Rutter, Emily Ruth. *Invisible Ball of Dreams: Literary Representations of Baseball behind the Color Line*.

Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 2018. 190 pp. Notes, Works Cited, Index.

Reviewed by Michele Schiavone, Professor Emerita, Marshall University

In *Invisible Ball of Dreams*, African American literature scholar Emily Ruth Rutter analyzes fiction, drama, poetry, film, and children’s books relating to black baseball through the lens of archival theory. She claims in the Introduction that “[t]he dissolution of black baseball may have gone relatively unnoticed at the time, but the specter of the segregated past continues to haunt the national pastime and the literature that engages it” (2). This is a thoroughly researched and engaging book that not only enlightens us about the literature and the culture of black baseball, but also, by using the theory of the archive and archival erasures, establishes a basis for new and exciting research in other areas.

First, I need to say I am not an entirely objective reviewer--Rutter’s topic has long been one of my own interests. I had already read most of the primary texts she deals with; I’ve given presentations on Negro League-related literature and issues of race at various conferences, including those of the Sport Literature Association; and I once had a vague dream of writing a book along these lines. On the upside, my familiarity with all but a couple of the texts analyzed here allows me to say that Rutter handles them with skill and sensitivity, while enhancing my understanding of the texts in the context of Negro League literature as a whole.

Rutter’s introduction establishes the concept of the archive and its importance to our perceptions. Citing Derrida, Diana Taylor and Wendy Walters as scholars who have looked at archives critically, she explains that archives are not objective, as someone has decided what is worth recording and archiving. The most basic example of this in relation to black baseball is the lack of reliable statistics. Several reasons account for this lack, but, as Rutter claims, many black baseball statistics have been erased by whites, who controlled the archives. But she is concerned with more than statistics; she is also troubled by the erasure of the black baseball *experience,* and thus examinesworks from successive waves of Negro League literature, arguing that “imaginative literature plays a key role in redressing these archival erasures” (2). However, the literature, as Rutter points out, also reflects the dominant culture of the time, “often express[ing] the biases that remain entrenched in baseball and the country for which it stands” (9).

For example, William Brashler’s 1973 novel, *The Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars and Motor Kings,* indepicting a Negro League baseball team and basing some of the main characters on prominent Negro Leaguers, has doubtless introduced readers to an unfamiliar era in baseball history. But this 70s novel, in Rutter’s view, overemphasizes “comedic, spectacular aspects of black baseball” and perpetuates “degrading stock tropes such as the ‘magical negro.’” (10). This weakness is common in the first wave of Negro League literature, which was written by whites. Also part of the first wave are Jay Neugeboren’s *Sam’s Legacy* (1974), John Craig’s *Chappie and Me* (1979), and Jerome Charyn’s *The Seventh Babe* (1979), all of which subordinate black characters to white ones. Rutter argues that these writers “mine significant gaps in archival knowledge” but also “elid[e] and/or misrepresent. . . many lived experiences” (19).

The second wave of Negro League literature encompasses African American writers of the 1980s and 90s, such as August Wilson (*Fences*), Gloria Naylor (*Bailey’s Café*) and poetry by Michael S. Harper, Quincy Troupe, Yusef Komunyakaa, and Harmony Holiday. Rutter begins her section on the second wave by quoting Amiri Baraka on the “laughter and self-love” engendered by watching the Newark Eagles play. She claims that *Fences* fills the gaps in the archive in terms of both statistics and feelings of what it was like to play baseball and of what it felt like to be excluded and passed over. Rutter also explains the connection between Negro League baseball and African American music, specifically jazz and blues, and how they are linked in works such as Quincy Troupe’s “Poem for My Father” and Komunyakaa’s “Glory.” She writes, “without the specter of the white gaze, communities such as the one “Glory” depicts constructed their own identities, and baseball . . . played an integral role in opposing dominant narratives of black inferiority” (99). In his poem “Archives,” Michael S. Harper deals with the gaps in the Baseball Hall of Fame’s archives, in terms of both artifacts and the emotions of the lived experience of black baseball, and suggests that poetry is one of the modes of documentation “necessary in order to reimagine this richly variegated past” (101). Rutter’s section on Harmony Holiday’s collection *Negro League Baseball* looks at the ways Holiday “mov[es] literary representations of black baseball, as well as the homologies with blues and jazz, in new and provocative directions” (102). Holiday’s poetry, which I was not previously familiar with, is difficult. I noticed that, for the most part, the quotations from Holiday did not accurately duplicate the poet’s unconventional spacing, but Rutter does a great job of making Holiday’s work intelligible.

The third wave contains works by both white and African American writers, including the novels *The Veracruz Blues* (1996) by Mark Winegardner and *All the Stars Came Out That Night* (2005) by Kevin King, and children’s books on black baseball. Winegardner’s novel, about the Mexican League active in the 1940s, and King’s, about a secret game played between Negro Leaguers and major leaguers in the 1930s, “call attention to the power structures that have historically wielded control over what is included and excluded from the annals and vaults of the national pastime” (109). The novels “dispel a unilateral view of the past” by “incorporating metafictional techniques . . . and polyvocal narration” (109). The children’s books that Rutter takes up teach young readers not only about black baseball, but also about black ingenuity in the face of segregation. After summarizing a few children’s books that place Negro Leaguers in mentor roles, Rutter focuses on works that have strong visual components: *A Negro League Scrapbook*, *We Are the Ship*, and the graphic novel *Satchel Paige*. Carole Boston Weatherford uses rhymed couplets in *A Negro League Scrapbook* to help young readers remember black baseball; she also includes information and photos of the three women who played in the Negro Leagues. In *We Are the Ship,* for whichKadir Nelson did the illustrations as well as wrote the text, Nelson not only introduces children to the giants of Negro League baseball, but he debunks some misconceptions about baseball and black athletes (for example, that they are only physical and have no mental ability). Nelson also has mentoring in mind, as he “pursues a dialogic relationship with readers that mimics a father sharing this history with his son or daughter” (144). In *Satchel Paige*, James Sturm and Rick Tommaso make it clear that they are teaching-- about Paige’s baseball feats and his attitude, about the sociocultural background, and about fathers as mentors.

In the book’s last section, “Coda,” Rutter examines Denzel Washington’s 2016 film version of Wilson’s *Fences*. She writes, “the film leans into the complex emotional residue that the Negro Leagues left behind, portraying both segregation and integration as freighted with unresolved frustration and loss” (160). This “emotional residue” brings us back to the reason Rutter gives for writing her book.

*Invisible Ball of Dreams* is the ideal scholarly work. Sophisticated in its analysis and use of archival theory, it is nonetheless accessible to students working with primary texts. While reminding readers of the many first-rate literary works related to black baseball, Rutter’s book also brings out the human component underlying the terms “segregation” and “integration.”