gifts is that it allows its fans to immerse themselves completely in the demands of the game. For those of us who may not have the résumés to participate in the nation-building or the father-son euphoria that surrounds the National Pastime, there are still the processes, the numbers, and the play on the field. A young lefty gets called up from Pawtucket because the aging DH lands on the DL after pulling his hamstring doing wind sprints during the pregame warm-ups. However, the fan knows this is most likely a cover-up to protect the pride of the aging DH, who has been in a 3-for-45 slump. Besides, the wind sprints excuse is total garbage because, as everybody knows, the manager always excuses the aging DH from any sort of pregame running exercise. Most likely, the GM wanted to try out the young lefty, who has been hitting .320 over the past month at Pawtucket (.386 against righties), against the team coming in for the weekend who has three right-handed pitchers lined up. All of this is extrapolated from one line in the small print page of the sports section: *Transactions: Boston Red Sox: Called up 1B Morgan Burkhardt from Pawtucket.* The discussion of this one line can be stretched out over a dinner or over the course of days. A friend of mine from college and I have been arguing about Eddie Murray’s induction into the Hall of Fame for ten years. And as long as the talk remains on the action between the chalked lines, and as long as I can put out of my mind what has been written about the national part of the National Pastime, I feel included in a running dialogue that started back when I asked my father to explain the box scores to me.

If going to 81 baseball games a year would offer me a glimpse of Roth’s aesthetic and mythic inclusion, I would reroute my paychecks to the Red Sox season-ticket office. Conversely, if I fully believed – again, in the sociologist’s terms – that the spectacle of the game served only to put a false shine on a rotten apple, I would never step foot in a ballpark again. Perhaps, the curse of the fan that identifies Ichiro as “my guy” is that he can recognize the promise and the betrayal of baseball only in the way that one picks up a song through a wall: missing out on the immediacy and the volume, but recognizing the resonance. But he keeps trying. This season, I will watch the game for the stats, the umpire-specific strike zones, the infield shifts, the pitching changes, and the numbers on the scoreboard. But, when I hear the occasional racist comment in the stands that I might reflexively place upon myself, my intellect will begin to pull apart baseball’s patriotic metaphor. But thankfully, the process is cyclic, because whenever an Asian player is met with applause, or when I see a young white or Hispanic or African-American kid in a Choo or Kuroda or Matsui t-shirt, the flood of inclusive, metaphoric language will seal the gaps shut and I will once again be awash in halfway hopeful reverence.

Postscript: The Importance of Yao

A few weeks ago, I wrote an essay about what Ichiro’s rookie season might have meant to Asian-Americans, particularly those who, like me, grew up as part of an undefined generation. After hearing the news this past Friday that Yao Ming was planning on retiring from the NBA, I began to wonder if I had written about the wrong icon. Ten years have passed since I spent that summer at

Safeco Field. I know nothing more about the Mariners right fielder than I did back then. He has never acknowledged the symbolic weight he carried, probably unwillingly, for all of us dumb, lost kids who use sports as our ballast within American society. And while it's certainly no one's duty to accept the role of symbol-of-your-people (especially when the parameters of "people" have been defined in ways you never signed off on), as I've watched Ichiro struggle throughout this season, I haven't felt the usual ebb of mortality that accompanies a hero going down. Rather, the twilight of Ichiro Suzuki has made me appreciate how Yao Ming handled himself.

The mammoth hope of a national athletic program representing 1.2 billion people, Yao was *Chinese*, on a scale we had never seen before. There was the Yeti-quality footage of Yao dunking over Chinese opponents (back then, were we even really sure he existed?), the strictly monitored interviews conducted through a translator, the conspiracy theorists who asked why an unproven, pituitary catastrophe deserved to be drafted before Jay Williams, one of the most dynamic point guards to ever play college basketball. But when he first walked out onto an NBA court, the public collectively gasped. Yao was *big*.

It was this size and his *Chineseness* that initially alienated American fans. Regardless of who you are, it is nearly impossible to really identify with a 7-foot-6 foreigner. But the skepticism, at least among Asian-Americans, also had something to do with the fact that Yao's first game in the NBA had come a mere 11 months after Ichiro took home the American League's MVP Award. The role of Great Yellow Hope had already been filled. What's more, when compared side-to-side, Ichiro made for a much better hero. He was cool where Yao was awkward. He was mysterious where Yao was opaque. Neither man spoke English particularly well, and both communicated through translators, but Ichiro somehow made it seem like he was too cool to speak English, whereas Yao's press conferences felt canned and foreign. Despite not saying much, Ichiro branded himself through glossy magazine shoots and public appearances. Yao just kind of frowned a lot. Neither man gave up much in terms of personality. But Ichiro at least gave us dominance on the field. Early Yao seemed as if he was only playing for the glory of his homeland – a mercenary sent to showcase the glory of Chinese genetic manufacturing.

Every child of immigrants knows the dread of watching a parent stumble through a PTA meeting or a car purchase or even an interaction with a grocery store clerk or waitress. Your sphincter constricts, your breath freezes. Every catastrophic scenario is projected – your mother's English will break, she will say something stupid or ignorant and the grand illusion of sameness, or, at least, the attempts at sameness, will atomize and disappear.

With Yao, I always felt that same dread. In an absurd, yet still significant way, watching him over the past nine years was like watching a video of my parents. I worried he would mispronounce a word, bomb a joke, or say something awful about his black teammates. Yes, I should probably not compare a 7-foot-6 Chinese basketball player who can carefully select his televised moments with an immigrant parent who has to make his or her way through a skeptical and oftentimes cruel country, but when the scope of available cultural references goes from Jackie Chan to Jet Li to Bruce Lee to Ichiro to Yao to Yan Can Cook, you sometimes have no option but to inflate, conflate, and, at times, fabricate. We live in an era in which self-identification is just the pastiche of relatable characters we piece together while staring in the mirror. Where else could we look for that story? Margaret Cho? Tiger Mothers? *The Joy Luck Club*?

Immigrant narratives, especially those we know well, are heavily processed and once-removed. Most are nostalgic tales of groups that have already lost their hyphenated status. The rest, written by the children of immigrants, too often focus on the weirdness of being the child of embarrassing parents. Rarely do we get to witness someone who comes over to the United States without any working knowledge of the language or the culture. In the past 25 years, there has not been any documentary, novel or film that has better captured what that acculturation might look like than Yao's nine-year *Truman Show*. At least there hasn't been one that was watched by more people.

Where but in sports can a foreigner come over and instantly become one of the most recognizable faces in the country? Every aspect of Yao's American career – the process that took him from being an unwanted curiosity to becoming one of the most beloved players in the league – was broadcast on a massive, corporatized scale, but only the worst cynic could have questioned Yao's authenticity, his earnestness. What we grew to love about Dirk Nowitzki, we also loved about Yao – both men came to the United States amidst skepticism and uncertainty. Both took on the sentimental values of American sport. Unlike Ichiro, whose pursuit of excellence always carried a lonely, abstracted air (I've always thought Ichiro could have gone to any team in any city with any number of teammates and have had the exact same career), Yao engaged America. For the kids raised within that undefined generation, the real triumph of Yao came from how graciously and faithfully he took on his role as the Big Immigrant. He did not, as they say, let his play do the talking for him. And in doing so, he became an ambassador and an inspirational symbol, not only for his countrymen back in China, but also for Asian-American immigrants and their petulant, ungrateful children.