



**FINDING THE SWEET SPOT:
A BLACK BOY'S BIG
BASEBALL DREAMS**
KAMILA HINKSON



Jalani Morgan, *Stick Talk*, 2019.

The number nine, when it comes to the game of baseball, seems to take on a kind of mystical significance. Consider this: during a game, nine players take the field to play nine innings on a diamond formed by points, or bases, that are all 90 feet apart. Toronto-based photographer Jalani Morgan considers his love affair with the sport as one of the most important relationships in his life. As a child, the lifelong Toronto Blue Jays fan fashioned himself after Devon White, a standout, Jamaican-American centrefielder who played for the Jays in the 1990s. Morgan wore the number nine on his back while he was honing his craft on the fields of Scarborough as a child. So when it came time to come up with a title for this exhibition, which he describes as a love letter to baseball, he decided to call it **9 Bats**, a nod to the number that seems to underpin it all.

The star of the story is Devon C. Jones, a (fictional) Hall of Fame baseball player named for Morgan's childhood idol Devon White, Morgan's nephew, named Cordell (and who plays Devon in the photos), and Adam Jones, a current Black Major Leaguer. In **9 Bats**, we meet Devon long before he makes it to the show. He is a five-year-old boy, already brimming with confidence and the belief that he is capable of big things. He is practicing on an empty, suburban baseball field, and it's clear by his mannerisms — when's the last time you saw a five-year-old calling his shots? —

that he probably watches men play in the Major Leagues on TV just as much as he plays himself. Devon practices both hitting and pitching; unconstrained by the demands placed on older players to pick a position and stick to it, he hasn't quite figured out the way in which he's going to take on the baseball world just yet. Regardless, he brings a laser-sharp focus to his game that isn't always characteristic of young ballplayers.

9 Bats takes place on the day Devon is presented with his very first bat. When it comes to baseball mythology, much has been written about the experience of getting one's first glove, but there is something about being gifted a bat that is just as, if not more special. Having your own bat makes it that much easier to work on hitting outside of team practices and games. You can get properly acquainted with it and discover its sweet spot — the place that, when you make contact, makes the cracking noise that tells everyone the ball is about to travel a long way. Understanding a bat is also crucial for pitchers, who make a living by trying to make sure the ball never connects with that sweet spot. Judging by how Devon stares in awe at the bat being handed to him in the first photo in the series, he, too, knows how special the moment is. You can almost see him getting carried away, thinking about how many hits he will send into the outfield grass wielding his new tool. The story is part of a nine-part series Morgan



Jalani Morgan, *No Hitter*, 2019.



Jalani Morgan, *The Gift*, 2019.

says is still undefined, in terms of whether it will focus on Devon from beginning to end, or branch out into different narratives and introduce other characters.

Devon isn't entirely alone on the field. There are adults there with him, including a woman who hands him the bat, and a man who catches as he practices pitching. And while those two Black adults were purposely inserted into Devon's story, their roles in his life haven't been defined by design. Morgan said he wanted to upend the idea that success is predicated on being a part of the nuclear, two-parent experience. In this case, they are simply two people who are invested in Devon's success and care about his experiences, a representation of the power of showing up and being present for a child.

The exhibition includes nine photos, video of Devon at work, Devon's uniform and bat, and a batting cage, complete with bats of varying sizes that Morgan has made himself out of Ontario Maple trees. The batting cage is there as a way to challenge the way gallery space is used — and Morgan figured there is nothing like playing what's widely referred to as a child's game to encourage people to interact with a space differently, and engage with his work culturally as much as they do visually.

Growing up, Morgan didn't see black kids as central characters in baseball stories. They exist — he cited Wesley Snipes as the speedy Willie Mays Hayes in the film *Major League*, as an example — but they were always adjacent to the main protagonists, represented in a limited way. And when it comes to Black Canadian baseball narratives, there is even less out there. In his research, he found that the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y. has barely anything. Same with the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame. The Negro Leagues Museum in Kansas City, while centered on Black stories, doesn't feature much Canadian content. With his work, Morgan attempts to realign those experiences, and present a fuller picture of the sport of baseball, and the Black people who enjoy it. Black people, and young Black people, most importantly, aren't necessarily seeing baseball through a lens that reminds them of themselves.

With no disrespect to the work the Negro Leagues did in providing Black baseball players with a place to play, there can be no conversation about Black role models and representation in baseball without mentioning Jackie Robinson. A formidable man and ballplayer, he became the first black man to play in Major League Baseball in 1947. According to the Society for American Baseball Research, the percentage of African Americans playing Major League Baseball grew



Jalani Morgan, *Devon Knows*, 2019.

steadily from Jackie's debut until the early 1970s. The percentage held steady at around 16 to 19 per cent for about 25 years, from 1972 to 1996.¹ But since then, it has plummeted to less than half that amount. *USA Today* did the math — on opening day this year, 68 out of 882 people on MLB rosters were African American. That's 7.7 per cent of players.² Young Devon, and Black children like him, are part of a segment of the population that is increasingly disappearing within the sport.

That same article asked one of the biggest Black baseball stars in recent years, Ken Griffey Jr., for his thoughts on the phenomenon. He chalked it up to an image problem — that Black kids left baseball or just aren't interested in the sport because football and basketball have done a better job at marketing the fun, entertaining aspects of their sports. There's also the cost; these days, playing baseball at a level that will eventually get you on the radar of MLB scouts can come with a price tag that is prohibitive for some families.

Regardless of the reason, the fact remains: when young players like Devon turn on their TVs to watch a Major League Baseball game, they aren't seeing that many people like them. And Black ballplayers are less and less likely to have teammates who look like them — an experience Morgan said he can relate to on a personal level, remembering his own experiences. He believes

part of the solution is to create more work that communicates the stories of Black baseball players and fans, work that allows them to see themselves in the spaces they occupy or want to occupy, and that normalizes an experience that they are having, but in many cases, that they are having alone. "I'm up to the task of doing that work, and it's urgent for me because time is long, for sure, but time is short, and I want to make sure I do as much as I can within the baseball narrative."³

Thing is, none of these issues are weighing on Devon's mind just yet. He is out on that field because he would wear his uniform every day, if he could. He loves the crunch of the crushed brick beneath his cleats. He sleeps with his glove under his pillow and lives for the feeling he gets when his bat connects with the ball and it sails away. He is busy, playing the game he loves.



Jalani Morgan, *Just Me & My Bat*, 2019.



Jalani Morgan, *We Fall Down*, 2019.

ENDNOTES

1. Armour, Mark, and Daniel R Levitt. "Baseball Demographics, 1947-2016." Society for American Baseball Research. Accessed September 15, 2019. <https://sabr.org/bioproj/topic/baseball-demographics-1947-2012>.
2. Nightengale, Bob. "'It's a Baseball Problem': MLB Redoubles Its Efforts as Sport's Black Population Remains Low." *USA Today*, April 14, 2019. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/mlb/columnist/bob-nightengale/2019/04/14/african-american-mlb-players-baseball-jackie-robinson/3465999002/>.
3. Morgan, Jalani. Interview by Kamila Hinkson. Personal interview. Montreal, September 16. 2019.

This essay accompanies **9 Bats**, works by Jalani Morgan, at the Doris McCarthy Gallery from September 24 - November 30, 2019.

Kamila Hinkson is a journalist at CBC Montreal. But above all, she is an avid baseball fan.

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