

Discussion of Blackness in Wrestling

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Abstract : The wrestling territories of the mid-twentieth century in the United States are widely considered the birthplace of modern professional wrestling, and by many professional wrestlers, to be a beacon of hope for the easing of racial tensions during the civil rights era and beyond. The performers writing on this period speak of racial equality but fail to acknowledge the exploitation of black athletes as a racialized capital commodity who suffered the challenges of systemic racism, codified by a false narrative of aspirational exceptionalism and equality measured by audience diversity. The promoters' ability to equate racial and capital exploitation with equality leads to a broader discussion of the history of Muscular Christianity in the United States and the exploitation of black bodies. Narratives of racial erasure that dominate the historical discourse when examining athleticism and exceptionalism redefined how blackness existed and how physicality and race are conceived of in sport and entertainment spaces. When discussing the implications of race and professional wrestling, it is important to examine the role of promotions as 'imagined communities' where the social agency of wrestlers is defined and quantified based on their 'desired elements' as a performer. The intentionally vague nature of this language masks a deep history of racialization that has been perpetuated by promoters and never fully examined by scholars. Sympathetic racism and the omission of cultural identity are also key factors in the limitations and racial barriers placed upon black athletes in the squared circle. The use of sympathetic racism within professional wrestling during the twentieth century defined black athletes into two distinct categorizations, the 'black savage' or the 'black minstrel'. Black wrestlers of the twentieth century were defined by their strength as a capital commodity and their physicality rather than their knowledge of the business and in-ring skill. These performers had little agency in their ability to shape their own character development inside and outside the ring. Promoters would often create personas that heavily racialized the performer by tying them to a regional past or memory, such as that of slavery in the deep south using dog collar matches and adoring black characters in chains. Promoters softened cultural memory by satirizing the historic legacy of slavery and the black identity.

Keywords : sympathetic racism, social agency, racial commodification, stereotyping

Conference Title : ICSRD 2020 : International Conference on Scientific Research and Development

Conference Location : Chicago, United States

Conference Dates : December 12-13, 2020