Naze, David. *Reclaiming 42: Public Memory and the Reframing of Robinson’s Radical Legacy.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 212 pp.

Reviewed by Jack Ryan

2019 marked the centennial of Jackie Robinson’s birth, and *Reclaiming 42:*

*Public Memory and the Reframing of Robinson’s Radical Legacy,* written by David Naze, is a reminder that Robinson’s accomplishments should be reexamined. Naze, an academic administrator trained in rhetorical studies, uses Robinson’s writing, articles written about Robinson, two museums that prominently feature Robinson, and Major League Baseball’s “Jackie Robinson Day” as the essential texts for his rhetorical, theoretical lens. Naze believes that American culture failed to recognize Robinson’s “political voice” both while he was a player and after his career ended. Using Ken Burns’s take on Robinson in his documentary *Jackie Robinson* (2016) as his foundation, Naze contrasts the hegemonic version of Robinson with the man Martin Luther King once described as “a sit-inner before sit-ins, a freedom rider before freedom rides.”

Prominent among Naze’s criticisms is a general lack of knowledge of “Robinson’s critique of the state of race relations in America” in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee (27). Robinson was meant to contrast dissenting remarks made by Paul Robeson at a left-wing conference in Paris, France. Robinson did not agree with Robeson’s Communist views, but he did admire his belief in social justice. As Naze maps it, Robinson’s testimony, which he describes as a dissent from the political status quo, was misinterpreted in most news accounts. Rather than speaking against Robeson, Robinson warned the congressional committee that the greatest threat to America was its failure to live up to the opportunities offered by the Constitution of the United States. This rhetorical move is essential to Naze’s thesis. Oddly, in his book’s introduction, Naze states that Robinson's testimony occurred in 1947 (27) when the appropriate date was July 18, 1947. While Naze’s approach to interpreting Robinson’s words and image complicates his subject, he also tends to over theorize his subject and repeats information, which creates confusion at times. For example, on page thirty-six Naze provides the “four primary themes” that make up his first chapter; on page forty-seven, he repeats these themes: “the battle over legitimacy, the battle over agency, the battle over the mainstream, and the battle over coalition building.” At times, this valuable book reads like a dissertation.

Still, Robinson is an ideal subject for the intersection of sports and politics, which the Robinson-Robeson history highlights. Robinson himself, according to Naze, was a political figure who also was successful as a baseball player. Sharon Robinson, Jackie Robinson’s daughter, writing in defense of the “Jackie Robinson Project,” housed at George Washington University but now facing lack of budgetary support, summarized her father’s values and commitment: “courage, determination, teamwork, persistence, integrity, citizenship, justice, commitment, and excellence…. a fighter for integration, civil rights, and fair play for all” (Zirin). Naze’s work illustrates how Robinson publicly displayed these values, and how his legacy has been commodified in both successful and questionable ways. Naze’s introduction contains a rather lengthy chapter outline, a guide for readers who might want to sample select chapters, such as Naze’s cultural and rhetorical analysis of the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, in Cooperstown, New York, and the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum, in Kansas City, Missouri, one of the strongest portions of *Reclaiming 42*.

Overall, the book contains four chapters and a conclusion, each an inventory of an aspect of Robinson’s legacy. Each chapter is designed to complicate Robinson’s history by contrasting popular assumptions with evidence from his writing and speaking life. As a professional athlete, Robinson spent his entire career with the Brooklyn Dodgers, leading the team to six pennants and one World Series victory. In 1962 he was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame. The narrative of Robinson’s breaking the Major League color barrier is legendary. After he retired from the game, he did not remain in Major League Baseball as a coach, manager, or executive. Rather, his name was attached to a variety of businesses: a construction company and a bank. The bank was meant to combat the persistence of redlining. Both businesses failed. According to Peter Drier, these business failures “dimmed Robinson’s confidence in black capitalism as a strategy for racial advancement and integration.” Robinson remained in the public eye. As Naze notes, he supported political figures, argued with political figures, and supported athletes, including John Carlos and Tommie Smith; he also testified in federal court in support of Curt Flood’s challenge to baseball’s reserve clause. Robinson’s legacy, away from the baseball field, demonstrates his unrelenting willingness to help others, especially African Americans.

Yet, as Naze alludes to, by the time of his death of a heart attack at age fifty-three, Robinson was almost a forgotten man. He designed a self-imposed boycott of professional baseball because of its poor record in hiring minority candidates for managerial and executive positions. In 1972, nine days before his death, Robinson broke his boycott and attended the second game of the World Series. He threw out the first pitch and voiced his displeasure over the lack of representation in Major League Baseball: “I’d like to live to see a black manager, I’d like to live to see the day when there’s a black man coaching third base” (Naze 154). However, according to Naze, Robinson’s radical voice faded but his symbolic significance would be revived in 1997, the fiftieth anniversary of his trailblazing year; this, according to Naze, illustrates how Robinson has been commodified and revised by baseball’s embrace of his image but not the man himself.

Robinson’s biography is massive, complex. Utilizing a rhetorical, theoretical lens and keeping a tight focus on specific areas of Robinson’s history, both when he was alive and after his death, Naze has produced a compelling book that examines how the past influences the present and also how memories can be reconstructed to fit present needs. While his case study approach makes the reading experience a bit pedantic, *Reclaiming 42* makes a compelling argument in favor of Robinson’s complete legacy: “his words, thoughts, and leadership are not to be carved in stone but rather provided as an opportunity to discuss, converse, protest, and deliberate the implications of today’s racial landscape not just in baseball but in society on a larger scale” (187). Naze’s concluding note sounds the need for looking at Robinson as more than a mythic figure, rather he asks that every aspect of Robinson’s life be evaluated in the broader context of the moment of history in which he lived and what his thinking then means to us today.

Burns, Ken, *Jackie Robinson* (2016). PBS. Online:

<https://www.pbs.org/kenburns/jackie-robinson/about-the-film>

Dreier, Peter. “Half a Century Before Colin Kaepernick, Jackie Robinson Said,

‘I Cannot Stand and Sing the Anthem.’” 18 July 2019. Online: <http://www.thenation.com>

Zirin, Dave. “Whither the Jackie Robinson Project?” *The Nation*. 24 September

2019. Online: <https://www.thenation.com/article/whither-the-jackie-robinson-project/>