

# **Danny Almonte: Discursive Construction(s) of (Im)migrant Citizenship in Neoliberal America**

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In this project I will trace former Little League Baseball star, Danny Almonte's, celebrity identity and flexible citizenship with particular regard to the way that he has been used as both an exemplary Dominican immigrant and later a cautionary tale. As such this critical biography of Almonte's rise and fall in American popular culture—informed by Henry Giroux's extensive theorizing on youth culture, Ong's concept of flexible citizenship, and Steven Jackson's understanding of "twisting"—will critically interrogate the mediated discourses used to describe, define, and make Almonte into a symbol of a (stereo)typical Dominican male. In accordance with contemporaneous hyper-conservative and neoliberal rhetoric pervasive throughout the United States, I posit the notion that Almonte's contested celebrity was formulated within the popular media as the embodiment of the minority "assault" on white privilege.

Dans ce projet, je retrace l'ex-étoile des petites ligues de baseball Danny Almonte, son identité de célébrité et sa citoyenneté flexible dans le sens qu'il a été utilisé à la fois en tant qu'immigrant exemplaire de la République Dominicaine et à la fois comme protagoniste d'un récit de mise en garde. Mon essai critique de la montée et de la descente d'Almonte dans la culture populaire états-unienne interroge les discours médiatisés utilisés pour décrire, définir et faire d'Almonte un symbole du mâle dominicain stéréotypé. Pour ce faire, j'utiliserai la théorie de la culture des jeunes de Giroux, le concept de citoyenneté flexible d'Ong et le concept de « twisting » de Jackson. En accord avec la rhétorique contemporaine néolibérale et hyper conservatrice qui domine aux États-Unis, la célébrité contestée d'Almonte a été formulée au sein des médias populaires comme étant la réincarnation de « l'agression » des minorités à l'endroit du privilège blanc.

In 2001, Williamsport, Pennsylvania, Danny Almonte and his "Baby Bomber" teammates from Bronx, New York took the annual Little League World Series by storm when they qualified for the International tournament behind the strength of Almonte's no-hitter against State College, PA on national television (Gowdy Jr., 2001). The initial excitement that emanated from his performance in the Mid-Atlantic Regional final was amplified when Almonte became the first pitcher to

throw a perfect game (recording 18 consecutive outs without allowing a base runner) in Williamsport since Angel Macias in 1957 (Van Auken & Van Auken, 2001, p. 100–102). The media frenzy surrounding the team and Almonte carried on as Bronx, NY went undefeated on their way to the U.S. Championship game, and, ultimately, a 3rd place finish in the tournament. Five days after the LLWS was completed a *Sports Illustrated* investigation revealed that Almonte was 14 years old, two years older than the acceptable age to participate.

In this paper, I excavate Danny Almonte's (celebrity) identity from the former Little League World Series (LLWS) star's rise and eventual fall in popular culture. I use a cultural studies framework to read the media coverage surrounding Almonte as well as ethnographic interviews and observations of key figures involved with the 2001 LLWS. I will first outline my theoretical framework through which I critically evaluated Almonte's mediated identity before discussing my methodology in more detail. I will then explore the context from which Danny Almonte and "his many handlers"/guardians (Garcia, 2009) were operating from in both the Dominican Republic and the United States to then, critically evaluate how Danny Almonte was treated as an *immigrant to the United States* during his brief experience within Little League Baseball. I will conclude by demonstrating how his media treatment serves to reinforce neoliberal philosophy and economics in the United States (cf. Berlant, 1997; Giroux, 2003, 2005; Grossberg, 2005; Zylinska, 2005).

## Theorizing Danny Almonte

To "read" Danny Almonte's celebrity identity I will use a cultural studies inspired framework (Andrews, 2006). This type of "theoretically contingent" (King, 2005, p. 26) research aims to understand particular social phenomenon by highlighting constraining social structures surrounding it (Hall, 1981). Various theoretical and empirical understandings can help evaluate social phenomenon at particular contextual and conjunctural moments (Andrews, 2002; Grossberg, 2006). This approach will inform the way I understand Almonte's story by demonstrating the complex web of opportunities/constraints that had an effect on the young, Dominican male (im)migrant living in the United States. In addition, King (2005) reminds that (group) identity formations are fluid, contingent, and conjuncturally specific to a particular sociopolitical context. Therefore, each social context, such as Little League Baseball's place in the United States "represents the conditions of *possibility* for the appearance" of a particular identity (p. 34).

Within the United States, several scholars point to a condition of neoliberal capitalism that has resulted in uneven forces, particularly for (im)migrant populations (Hernandez, 2004; Juffer, 2002; Klein, 1988, 1995, 2000, 2007, 2008, Mosher 2001a, 2001b, 2001c; Zinn, 2003). Such conditions have also influenced sport-induced migratory patterns that continually challenge traditional notions of national identity (Jackson, 1998a). For example, the *flexible citizenship* (Ong, 1999) of notable sport figures such as Martina Hingis, Becky Hammon, Manny Ramirez, Sammy Sosa, and Alex Rodriguez have contributed to more convoluted understandings of what constitutes national identity in that individual (sport) stars can simultaneously *be* American and "other" depending on the national context from which they are operating. I will now locate the construction of sporting celebrity within this cultural condition in the United States.

Andrews (2000) asserts that conducting critical studies on the symbolic nature of sport stars and revealing the power relations between athletes and the media at particular conjunctural moments:

encourages/implores readers to question, both in a specific and broader sense their engagement with the popular media and the effects of such engagements on the creation of the subjective understandings of racial (national/gendered/sexual) selves and others that have such a profound effect upon the structure and experiencing of everyday life. (p. 108)

Giardina adds that (2005, p. 49), “(sporting) celebrity is perhaps unrivaled within commercial media for both its drawing power and influence on a mass audience.”

Consequently, studying how sport celebrity is constructed through the media provides an understanding of what (inter)nationality of race, class, gender, sexuality, and (dis)ability might *mean* in contemporary US society. Critical evaluation of these mediated representations also serves to reveal the often iniquitous, and sometimes symbiotic, power relations between cultural intermediaries and those they represent in the media (Ong, 1999). By cultural intermediaries I mean those individuals in “occupations involving presentation and representation (sales, marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion, decoration, and so forth (sic) and in all the institutions providing symbolic goods and services” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 359). Cultural intermediaries hold positions of authority over stars/celebrities, because they possess the ability to (mis)represent individuals through various (multi)media channels.

To trace these power relations through the media representation of Danny Almonte, I will draw from Giroux’s (1996, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2006) extensive writing on the effects of neoliberalism on youth and (youthful) popular culture that sets the context through which Almonte had to operate; Ong’s understanding of flexible citizenship whereby I consider the various ways Danny Almonte became representative of the United States and Dominican Republic through the “dual process of self-making and being made within webs of power linked to the nation-state and civil society” (1999, p. 264); and Jackson’s definition of racial *twisting* which “refers to the shifting, mediated representation of [Almonte’s] identities within specific contexts” (1998a, p. 27).

Though others in cultural studies (cf. Denzin, 2007; Grossberg, 2001, 2005; Giardina, 2005; McLaren, 1994; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1997, 2004) have taken interest in youth and youth culture, broadly speaking, Henry Giroux is a, if not *the*, leading contemporary scholar on the subject. Giroux’s examination of the conditions young people in the United States (and elsewhere) are living in/under provides the basis for my conceptual and contextual premise. He observes:

a failing economy that offers most youth the promise of service sector jobs, dim prospects for the future, a world of infinite messages and images designed to sell a product or to peddle senseless violence as another TV spectacle, in part, constitute the new conditions of youth. In light of radically altered social and economic conditions, educators need to fashion alternative analysis in order to understand what is happening to our nation’s youth. Such a project seems vital in light of the rapidity in which market values and a commercial public culture have replaced the ethical referents for developing democratic public spheres. (2006, p. 97)

As such, I seek to outline the various levels of power and privilege that were working for, on, in, and through Danny Almonte's (youthful) mediated identity. To achieve this, I need to focus on the sociopolitical context from which Almonte emerged, and how his mediated symbolic presence serves to reinforce hegemonic relationships between the United States and Dominican Republic, whites and nonwhites, as well as the (relatively) wealthy and poverty stricken.

Before the advent of Twitter, social networking sites (Youtube, Facebook, Myspace), and weblogs, which may radically alter the way(s) in which athletes are perceived for they are essentially serving as their own mediators (see among others: Curt Schilling, Chad Ochocinco, Shaquille O'Neill), most (sport) celebrities were covered by an ever-growing variety of (sport) journalists (talk radio, internet, newspaper, television). This constituency, largely comprised of white men (cf. Bryant, 2002, p. 114), has long been criticized for their nationalist, racist, sexist, and classist depictions of (sport) celebrities and spectacles (Andrews & Jackson, 2001; Billings, 2008; Dyer, 1997). Specifically, there has been much scholarly work on the whitening, trancendentalizing, reracializing, and normalization of such symbolic U.S. sport stars as O.J. Simpson (Johnson & Roediger, 2000), Michael Jordan (Andrews, 2000, 2001; McDonald, 2001; McDonald & Andrews, 2001), Tiger Woods (Cole & Andrews, 2000, 2001), Venus Williams (Spencer, 2001), among many others (cf. Andrews, 2001; Andrews & Jackson, 2001; Birrell & McDonald, 2000). Each of the studies demonstrate how these sport stars have been strategically represented as racially transcendent and/or exceptional minorities. Often their *difference* in comparison with the white male majority in the United States is not deemed important during periods of sporting success (i.e., these athletes have overcome racism, classism, and sexism but have the "good sense" not to bring it up to the media). However, as soon as each one of these sport stars fails (morally, ethically, on the field, or by discussing their minority status) their "shortcomings" are represented through crude racially, gendered, and sexually coded language that does little to subvert the American status quo.

Using a more global perspective Jackson (1998a, 1998b), Giardina (2001, 2005), and Juffer (2002) have interrogated the ways that Ben Johnson and Donovan Bailey, Martina Hingis, and Sammy Sosa became "representative characters of the national symbolic" (Cole, 2001, p. 71) for Canada, Switzerland, and the Dominican Republic respectively. As will be demonstrated in the following, similar to Danny Almonte's mediated identity, each article outlines how successful athletes' national identities are flexible in that they come to be represented *as* and/or be represented *by* various national constituencies. Again, these critical studies on modern adult (sport) minority stars/celebrities have demonstrated that when an individual is successful they are represented as evidence for the unrivaled "fairness" of the various global and national sociopolitical structures they operate within.

Thus, individual sport stars become veritable commercials for the social structures reinforced by corporate profiteers, cultural intermediaries, as well as politicians and their "handlers" during the brief periods (sport) celebrities are mediated as success stories. Mediated discourse often places the blame on the individual sport star for his/her failure within a system that provides many "opportunities" for success. This tends to happen particularly when a sport starts engages in what is deemed as morally and ethically unacceptable behavior such using performance enhancing drugs, gambling, being too outspoken, or cheating.

Johnson and Roediger's (2000) description of O.J. Simpson's shifting racial representation, from acceptably black to dangerously black, following the murder of his ex-wife and her partner is a salient example that demonstrates how successful minority athletes are always minorities even when it goes unspoken. More recently, the mediated treatment of minority sport stars, Serena Williams, Michael Jordan, and Tiger Woods seemed to reinforce Johnson and Roediger's (2000) findings. Williams' status as a black sex-symbol for tennis (which in and of itself is sexist and racist) turned to that of an uncontrolled black woman after she reportedly "threatened to kill a line judge at the U.S. Open" (Dwyre, 2009, ¶7). Jordan's image as a racially transcendent champion turned to the petty, vindictive, and arrogant black man after his NBA Hall of Fame acceptance speech (Dell'Appa, 2009). Finally, Tiger Woods, once America's new son (Cole & Andrews, 2001), has seen his approval rating fall precipitously amid allegations that he repeatedly cheated on his wife, and that he had been treated by a Canadian doctor accused of providing athletes with Human Growth Hormone (HGH) (Kantor, 2009; Van Natta, Jr., Schmidt, M. & Austen, I., 2009).

Though these are good examples of the way that minority sport stars are handled by the media, it is Jackson's (1998a) critical understanding of Ben Johnson's brief rise and fall within the Canadian context that most closely parallels the way Danny Almonte was treated in the United States. Johnson, a Jamaican-Canadian, was lauded and accepted as a Canadian following his, sub-10 second, 100 meter dash victory over American, Carl Lewis. Yet, when Johnson failed a steroids test days later, he was shunned by the Canadian press, and described as a typical "cheating" minority. I also plan to demonstrate how Danny Almonte's ever-changing racial and national identity was initially *flexible* (Dominican/American/Latino) (Ong, 1999) during the brief period he became an American celebrity. During this period it seemed as if Almonte was well on his way to becoming a childhood sport celebrity who was accepted as an American immigrant. However, following his own cheating scandal, Almonte's identity *twisted* from Dominican-American immigrant to Dominican migrant (Jackson, 1998a).

While there is substantial literature on media representation of sport stars, few have focused on the portrayal of youth sport stars. Although youth sport has been critically evaluated at some length within the sociology of sport (Cole, 1996; Fraser-Thomas, Cote & Deakin, 2005; Giardina & Donnelly, 2008; Hastad, Segreave, Pangrazzi & Peterson, 1984; Hill, 1993; Pitter & Andrews, 1997; White, Silk & Andrews, 2008a; 2008b; Wilson & Hayhurst, 2009), only Giardina's work on Martina Hingis (2001, 2005) focuses on media representation. Thus, this project aims to both add to the already existing discussion on the representative nature of sport stars, and take up the challenge posed by Giardina and Donnelly (2008) to "shed a much-needed critical light on an arena of youth culture that is all-too-frequently overlooked by a majority of scholars and critics alike" (p. 4). I aim to, therefore, open up a (relatively) new dialogue on the unique moral issues that arise when covering high profile youth sports.

## Getting to "Know" Danny Almonte

To understand Danny Almonte's mediated identity I searched across the (multi) media spectrum to investigate the ways in which Danny Almonte was described to the American reading/watching public. Specifically, a *Lexis Nexis Academic*

search on Danny Almonte between August 1, 2001 and June 4, 2007 yielded 510 newspaper articles (including 300 written very close to the 2001 LLWS), and 6 magazine articles. This was coupled with a search of popular sporting news websites *CNN.com*, *ESPN.com*, *Foxsports.com*, *CBSsportsline.com*, as well as the official Little League Baseball website which contained several articles and video clips describing Almonte's experience at the 2001 LLWS.

In addition, I critically evaluated the televisual renderings of Danny Almonte during five 2001 LLWS broadcasts (Gowdy Jr., 2001), and post LLWS follow-up features segments by ESPN on *Outside the Lines* (Ebinger, 2001), *Sportscenter* (Ebinger, 2005), an interview on *First Take* (Gordon, 2007), and a recent "where are they now" segment on *Sportscenter* (Bengston, 2009)—which indicated how Almonte's celebrity still "matters" in contemporary American culture. Finally, the multimedia information was buttressed by extra information obtained from various "expert" sources since the 2001 LLWS. This began with an undergraduate course that I took on youth sport at Ithaca College with Dr. Mosher, who wrote three articles about Danny Almonte on ESPN.com, in 2001. Following that I attended the 2003 and 2005 LLWS, and met with and talked to Little League Corporation's Media Director, Lance Van Auken. Van Auken is regarded as the "voice" of LLC, and he spoke with me on several occasions following the 2001 LLWS regarding Little League in general and Danny Almonte in particular (2001, 2003, 2004, personal communication).

To analyze my empirical material, I followed Andrews (1996, 2000), Jackson (1998a, 1998b), and Giardina (2001; 2005) to focus on *key* and *emergent* themes in the mediated discourse surrounding Danny Almonte. According to Fairclough's contemporary description of critical discourse analysis (CDA) this meant that I must "be selective i.e. to make judgments about which 'mix' of available resources yield the most fruitful perspective on relations between semiosis and non-semiotic elements" (2005, p. 84). He further suggests that discourses on particular "subjects" (like Danny Almonte) must be considered in relation to discourses created about, by, and through "neo-liberalism and globalization" (2005, p. 76). This analysis technique entails working in a "transdisciplinary" way through dialogue with other disciplines and theories which are addressing contemporary processes of social change (Fairclough, 2005, p. 76). To do so I chose to follow a methodology initially formulated by Gruneau, Whitson, and Cantelon (1988) then employed by others in sport sociology (MacNeill 1996, Silk 2002, Trujillo, 2001, White, et al., 2008a, 2008b) which evaluates and contextualizes the various meanings provided by cultural intermediaries about sport events and stars. This was particularly useful in gaining an understanding of how Danny Almonte's celebrity identity was used by the media, and Little League for both capital gain and the (re)affirmation of power by those who already hold it in contemporary American society.

## **Dominican Dependence on the United States and Baseball**

To best understand the choices made by Danny Almonte, his guardians, and his mediators, the contexts in which they were operating must both be understood and articulated with their choices in creating Almonte's fluid identity (King, 2005). Therefore, in this section, I will describe how Almonte's life choices and chances

were similar to most other Dominican males, and that the context from which he was operating from likely had a large influence on the seemingly desperate move to cheat in Little League Baseball. Because of the historic connection between the United States and Dominican Republic success in baseball has become an important aspect of Dominican male identity and upward social mobility (Juffer, 2002; Klein, 1988, 1991, 2008; Mosher, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c; *The New Americans*, 2003; Wong, 2001a).

Following Wiarda and Kryzanek (cited in Klein, 1988, p. 301), “it is difficult to find another sovereign country that the U.S. has so openly and thoroughly influenced” in terms of national leadership, economy, and normalized social conventions (like using baseball for social mobility). In that regard, Salvador Gomez (1997) has provided an historic account of the various interventions the United States has staged in the Dominican Republic to keep their capitalist political interests at bay in the Caribbean. Gomez traces the various choices the U.S. government made between 1904–1965 to invade, occupy, and in many ways destroy an unencumbered Dominican “way of life”. Perhaps the most devastating act the United States committed against the people of the Dominican Republic was protecting of the country’s murderous dictator, Rafael Trujillo, between 1930–1961 (Gomez, 1997). By supporting this nefarious ruler, the United States was able to effectively garner control of the Dominican economy, and shape it to fit *their* needs (see Gomez, 1997; Zinn, 2003).

More specifically, the U.S. and its corporations have fashioned the Dominican Republic into a tourist destination, installed sugar industry, then later sporting goods factories, and essentially forced the inhabitants of the country into service sector occupations that have done little to develop the country economically and/or educationally (Achbar, Abbot & Bachan, 2005; Gomez, 1997; Klein, 1988, 1991, 2008; Zinn, 2003). Major League Baseball has benefitted from the United State’s neo-colonial domination over the Dominican Republic, because they can use the country to develop cheap talent. Indeed, by 2003, 23% of Major League Baseball rosters and 50% of minor league rosters were comprised of “Latino” athletes, most of whom were from the Dominican Republic (Gonzalez Echevarria, 2003). Unfortunately, baseball has been used as an opportunity to take advantage of the poor, uneducated families and boys who harbor hopes of making more than the meager average yearly salary estimated to be between \$2000–8100 (USD) working in the Dominican service sector (CNN, 2001; Juffer, 2002; Klein, 1991, 2008; Mosher, 2001a; Per capita income, 2007).

In many ways then, Danny Almonte’s story is typical of a young Dominican male. He was raised in the poor agricultural town of Moca, Dominican Republic where few people receive a quality formal education (Klein, 2008). Further, “virtually no correlation between education and employment exists” in the Dominican Republic (Klein, 2008, p. 133). Thus, in the Dominican Republic, earning a degree rarely leads to finding a job that offers a chance at upward social mobility. As such, Almonte’s options for upward social mobility in the Dominican Republic were far more restricted by his socioeconomic status than most individuals in the United States. As a result he, his brother, and father did what many Dominican’s choose to do, they left the Dominican Republic to live in the United States in hopes of making money through baseball, and/or blue collar labor (Hernandez, 2004; Klein, 2008).

When Dominicans, like the Almontes, are not successful in baseball the United States, they end up in nearly the same dire economic straits as they did at home. In

the following Hernandez (2004) describes how Dominican reliance on the United States has adversely effected its (im)migrant population:

Dominicans [have] left their homeland pressured by economic needs, the desire to improve their lives, and encouraged by a *de facto* immigration policy that facilitated their exodus. Once in the U.S., most Dominicans encounter an economy that increasingly demands skills and levels of schooling they do not possess. Rather than a prosperous life, in the new land, Dominicans face high unemployment levels and an alarming state of poverty. Paradoxically, while the needs of Dominicans continue to be unmet in the new society, the social policies and the conditions that push them out of their country remain in effect .... In the end, poor Dominicans are pushed back and forth by both societies whose immigration policies mask their unwillingness to respond to the needs of the group. (p. 87)

This disturbing situation has led to the point where a harrowing 58.7% of the Dominican population in the United States uses some form of state assistance (a fact not lost on the conservative right in America), 25.4% live in poverty, and only 29% *reach* high school (Armas, 2001; Cala, 2001). To be frank, Danny Almonte was contributing to this statistic since he was truant from school during the first 18 months he was in the United States (Vulliamy, 2001).

Despite this seemingly oppressive situation, putting aside all other forms of socioeconomic development (like going to school) trying to “make it” in baseball has become a social norm for Dominicans (Juffer, 2002; Klein, 1988, 1991, 1995, 2008; Mosher, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c). To better illustrate this point, one of the parents for Danny Almonte’s team (which was largely comprised of Dominican and Puerto Rican (im)migrants) responded to CBS Evening News field reporter, Lee Cowan’s, question as follows:

(Cowan) “It (baseball) is really their ticket out of the Bronx?”

(Parent) “Yes, definitely. They—they grow up poor, and once—when they’re poor, they want to reach a better goal. They say, ‘I don’t want to stay stuck in here.’ That’s the way my children think”. (August 18, 2001)

Consequently, if the Dominican males do not make it in baseball they are considered failures at home, unwanted migrants in the United States, and possess few skills needed for gainful employment in either country (see: *The New Americans*, 2003).

However, the United States’ dominance over the Dominican Republic has been veiled by American media sources in that the Dominican-U.S. baseball link is often celebrated for its supposed mutually benefiting (inter)dependence (for examples during the 2001 LLWS see: Gowdy Jr., 2001; Musburger, 2001). Unfortunately this type of mediated programming belies dominant structural issues affecting the future of young Dominicans outside of baseball (cf. Giroux, 2003). Such discrimination in popular culture simultaneously contributes to a prevailing mythology that immigrant (minority) youth should be subject to overt “policing, exclusion and oppression” (Giroux, 1994, p. 12). This is evidenced by the fact that while “child poverty rates for blacks and Hispanics ... is an unconscionable 30 and 28 percent respectively” there has been “dramatic increase in black [read: racial minority] prisoners [factor-ing] in the growth of the prison-industrial complex” (Giroux, 2003, p. 125).



Further since many of these children are in families reliant on American money in some form of welfare, Dean argues that the neoliberal language of (welfare) dependency implies a “central contention that poor people have something more wrong with them than their poverty. Welfare dependency is hence a syndrome lurking behind the welfare state that can be related to biology, psychology, upbringing, culture, or behavior, or several or even all of these factors” (1999, p. 62). Thus Dominicans that have seemingly failed to develop into “useful” adults are positioned as leaches on the American government by the (multi)media with little consideration given to the context through which they operate (Klein, 2008; Mosher, 2001a).

With this in mind, throughout the final three sections, I will trace how Almonte’s initial rise to prominence was used as “evidence” for how the American neoliberal system provides “opportunities” for even the most destitute immigrant populations. More to the point, when Danny Almonte became a star he was positioned as an acceptable immigrant to the United States. Following Almonte’s “cheating scandal”, Danny became that which he seemingly circumvented—a state dependent migrant to the United States.

## Almonte the (Almost) All-American Hero

The Little League World Series is the world’s largest organized youth sporting event (White et al., 2008a, 2008b). Though most Little League districts are located in the United States, the sport is played in over 100 countries and has approximately 2.7 million participants worldwide. Each year, its three-week, season-ending World Championship tournament comprised of eight U.S. regions, and eight International regions, is televised on the American Broadcast Company (ABC), as well as, the Entertainment Sports Network (ESPN, ESPN2). The event provides cheap programming, and typically garners relatively high television ratings during the slow late-summer months for the aforementioned networks (Van Auken, personal communication, 2003). Further, since the games are played by 11–12 year old children (mostly boys) in the parochial town of Williamsport, Pennsylvania, the LLWS is generally a space for ABC/ESPN to promote *their* version of youthful innocence, wonder, and excitement. This should come as no surprise for two broadcast companies operating under the Disney Co. umbrella (cf. Giroux, 2001).

In addition to the newly television expanded coverage by ABC/ESPN for the 2001 event (from 15 to 27 games) “a LLWS record, 230 media credentials were issued” (Ebinger, 2001) to other members of the media. Since the 2001 LLWS received heightened media coverage there was a more intense public following for the event, and those mediating it held even more power in shaping who mattered and how. Interestingly, though there are (non-American) *others* participating in the event since there are *International* teams, most successful U.S. teams are comprised of white middle to upper-class kids whose parents can afford to pay for the best training and equipment (cf. Mosher, 2001a). The “Baby Bombers”, who were comprised mostly of Dominican and Puerto Rican boys, ran in direct contradiction to that norm. In other words, though it is typical for young Dominicans and Puerto Ricans to be playing baseball, the unique nature of an American Little League team led by a Dominican (im)migrant provided a compelling tale for the media and the ABC/ESPN narrative machine to make use of early and throughout the 2001 LLWS (cf. Cowan, 2001; Ebinger, 2001; Gowdy Jr., 2001; Wong, 2001a).

The aforementioned became exceedingly clear during Almonte's perfect game in the opening round of the LLWS against Apopka, Florida when ESPN announcers Dave Ryan and Tom Candiotti, marveled at his performance "amidst all the media attention and the overflow crowd at Volunteer Stadium" (Gowdy Jr., 2001). In the top of the 5th inning of the game Candiotti reflected on the moment by stating:

Good look at Volunteer Stadium, and how many people are jammed in to watch this superstar in action. This is my fourth year here at the Little League World Series, and I cannot recall anything close in terms of the anticipation to see any one individual player. Some teams get a lot of media attention, but nothing like this, definitely really groundbreaking stuff ... what we're seeing from Danny Almonte he's certainly worthy of media attention. Very special kid, and he's performing at a very high level. (Gowdy Jr., 2001)

In addition, the *New York Daily News* reported that "four buses filled with fans from the Bronx, NY helped fill the 5,000 fans that lined Volunteer Stadium" (Garcia, 2001, p. 5), and the *New York Times* described a scene whereby "one man pulled off his artificial left leg and waved it, others stomped in unison and more than a few chanted "'New York! New York!' as the smell of deep-fried funnel cake wafted through the air" (Wong, 2001a, p. 1).

Newspapers also reported that the Bronx team jerseys sold out at the Williamsport concessions stands (Pinellas Sports Extra, 2001), sport apparel giant Modell's created replica uniforms that were flying off the shelves in New York City stores (Martinez, 2001), and, perhaps even more outrageously, "authentic" Danny Almonte signed baseballs were being auctioned off at EBay—where one "had 30 bids and was priced at \$115" (Ingrassia, 2001, p. 5). As the tournament wore on it was reported that ESPN's expanded coverage of the tournament, while expected to lower ratings, actually increased 17% (Brady & Rosewater, 2001, p. 1A). Not surprisingly, a large portion of this upswing in viewers was attributed to the multinational following for Danny Almonte and the Baby Bombers. For "they represent not only New York, but Latin America as well", and "what separates Danny Almonte from the glut of candidates for America's Next Heartthrob is the fact that Danny Almonte is also the Dominican Republic's Next Heartthrob, and Puerto Rico's Next Heartthrob" (Pinellas Sports Extra, 2001, p. 10C).

Interestingly, during his brief period as a success story, Almonte was being claimed by both the Dominican Republic and the United States as *their* hero. Following Giardina (2005, p. 51), Danny Almonte's "discursively-rendered vernacularity [became] amorphously positioned to and within" the United States, the Dominican Republic, and even "Latin America" writ large. In other words, through his mediated celebrity identity Danny Almonte was beginning to "effortlessly negotiate borders of the global market" (Giardina, 2005, p. 51) by at once *being* Dominican, American, and Latino depending on who was mediating and consuming him. More specifically, in a lengthy review on *ESPN.com* Musburger wrote:

This team deserves an enormous amount of credit for what they've overcome. The Little League fields in the Bronx are mainly vacant lots littered with broken glass and discarded cans. The league received a major donation from Merrill Lynch, and the youngsters took it from there. In large part, the Rolando Paulino team represents what's happening to the United States population as a whole.

They are the latest wave of immigrants to be welcomed with open arms in the United States . . . Times change, immigration patterns change and the Latino kids now dance to the beat of baseball. When they posed for their team photo the other day, an American flag was proudly displayed in front of the team. They would be a great representative for the U.S. against the champion of the International bracket. (2001, ¶9)

A *USA Today* article further suggested the acceptance of Almonte and his teammates as American popular culture icons stating, “the Baby Bronx Bombers have given this World Series a special luster, it’s like a golf tournament with Tiger Woods. Once the Series is over, (HBO sports agent) *Arlit* could be standing outside the door to sign Almonte” (Martzke, 2001, p. 2C). This strategy of positioning Almonte, as a celebrated American-immigrant, was buttressed by similar coverage of Danny Almonte provided by the *CBS Evening News* (Cowan, 2001a, 2001b), *NPR* (Siegel, 2001), and in an *NBC Today Show* interview (Brady & Rosewater, 2001).

The coverage that celebrated Danny Almonte’s success ignored the cultural economy of corporate America that Almonte’s team was able to use. For most minorities have far more to overcome to become accepted in America, and very few make it to that point (Giroux, 2003). Further, in mediating Danny Almonte as a legitimate American, the United States is *selectively positioned* (Jackson, 1998a, p. 26) as an egalitarian social system ignoring their history of racism and domination over the Dominican Republic and Dominicans in general. In effect, this type of discourse allows for the status quo to essentially continue, because the system seemingly allows for “everyone” to become successful. This, of course, is in spite of the fact that there has only ever been one *Danny Almonte* in Little League Baseball.

Moreover, given that those “flocking to see” Almonte at Williamsport, and consume him in various ways elsewhere, are overwhelmingly white (Mosher, personal communication, 2005) Almonte’s celebrity seemingly cleared the way for him to transcend normalized minority status in America. Almonte’s story—like other minority celebrity stories before him—reified the belief that “personal resolution, according to Reaganism’s doctrine of conservative egalitarianism and color-blind bigotry, was all that was required to achieve in American society” (Andrews, 2001, p. 115).

In other words, when treated as a superstar celebrity, Danny Almonte became the embodiment of a “true” American citizen. Unfortunately, his brief period of success serves as defense for critique against the continued rollback of social provisions in the United States (Andrews, 2001). Thus, Almonte’s success allows for those defending American neoliberalism to suggest that if he, a poverty stricken, Dominican, (im)migrant, can become successful in the United States others should be able to do the same without support from the government.

## Almonte the Dominican

Importantly, while Almonte was consistently lauded as the prototypical American immigrant that should be celebrated for his hard work and success, there was a certain amount of unease coming from his competitors and some members of the media (cf. Ebinger, 2001; Sandomir, 2001). In fact, before the LLWS finals in

Williamsport an inquiry into Almonte's age had already taken place. Though age challenges (again the participants in the LLWS must be between 11–12 years old) are not new to Little League, it is rare that they involve American-based teams and/or are seriously covered by the U.S. media (cf. Burroughs & Hennessy, 1994; Mosher, 2001b, 2001c; Van Auken & Van Auken, 2001).

Regardless, unconvinced by the birth records produced by Almonte's coach, Rolando Paulino, the parents for teams that the Bronx had defeated on their way to Williamsport, from Staten Island, New York and Pequannock, New Jersey funded a \$10,000 private investigation on the young star, and found nothing (Gowdy Jr., 2001; Hickey, 2001; Woods, 2001). However, the popular media followed suit and, five days after the LLWS was completed, a second investigation by *Sports Illustrated* revealed that Almonte was, in fact, 14 years-old (two years above the acceptable age to participate). Given that Almonte was still being celebrated as an American hero, even receiving a key to New York City (Wong, 2001b), he was initially defended by many media sources as a "young boy that was exploited by greedy parents, Little League, and ABC" (cf. Donaldson, 2001; Donnellon, 2001; Elliott, 2001; Hickey, 2001; Knott, 2001; Lopresti, 2001). However, as time wore on, the negative sentiments harbored by those he "cheated" won out, and Almonte became a vilified figure in the popular media.

Following Jackson (1998a), Almonte's identity twisted back to a brown-bodied Dominican immigrant, thereby serving to "displace [Almonte's American] racial identity" (p. 27). In effect, Almonte, the Dominican, became a cautionary tale who was part of *their* "constant attack" of white American interests and innocence. This began when Little League President, Steve Keener, responded to the controversy by stating that:

Adults have used Danny Almonte in a most contemptible and despicable way, their actions are reprehensible. We are certainly saddened and angry that we were deceived. In fact, millions of Little Leaguers around the world were deceived. The charter committee unanimously voted to forfeit all the victories won by the Rolando Paulino Little League team in 2001 including the championship titles won at the district, sectional, regional play as well. In addition, the 3<sup>rd</sup> place game won by the Rolando Paulino Little League in the Little League World Series has been forfeited in favor of the team from Curacao representing the Latin American region. (CNNSI.com, 2001b)

Thus, through the press conference Keener officially presented the notion that Little League felt Almonte and the two adults involved in altering his age had cheated "millions of Little Leaguers around the world."

Popular media sources followed suit by disparaging Almonte's coach, Rolando Paulino, his father Felipe, and, in some cases, even Danny Almonte himself while lamenting the fact that the "innocent children" had lost out on a "chance of a lifetime" (Becker, 2001). President George W. Bush even commented that:

I'm disappointed that adults would fudge the boy's age. I wasn't disappointed in his fastball and his slider, guy was awesome ... I mean he's a great pitcher, but I was sorely disappointed that people felt like they could send in a false age particularly when it comes to Little League Baseball of all places. (CNNSI.com, 2001a)

It is ironic that George W. Bush would criticize anyone for “fudging” anything so soon after the 2000 Presidential election (Kranish & Kirchoff, 2001). Notwithstanding, these criticisms from white male power figures seemed to open the door for far more critical mediated renderings of Danny Almonte.

More specifically, when the media openly questioned how Almonte could have passed for a 12 year-old, particularly while having to attend school in New York, the situation spiraled out of control. *NPR*'s Robert Siegel reported that Almonte was living illegally in New York on a visa that had expired in September of 2000 (2001), and worse, *The New York Daily News* found out that “Danny’s English was not good enough for him to enroll in school” (Lopresti, 2001, p. 12C). When the news broke that Almonte had not attended school in the “18 months that he had been in the United States” (Vulliamy, 2001, p. 19) and “has been eating and playing baseball” (Lopresti, 2001, p. 12C) because “it would have blown his cover” (Caple, 2001, ¶5), there was general condemnation of Almonte and his guardians (see Crouch, 2001; Gendar, 2001). Keener even declared that the fact Danny had not been enrolled in school was “the most deplorable act that has been committed to date” (Gendar, 2001, p. 2).

Such statements implied that Almonte had both taken away his white counterparts’ innocence and further perpetuated the notion that without the help of (white) Americans, brown-skinned youth and their parents cannot govern themselves (Dean, 1999; Finney, 2001). Yet, just a few weeks earlier, these were difficulties that Almonte, the immigrant, had seemingly *overcome*. Thus following Jackson (1998a), a new racial and national narrative on Almonte emerged that served to position him as a typical Dominican (migrant) ballplayer in need of surveillance.

For example, the September 1st, 2001 ESPN broadcast of *Outside the Lines* (Ebinger, 2001), which covered the Almonte incident, initially started out as an explanation for why Almonte, and his adult contemporaries may have chosen to falsify his age. The show’s host and narrator, Bob Ley, suggested that the feature might make it “easier to understand and harder to condemn” (Ebinger, 2001) Almonte, but essentially helped position the young boy as a stereotypical Dominican. While through a series of interviews the viewer found out that this choice was likely made, because this was the “only way Almonte could possibly ever provide for his father, mother, brothers, and sisters,” (Ebinger, 2001) the piece eventually degenerated into more moral panic (Hall et al., 1978) over what *sneaky* Dominicans do to “make it” to Major League Baseball. At one point a Los Angeles Dodger’s scout was interviewed, and he stated that “almost all players in the Dominican falsify their age” (Ebinger, 2001). thereby helping critics perpetuate moral assaults on Dominican minorities (cf. Klein, 2008).

Similar coverage in the news found that ballplayers in the Dominican Republic were sympathetic to Almonte’s situation (cf. Cala, 2001; Goldberg, 2001), because, as one player said “I’d change my age if I could make it to the major leagues...it’s the fastest way out of poverty for me and my family” (Cala, 2001). On an *ABC: Nightline* segment entitled “Field of Schemes,” another player added that he had taken the name of his deceased cousin to seem younger, and therefore become a more desired prospect for Major League Baseball teams (Goldberg, 2001). While the Dominican baseball players interviewed were more understanding toward Almonte, most of the reporters covering his story continued to write disparaging

articles about the young boy who had now become the focus of jokes on David Letterman and Jay Leno's popular late-night comedy shows (cf. Callahan, 2001; Finney, 2001; James, 2001; Killion, 2001; Knott, 2001; Shaughnessy, 2001; Tierney, 2001; USA Today, 2001).

At one point, the negative press coverage in regard to Almonte, his guardians, and Dominican ballplayers became so overwhelming that fellow Dominican baseball superstar, Pedro Martinez (who came from poor conditions himself), came to his defense stating:

This kid has been through so much, he comes from the mountains, he goes to New York, he gets the opportunity to play and then he gets all of this crap just because he does good ... It's just because he kicked everybody's ass that people complained ... It's good that he doesn't have to deal with all the crap they're trying to do to him; *all the crap that America has to offer*. (Horrikan, 2001, p. 108, italics mine)

Though Martinez was probably the only individual in the popular press to actually come close to having a nuanced understanding of the context through which Almonte was operating, it was not surprising when Boston Herald columnist Gerry Callahan (2001) responded with the following:

So, Pedro, the Almonte's basically cheated their way to Williamsport, and then got caught. They might call that crap in the Dominican, but up here we've got another word for it. It's called justice. As far as we can tell, all the crap was provided by Danny and daddy Almonte .... Real kids—12 year-old kids—in the biggest game of their lives were made to look silly by a 14 year-old bully. They were victims of the Full Almonte—a sleazy little con game that got found out. (p. 92)

Importantly, while Danny Almonte and the adults implicated in changing his age were being blamed for robbing the "real" white American kids of their innocence, in their quest for "justice" Keener, Bush, Callahan, and other assenting media sources were taking part in some convenient forgetfulness.

For example, ABC never returned the advertising money they made while garnering a 4.2 television rating (including a 6.3 in New York City and 17.7 in Orlando, FL) for the now-irrelevant U.S. bracket Championship game played between Apopka, FL and Bronx, NY (Sandomir, 2001). Second, they did not write about how Little League and ABC make the players into commodities to be bought and sold by corporate interests (Hamill, 2001), written about in the media, argued over by (mostly white) adult men on ESPN television shows like *Pardon the Interruption*, *Around the Horn*, and *Sportscenter*, while offering little in return. Third, the predominantly upper-class white men organizing and producing the LLWS are also guilty of overlooking the power structures governing Almonte's life had in shaping his and/or his "handlers" decision to cheat. These power structures in the United States serve to fortify George W. Bush's neoliberal policies and neoconservative values (Butler, 2002; Dean 1999; Giroux, 2003; 2005; Grossberg, 2001, 2005). Exposing the inequality inherent in this system would therefore point to failing of this type of governance (Giroux & Giroux, 2008; Harvey, 2005).

## Coda: American “Justice” and the Domination of the Dominican Republic

In the years following the “Almonte scandal” several media outlets have followed Danny Almonte’s life and career trajectory. Most reports have focused on critically evaluating his supposed personal failings or immaturity. This has helped to cement Almonte as a case study in how minority (im)migrants are “ruining” America. Numerous websites (ESPN.com, Foxsports.com to name a few) have run stories describing Danny as one of the top 10 sports cheaters of all-time, while ESPN television has aired features and interviews on Almonte in recent years outlining his life after the 2001 LLWS (Bengston, 2009; Ebinger, 2005; Gordon, 2007). When viewed critically, this coverage can be seen as a strategy to absolve LLCo/Disney/America, and the socioeconomic conditions created by and through the United States dominance over the Dominican Republic, of any blame for the direction his life took.

For example, during the 2005 Little League World Series ESPN revisited the “Almonte scandal” as part of their special ‘50 states in 50 days’ travelogue throughout the United States. On *Day 37: Pennsylvania*, Chris McKendry led into a feature on Almonte with the following statement:

Well Ben Franklin, one of our countries founding father’s lived, died, and he’s buried in Philadelphia. You know the baseball world could have used his wit, and his wisdom over the years ... Franklin would have crafted a way to explain the 1919 Black Sox, Peter Rose, or maybe the current steroid situation to the kids ... or better yet the scandal that hit this tournament in 2001 – Steve Levy catches up with Danny Almonte. (Ebinger, 2005)

As the story began the viewer finds out that Almonte was the winning pitcher in the New York State 2004 Public School Athletic League title game, “against people his own age,” and that he had moved to Florida with his father to play in an elite summer league team.

Unfortunately, Danny Almonte was kicked off the team, because he did not attend enough practices and games. His coach stated in an interview, “you know he’s obviously gotten away with murder, and at some point you have to face responsibility, and he hasn’t done that.” Throughout the short feature however, there were allusions toward the fact that he was estranged from his family, had no money, internet access, or transportation to get to practice (Ebinger, 2005). It was never elaborated on how this contributed to Almonte’s individual (lack of) responsibility.

ESPN took a second opportunity to look back at the Danny Almonte story in 2007. In this feature, Almonte was interviewed, by Jay Crawford, for the show *First Take* following his first start for South Illinois, an Independent League ballclub. Visibly uneasy with the American media, even six years after his “scandal”, Almonte refused to answer questions based on his past experience with Little League Baseball (Gordon, 2007). However, when asked why he was not drafted for a Major League ballclub, Almonte responded that it was because of his past (a left-handed pitcher that throws around 90 mph would typically be regarded as a Major League prospect). Thus the viewer again is reminded that Almonte is still experiencing “justice” for his personal inability to follow the rules.

Finally, in 2009, ESPN ran a *Where Are They Now* feature on Almonte where he came forward to explain his side of the story. During his interview Danny stated:

They never told me I'd be play with 11, 12 year-old kids. I thought I was playing with kids my age. 14 year-olds. I would tell myself, "this isn't right, I'm playing against boys younger than me, that's not right". But I couldn't do anything at the time because I didn't know how to tell the manager I didn't want to play. And I couldn't say no to my dad because he brought me to this state, to this country, but inside I felt it was wrong and I said to myself, "No I can't do this". (Bengston, 2009)

The piece further reveals that he returned to school, and was a success on the field at an Oklahoma Community College while pursuing a degree in Criminal Justice. Yet again, Almonte went undrafted by a Major League team and it appears that Danny Almonte's future ironically lies in the field of American (criminal) justice.

Like previous studies conducted on racial and ethnic media discourse (Andrews, 2001; Cole, 2001; Giardina, 2005; Jackson, 1998a, 1998b, 2004) this project has been an overt attempt to uncover an alternative reading of a "minority" subject. Similar to Martina Hingis's flexible citizenship (Giardina, 2005), it is clear that Danny Almonte's celebrity identity is constructed to maximize capital gain. Simultaneously, like most U.S. athletes (cf. Andrews & Jackson, 2001), his mediated identity also helps support the ideology that America is the land of opportunity and justice.

More to the point, through his status as a hero and villain Almonte was appropriated by the U.S. media into dominant neoliberal discourse about the ability for anyone to achieve the "American Dream." Unfortunately, these overarching notions take part in a collective forgetfulness which leaves out the "real" struggles that poverty stricken minorities, primarily of color, have to endure as second-class citizens in this world (Baudrillard, 1988; Giroux, 1996). This erasure only serves to heighten popular opinion that brown male youths are only looking for government handouts, and, without the help of "benevolent white folk" (hooks, 1992) cannot take care of themselves. The mediated discourse clearly demonstrates the boundaries on who and what constitutes an American—particularly as Almonte's mediated identity twisted (Jackson, 1998a) back to him being a Dominican after his "failure." Further research on the ways that popular American media sources create (young) celebrities in sport, music, film, is thus needed. Particularly, it is necessary to understand how (minority) athletes become American stars and who benefits from these athletes' ability. I demonstrated how dominant multimedia discourse is shielding the inherent inequalities emblematic of the current governmental system those who would benefit most from its change. As Berlant (1997, p. 220) states:

One person, one image, one face can only symbolize (But never meet) the need for radical transformation of national culture, whose sanitary self-conception these days seems to require a constant cleansing of the nonnormal populations – immigrant, nonconjugal, poor, Hispanic, African American – from the fantasy scene of private, protected, and sanctified "American" life.

Thus, it seems as if Danny Almonte's mediated identity is an instance through which American media sources can continually (re)produce the United States as the "land of opportunity, freedom, and justice" while simultaneously committing acts that are just the opposite (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005).



I demonstrated a typical strategy of first greeting Danny Almonte as a positive story about the opportunity that immigrant citizens have in the United States and then painting him as an unworthy Dominican when he failed to live up to exceptional American expectations. My findings give further meaning to a stone plaque within the Little League Museum engraved with a quote from George W. Bush: "Perhaps nothing is more American than Little League Baseball." Unfortunately, he may be more correct in that statement than he will ever understand.

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