

RACE AND GENDER: INTERSECTIONS

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Separating the ‘Men’ from the ‘Boys’: The Inscription of Race and Masculinity into the Players’ Labor Movement and the Formation of Baseball’s Color Line, 1880-1890

This paper explores the historical impact that contemporary discourses on race, masculinity, and labor had on the process that culminated in the exile of African-American players from professional baseball’s elite leagues between 1880 and 1890. Focusing on elite leagues, including higher minor leagues, it examines the ideas that supported racial exclusivity and argues that these were emblematic of what was occurring in the wider society. Industrialization reconfigured the shape of American society and labor relations in this era and the consolidation of capital among the barons of industry greatly affected how labor perceived its own situation, regardless of race and/or ethnicity. But the implementation of baseball’s color line in this period showed that race did, indeed, matter.

This study links baseball’s color line with the players’ movement that followed. It explores the ways in which players who participated in the Brotherhood of Professional Base Ball Players articulated their grievances and rights as professionals and highly skilled craftsmen in racial and gendered terms.

An examination of baseball’s place within nineteenth-century American culture reveals some apparent contradictions, particularly when it is viewed through racial and class perspectives. Among these contradictions was the idea that recreation was a way to inculcate a strong work ethic, that sport was a professional livelihood, and that social equality on the field might translate into off-field social and racial equality. The perception arose that baseball diamonds could serve as transformative (and performative) social spaces where anyone from the nation’s youth to immigrants could learn ‘American’ ways and beliefs, and also how to be a ‘man.’ For those who adhered to these notions, the national pastime ultimately separated the ‘men’ from the ‘boys.’

Baseball’s color line, along with player labor agitation brought together ideas about the game’s masculine-affirming capacity and concerns about the impact of social

and racial factors on the status of the independent laborer. Firmly in place by 1889, the color line juxtapositioned ideas of race and masculinity in such a way as to ensure that entry into the professional game's highest level was predicated not by performance, but was over-determined by race. This paper argues that the exclusion of non-white players boosted white players' claims in their revolt against harsh work terms of the late 1880s such as the reserve rule. It further argues that white players' complaints about undeserved racialized treatment and "white wage slavery" at the hands of management were predicated on preventing black players from performing in the same professional leagues.

Such rhetoric did not connote solidarity with the recently departed black players, but rather asserted racial and gender-based privilege. The implementation of professional baseball's color line was critical to white players' ability to build their argument against labor exploitation and to validate their status as privileged racial and masculine subjects.

The paper uses the sporting press, local newspapers and material gathered from individual players' biographical files from the National Baseball Library's archival holdings.