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Professional Wrestling's "Attitude" Adjustment: WWF Programming, Realism, and the Representation of Race During the Neoliberal Nineties

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Professional Wrestling's "Attitude" Adjustment: WWF Programming, Realism, and the Representation of Race During the Neoliberal Nineties

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Dedication

To Allison, who has borne patient witness to every iteration of this document and the mind responsible for it. Without you, none of this would be possible.

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Abstract

Professional Wrestling's "Attitude" Adjustment: WWF Programming, Realism, and the Representation of Race During the Neoliberal Nineties

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The WWE, formerly known as the World Wrestling Federation (WWF), has a long history of showcasing harmful stereotypes via hyperracialized characters. Many academics have observed these characters and the overarching types to which they can be assigned as being indicative of the respective sociohistorical conditions in which they were produced. During the mid-to-late nineties, the WWF embarked upon a re-branding effort focused on adopting a new "Attitude" that purported to offer a more "realistic" form of "sports entertainment." Throughout this "Attitude Era" the WWF purposely obfuscated delineations between fact and fiction, and subsequently, performers and racialized performance. Set against the backdrop of the neoliberal nineties, then – a period when America was supposedly embracing multiculturalism, the "welfare state" had been discarded in favor of fiscal conservatism, and possessive individualism catapulted to paramount importance – in what ways did the hyperracialized characters and storylines of the WWF Attitude Era reflect contemporary American cultural attitudes toward race? This study seeks to answer this question by incorporating historiographical

work, industrial discourse analysis, and textual readings to analyze the representation of race in WWF programming of the late nineties. Utilizing an ideological textual analysis to understand how weekly episodes of *Monday Night Raw* and monthly pay-per-view events that aired during the years of 1997-1999 embodied and reified certain values, beliefs, and ideas, this project will look to the cultural, industrial, and political discourses circulating during the 1990s to show how they intersect with the WWF programming of the period.

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Introduction

> *"It is not enough to say that art is constructed. We have to ask: Constructed for whom? And in conjunction with which ideologies and discourses?"*
>
> – Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1994, 180)

> *"In short, wrestling embodies the American populist tradition. The politics of WWF wrestling is punchdrunk and rambunctious, yet it builds upon authentic anger and frustrations which we cannot ignore if we want to understand the state of contemporary American culture."*
>
> – Henry Jenkins (1997, 64)

After a rapid burst of flashy pyrotechnics, a funky bass-line emanates from the public address system of Chicago's Rosemont Horizon Center, indicating the imminent arrival of wrestler Flash Funk for his match at the World Wrestling Federation's (WWF) Wrestlemania XIII in 1997. As fans in the arena rise to their feet, two scantily clad black women – The Funkettes – dance their way through an elaborately constructed entryway and position themselves to announce the popular performer's entrance. Garbed in a broad-brimmed white fedora, purple fur coat, and shimmering silver boots, Funk dances past his female escorts, keeping time with the beat of his entrance music as he makes his way to the ring. The crowd demonstrates their appreciation with cheers of approval and high-fives, clearly marking Flash Funk as a *babyface*, wrestling parlance for 'good guy.' Funk proceeds to wrestle, and ultimately lose his match against the white cowboy *heel* ('bad guy'), Billy Gunn. While it can certainly be argued that wins and losses matter little in the scripted performance of sports entertainment, it must be stressed that fan adoration of a losing black man who is portrayed as a Huggy Bear-esque, "grinning and dancing Negro," reinforces the highly problematic cultural practice of presenting and consuming

racialized stereotypes. Equally disconcerting is the fact that Flash Funk is but one character among a long lineage of racially and ethnically stereotyped WWF "superstars."

During the early '90s, the 6'7" 400-pound black man James Harris of Mississippi performed in the WWF as "Kamala, the Ugandan Giant." Clad only in a loincloth and "tribal" face paint, Kamala was inarticulate and announcers intimated him to be a cannibal. Several years prior, the 500-pound Samoan man Rodney Anoa'i portrayed Yokozuna, a Japanese sumo wrestler, by donning a kimono, wearing his hair in a topknot, and speaking broken English. In the late '80s, Mike Jones became known as Virgil, the black bodyguard for "millionaire" white wrestler Ted DiBiase. Virgil was less a bodyguard and more a manservant, carrying DiBiase's bags, bearing the brunt of DiBiase's verbal abuse, and even cleaning DiBiase's shoes. During the '70s, Italian-American Joseph Scarpa donned a traditional Native American headdress and would frequently "go on the warpath" as Chief Jay Strongbow. New Jersey resident Robert Marella was billed as Gorilla Monsoon during the '60s, and was identified as a Manchurian "gorilla" who ate his opponent's flesh and drank their blood.

While we might distance ourselves from these troublesome representations of race by citing a temporal remove – "It was a different time" or "We've moved past that" – these defensive claims to varied sociohistorical contexts should give us pause when considering the era in which a character like Flash Funk garnered fanfare. The World Wrestling Federation was reaching the apex of its popularity during this time, a success that many academics and journalists have attributed to an organizational re-branding effort known as "WWF Attitude" launched in 1997. During this "Attitude Era" of the

WWF, television ratings peaked and profits soared, all while the WWF's new Attitude promotion deliberately intensified the degree to which the line between reality and fantasy was obfuscated in its programming. While the WWF specifically and professional wrestling in general have long blurred the distinction between truth and fiction, the fact that these "more realistic" characters and storylines were set against the backdrop of the neoliberal nineties – a period when America was supposedly embracing multiculturalism while non-white and lower class citizens suffered as the "welfare state" was dismantled in favor of fiscal conservatism, and a reconstituted investment in the rhetoric of individual liberties became an important tool in further marginalizing these members of society – their very constructedness raises an important question which this study seeks to answer: In what ways were the hyperracialized characters in the WWF connected to contemporary American cultural attitudes toward race during the late nineties? Also, how did the WWF's close relationship with the medium of television impact the practices of racial representation during the Attitude Era?

This project seeks to answer these questions through a hybrid methodology, incorporating cultural historiography, an analysis of industrial discourse, and an ideological textual analysis. Mimi White defines this last analytical method as being

> based on the assumption that cultural artifacts – literature, film, television, and so forth – are produced in specific historical contexts, by and for specific social groups. […] Because they are created in socially and historically specific contexts, cultural artifacts are seen as expressing and promoting values, beliefs, and ideas in relation to the contexts in which they are produced, distributed, and received (1992, 122).

An ideological analysis therefore aims to understand how a cultural text such as a television program embodies and reifies certain values, beliefs, and ideas through an examination of the text in relation to its historical and social context. In this sense, the study follows the guidelines for research in the realm of cultural studies, as outlined by Julie D'Acci (2004), and which have long been utilized by scholars looking to study representational practices in media (Shohat and Stam 1994; Gray 1995; Hall 1997; Berg 2002). This project will look to the cultural, industrial, and political discourses circulating during the 1990s in an attempt to understand how they intersect with the WWF programming of the period, specifically weekly episodes of *Monday Night Raw* and monthly pay-per-view events which aired during the years of 1997-1999. While the methodological approach undertaken in this study will be detailed more specifically in the penultimate section of this Introduction, it warrants mentioning here that the episodes airing during the years of 1997-1999 were selected for textual analysis for two reasons: first, they were broadcast amidst the cultural and racial anxieties of the neoliberal nineties, and as such, reveal noteworthy connections to a specific, privileged discourse; and second, they are representative texts of an extremely popular television program, which the WWF utilized to execute a re-branding effort that brought about unmatched success for the company.

Though the first and second chapters of this study offer a more complete history of the WWF, an overview provided here via Figure 1.1 supplies a brief but necessary orientation for the analysis that follows. The timeline presented below covers the chronological history of the WWF, from its inception as Capitol Wrestling Corporation in

1952, to its WWF Attitude re-branding efforts of the late-nineties. The history has been broken down into five key periods (each will be explored in greater detail in Chapter Two), which appear in red. Also throughout the chart, key moments in the company's history concerning the television industry have been included – highlighted in blue – in order to foreground the WWF's intimate relationship with this mass medium of representation (See Figure 1.1 on page 6).

Though the WWF's intractable 50-year-long history of presenting its fans with racially stereotyped characters has received a modicum of scholarly attention, most of this work has been performed by academics analyzing practices of racial and ethnic stereotyping that predated the mid-nineties (Jenkins 1997; Maguire and Wozniak 1987; Morton and O'Brien 1985). A standout among these works is Henry Jenkins's "Never Trust a Snake," wherein he posits: "The appeal to racial stereotyping, which had its progressive dimensions in the creation of champions for various oppressed minorities, resurfaces here [the 1980s and early-1990s] in a profound xenophobia. Arab wrestlers are ruthless, Asian wrestlers are fiendishly inscrutable or massive and immovable" (2005, 61).

Figure 1.1: Timeline of the World Wrestling Federation (1952-1999).

More recent studies focused on analyzing the WWF – changed to WWE in early 2002[1] – from an industrial-economic perspective have devoted only cursory attention to the topic of race and ethnicity when discussing the globalized product now offered by the WWE (Butryn 2012). Of these works, the linkages observed by Battema and Sewell (2005) are noteworthy for addressing the way in which variegated WWF character types of the late-nineties reflected and reified Bush-era masculinist and capitalist policies. Battema and Sewell thus echo the analysis previously offered by Jenkins, in that the performance and presentation of WWF characters and storylines are seen to be cultural products of their respective sociohistorical contexts.

A glaring gap between these two points, however, is manifest through the lack of scholarly analysis concerned with understanding the connection of the WWF's practices of racial and ethnic representation to the dominant cultural discourses circulating in mid-to-late nineties America. Marc Leverette, writing in *Professional Wrestling: The Myth, the Mat, and American Popular Culture,* appears poised to fill this gap, resuming where Jenkins left off: "Our battles with Russia and Iran were now a fading memory. In a climate filled with prevalent multiculturalism, we had no enemies left to fight" (2003, 159). Yet Leverette doesn't recommence, in any significant way, the critical task of analyzing the racialized markers these new villains would be forced to assume during this multiculturalist and neoliberal climate. Elucidating what lies within this rupture, therefore, is the main goal of this study. This imperative necessitates more than the simple identification of wrestling stereotypes, and thus the flattening of their varied

meanings and readings. It is the ideological cultural function served by these representations of race that this project is interested in assessing, and will therefore require a familiarity with the work of other scholars who have similarly studied and problematized televisual representations in relation to broader cultural discourse.

Examining Racial Representation

With the aforementioned goal of this study being to understand the manner in which the characters and storylines of WWF programming were connected to contemporary cultural attitudes toward race in America, this project is first and foremost situated within the wider field of cultural studies, specifically work conducted by academics seeking to examine racial representations in media. As such, the ensuing analysis will benefit first from a brief summary of several canonical texts that are concerned with questions of racial and ethnic representation. While the works of such scholars as Stuart Hall (1997), Charles Ramirez-Berg (2002), Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1994), and Herman Gray (1995) indeed provide the foundation upon which this study has been conducted, the analyses proffered in these last two texts have been particularly beneficial to consider while focusing this study on the mediated representation of race constructed to be more "realistic," presented via the medium of television.

In their 1994 book, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam critique the titular concept of Eurocentrism as a construct that "sanitizes Western history while patronizing and even demonizing the non-West; it thinks of itself in terms of its noblest achievements […] but of the non-West in terms of its deficiencies, real or

imagined" (1994, 3). Concerned largely with the media's role in perpetuating this cultural discourse, Shohat and Stam look primarily to cinema in order to problematize the ethnic and racial representation practices that prolong the legacy of Eurocentrism and consequently marginalize the cultural investment in the ideal of multiculturalism. Accordingly, the authors caution against what they see as the tendency to examine these images in a "corrective" manner, seeking out depictions which adhere to a perceived notion of "reality," and admonishing those which neglect "accuracy." As Shohat and Stam state, ""Filmic fictions inevitably bring into play real-life assumptions not only about space and time but also about social and cultural relationships […] While on one level film is mimesis, representation, it is also utterance […] In this sense, art is a representation not so much in a mimetic as a political sense, as a delegation of voice" (1994, 179-180). The academic study of racial and ethnic representation, as Shohat and Stam describe it, is not concerned with a "truth" per se, but rather with what a particular mode of representation or a specific image is meant to convey, provided a specific sociohistorical context and the audience's subjective positioning.

Shohat and Stam also warn of the pitfalls that these analyses may suffer if they delve too deeply into excessive categorization of simple stereotypes. "The exclusive preoccupation with images," the authors observe, "can lead to a kind of *essentialism*, as less subtle critics reduce a complex variety of portrayals to a limited set of reified formulae… the analysis tends to be static, not allowing for mutations, metamorphoses, changes of valence, altered function; it ignores the historical instability of the stereotype and even of language" (1994, 199). To avoid these essentializing entanglements, Shohat

and Stam find that analyses of representation need to consider "mediations," encompassing the narrative structure, genre conventions, and cinematic aesthetics and mise-en-scene, all of which can be understood to translate social power "into registers of foreground and background, on screen and off screen, speech and silence" (1994, 208). While attention to these matters certainly bears emphasis when studying representational practices in film, we might question the importance of aesthetics and mise-en-scene to the study of representation in television. As such, we should include the *medium* through which these images are presented as an additional criterion to consider when approaching an analysis of racial representation.

One of the most comprehensive works to offer an analysis of mediated representations of race appearing during a particular period and via a specific medium, Herman Gray's *Watching Race* provides a detailed and succinct guide to understanding the meaning and function of African American images produced and consumed via commercial television. Gray's analysis offers one of the most complete approaches to the analysis of meaning at the core of televisual representation by following the prescriptions of Shohat and Stam, and considering the sociohistorical context in which mediated images are produced. The goal of studying racial representations, as Gray defines it, is not simply to point to those characters, images, or signifiers that are good versus bad, or positive versus negative. Rather, the aim is to expose how singular discourses – those of the dominant social order – circulating in culture at large are privileged in mediated representations. As such, the television text – which, as John Fiske argues, is intrinsically polysemic (1987, 15) – must be read and understood in conversation with a wider breadth

of discourses. As Gray states, "The progressive, reactionary, and contradictory character of a program, representation, and image is historically and socially determined rather than politically guaranteed by the text" (1995, 9). This project thus examines WWF programming of the late nineties as a televisual text positioned in dialogue with various contemporary discourses, and seeks to examine the articulation of race within these programs in relation to the historical, industrial, and political contexts in which they were produced.

A second crucial way in which Gray's study provides a precedent for future examinations of racial representation in television is through its emphasis on the mass medium of television as site of construction, circulation, and reification of dominant cultural discourse. Since WWF "Attitude Era" programming of the late nineties brought about unprecedented ratings and financial successes for the WWF – indicating a heightened popularity with a large section of the television-viewing audience – this study posits that this programming is an important component to the television medium's operation as a repository and distributor of cultural discourse. As such, the function of WWF programming as a key text in this process raises an important question with regard to its representation of race, posed here by Gray with specific attention to "blackness" as racial signifier:

> The issue remains just how American society, through its dominant commercial institutions of representations, constructs, organizes, and represents blackness in the dominant popular imagination. In other words, how do our central institutions of representation (produced through rejection, appropriation, and marginalization) generally reconcile the presence of blackness with the American political, social, and cultural experience? (1995, 3)

Gray's view of television as a "dominant commercial institution of representation" thus leads to his subsequent questioning of television's role in marginalizing blackness vis-à-vis white cultural hegemony. This project is equally concerned with this notion, and will contemplate questions of marginalization through an examination of the characters and storylines of WWF Attitude Era programming.

The final aspect of Gray's analysis that provides an excellent framework for the study of televisual representations of race is its methodological approach to researching the subject. As Gray observes of his study, "…it deliberately combines and appreciates the insights of social history, institutional analysis, textual readings, and the social locations of audiences" (1995, 11). This project will likewise consider the circuit of these categories in its analysis of the representation of race in WWF programming of the late nineties. While the precise methods employed in this study will be expanded upon in the methodology section below, the approach briefly warrants mention here for the motive behind its implementation. That is, through examining racial representation via the incorporation of an inclusive methodology, this study will more fully consider the varied readings possible of WWF programming, while still showing what or whose discourse the WWF's representation of race is invested in buttressing.

While I build on much of Gray's work, several important distinctions must also be made between his study and the project at hand. Chiefly, as Gray talks about the representation of race with near total regard to blackness in opposition to whiteness, this study will address representation in relation to African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and various ethnicities vis-à-vis cultural signs of

whiteness. Like Gray's, this project focuses on an object of study positioned in a decade "rich with struggles, debates, and transformations in race relations, electronic media, cultural politics, and economic life" (1995, 2). Writing in the nineties, though, Gray couldn't yet discern the transformations still occurring in late-1980s and early-1990s America, nor how racial signifiers continued to be constructed, performed, and struggled over. A longer temporal gap between this study and its object of professional wrestling texts of the late-nineties should allow for a fuller consideration of the social, institutional, and political discourses of the time.

Academic Studies of Professional Wrestling

The literature review performed and contained herein cites and presents key bodies of academic work according to the degree to which they attempt to provide an understanding of the ideological functions of hyperracialized characters in the WWF, and how these representations of race are connected to broader contemporary American cultural attitudes. The review consists, therefore, of an overview of the scholarly research on professional wrestling, with texts roughly organized into one of two categories determined according to their main academic approach to the subject and arranged in chronological order: studies that focus on analyzing professional wrestling as a ritual, mythic, or cultural spectacle; and studies that purport to offer analysis of the professional wrestling practice of racial and ethnic stereotyping. With Gray's prescriptions for the study of representation in mind, this latter category of literature represents a key precursor to the more complex process of examining racial representation in professional wrestling with which this project is concerned.

Professional Wrestling as Ritual, Mythic, and Cultural Spectacle

Based upon its frequent inclusion within the literature reviews of nearly every academic analysis of professional wrestling published in its wake, Roland Barthes' 1957 essay, "The World of Wrestling," would easily be considered the academic text that marks the foray into the scholarly study of the subject. While many of Barthes' observations about the "spectacle" of professional wrestling continue to surface in recent popular published works (Hedges 2009; Shoemaker 2013), this longevity has not always been accompanied with a deft understanding of Barthes' proposition. That is, Barthes observed wrestling to be a spectacle of "Suffering, Defeat, and Justice," with suffering signified by the placing of an opponent in a wrestling "hold" intended to establish the appearance and condition of prolonged pain; defeat signified not by a losing outcome, but the duration of pain suffered; and justice signified not by a single victory, but in a pattern of compensation that might be seen as "eye for an eye" (1957, 18-21). As Barthes prescribes this semiotic approach, professional wrestling must provide an immediate legibility through these and all other signs of its spectacle.

While Barthes includes mention of both the wrestler's body and his or her gestures as additional signs most obviously imbued with meaning in the spectacle of professional wrestling, he stops short of addressing racial difference as an aspect of the signifying process, focusing instead on differences of grotesquery or deformity. This oversight could be the result of Barthes' cultural positioning as an observer of French wrestling rather than, as he defines it, the "quasi-political" American style (1957, 22). Alluding to the construction of its villains as communists and non-citizens, Barthes views

American wrestling as a "mythological fight between Good and Evil," but he fails to expand on the use of nationality or ethnicity as signifier in this regard (1957, 23). As the starting point for many subsequent studies of American wrestling, these later examinations often resume the analysis of wrestling-as-spectacle precisely where Barthes ends his conversation, omitting the mention of race or ethnicity.

In *Wrestling to Rasslin: Ancient Sport to American Spectacle*, Gerald Morton and George O'Brien offer a "generally descriptive" historical account of professional wrestling, upon which later studies could build critiques of "this very interesting manifestation of popular culture" (1985, 2). In their extensive historical examination of wrestling dating back to Grecian times, the authors devote significant attention to professional wrestling's theatrical roots, incorporating Barthes' view of American professional wrestling as a morality play pitting good against evil (1985, 104), while also emphasizing the importance of grandiose stage-like theatrics to the intelligibility of the spectacles of suffering and gesture (1985, 114). Though they do update this discussion to consider the preponderance of television technology and its mutually beneficial partnership with professional wrestling programs subsequent to the publication of Barthes' essay, they hesitate to stray from a consideration of technology that focuses solely on spectacle. They thus neglect to provide any insight as to how the introduction of television affected the presentation of racialized wrestling characters and/or performers identifying as non-white. Were these characters and performers more or less prevalent on television screens than they were at live events? How might the presentation or omission

of these characters from television have been related to regional broadcasting or performing policies and customs?

While Morton and O'Brien fail to consider these questions, they do provide a substantial expansion of Barthes' discussion of "Good and Evil," offering an analysis that signals the first academic attempt to consider race/ethnicity/nationality in relation to professional wrestling's heroes and villains. In spite of an impressively expansive typology of hero and villain sub-categories, however, race or ethnicity is explicitly mentioned in only two of them: the Evil Foreigner and the Minority Hero types (1985; 130, 151). Ultimately, Morton and O'Brien use the hero-villain dichotomy to posit that American professional wrestling operates as a form of American ritual, the appeal of which rests in its ability to serve "as a method for society to deal with the social crises it faces" (1985, 163). It does so, according to the authors, by "prov[ing] that villains can be defeated, that heroes who embody good American ideals can win and that, whatever else, determination and dedication can and do triumph over deceit and treachery" (1985, 164). Though an interesting thesis, these assertions lack credibility due to the fact that the authors have provided only a historical and occasionally semiotic study of professional wrestling. To arrive at a conclusion such as theirs imposes a single meaning upon the wrestling texts, negating the varied social and political conditions under which they were produced, and within which conditions audiences are positioned.

In *Professional Wrestling: The Myth, the Mat, and American Popular Culture*, Marc Leverette echoes these sentiments about wrestling's ability to help audiences realize that good can conquer evil, emphasizing its role as a myth-cultivating, ritualistic,

propagandizing, popular culture phenomenon. The goal of Leverette's study is to understand the symbolic function of professional wrestling, as he argues that the archetypal images present in wrestling performances and programming are used to shape the "imaginations and daily lives of the audience" (2003, 5). As this view would understand audiences to be relatively passive consumers of a wrestling text, it once again negates the varied social positioning of viewers, and therefore the possibility for multiple understandings.

Though Leverette offers a vague discussion of the mythic appropriation of "social struggles brought on by gender, class, and race," he never offers a complete analysis of the appeal in the presentation of these struggles (2003, 50). Because his study remains far too macro-level to consider these marginalized audiences and the varied interpretations available to them, he is thus never able to fully problematize the dominant discourses he finds manifest in wrestling texts. That is, because he doesn't discuss those audiences who – based on their social positioning – would not read into these texts the preferred, dominant meaning, he fails to reveal who and what this meaning privileges. In short, he participates in the further normalization of the hegemonic discourse.

The discussion of myth and ritual is undoubtedly important to the understanding of professional wrestling as text of popular entertainment. It allows for the consideration of why certain actions come to be expected of heroes rather than villains and vice versa. An awareness of wrestling as myth and ritual allows us to understand why audiences are so passionate to see heroes surmount defeat and suffering. These discussions should not be held in a sociological and political vacuum, though, as myth accounts for only a

portion of a wrestling text's meaning. As society and culture changes, discourses evolve, and as a vehicle through which social, cultural, and political discourses are disseminated, television programs such as those offered by the WWF need to be more closely scrutinized to understand who benefits from the circulation of the mediated representation of the discourses contained therein.

Professional Wrestling and the Practice of Stereotyping

One of the problems that remains largely unobserved in each of the above texts is the role race and ethnicity play in marking heroes and villains. Sociologists Brendan Maguire and John Wozniak discuss this topic in their examination of professional wrestling as equal parts "play" and "display" in their 1987 essay, "Racial & Ethnic Stereotypes in Professional Wrestling." The authors acknowledge that all professional sports "rely on the instant identifiability of persons and/or teams into good guys/bad guys" and proceed to argue that the use of racial and ethnic stereotyping in order to do so "is far more pronounced in professional wrestling than any other sport" (Maguire and Wozniak 1987, 264). Provided they conducted their content analysis of televised professional wrestling over a 12-month period, and included in this review six weekly shows, several live events, and bi-monthly wrestling publications, Maguire and Wozniak's findings are both exhaustive and shocking: a black wrestler referred to as "a monkey, a gorilla"; another black wrestler portraying a "Ugandan cannibal"; and yet another, referred to as Junkyard Dog, depicted wearing a collar and chain.

While these are only some of the observations noted by Maguire and Wozniak, their concerns about the frequency with which professional wrestling relies on racial and

ethnic stereotyping nevertheless seems fairly grounded. As they observe, "The appeal of stereotypes is rooted with the desire to satisfy *universal subjective needs*… human actors have a phenomenological need for determining good and evil, creating a stable sense of social reality, and promoting ego satisfaction" (Maguire and Wozniak 1987, 267). Through the representative practices described by Maguire and Wozniak, we can see each of these needs being satisfied in the construction of professional wrestling characters as racial and ethnic stereotypes.

Maguire and Wozniak also discuss the social-psychological processes of projection and displacement, explaining, "To project one's own responsibility for failure on an ethnic group may go a long way to repair ego damage. Projection and displacement, however, have a more tenuous status in a society that explicitly denounces racial and ethnic prejudice and discrimination […] The need is there but outlets are scarce. Wrestling provides such an outlet" (1987, 269). Indeed, as neoliberalist discourse circulating during the nineties projected and displaced blame for a culture of poverty onto a welfare system that failed to instill a sense of personal responsibility, WWF storylines appealing to a "responsibility of the self" offered ample outlets for audiences to sympathize with "responsible" whites vis-à-vis "undeserving" non-whites. While Leverette, too, touches on the phenomena of projection and displacement, his is a Neo-Gramscian economic approach wherein he finds, "The alienated audience is thus presented with a compelling drama that explains the cause of their anomie and is offered a refuge, the WWF universe, where their need to be members of a community, both respected and important, is satisfied" (2003, 169). Leverette finds the appeal of the WWF

performances during the nineties deeply rooted in the master/subordinate relationship between the owner of a company and their employees. This observation overlooks the possibility of underlying racial tensions brought on by the social and political conditions of the decade, and he therefore neglects to explicate how the hyperracialized WWF characters during the nineties were augmented in consideration of these discourses.

Building on the work of Maguire and Wozniak, scholar Michael Ball's analysis of wrestling stereotypes reveals the shifting terrain on which they are situated: "Historically, wrestling has progressed through transitional phases corresponding to changes in technology and bureaucratic control. The nature of the ritual drama and the stereotypes have changed with time […] today's figures present clichéd stereotypes corresponding to contemporary social problems" (Ball 1990, 159). As Ball understands the practice of racial and ethnic stereotyping, then, it is a process of iteration punctuated by changes spurred on by the fluctuation of discourse in the culture at large.

For example, a stereotype that has persisted throughout the history of professional wrestling, the "Foreign Menace," is one that Ball describes as a character who represents a perceived threat to America. Surveying the depictions of Russians in the WWF, Ball explains that, while a character may once have been represented as a "Rasputin-like character with magical powers, he or she is currently [in the late '80s/early '90s] represented as a Communist with strong political beliefs" (1990, 85). In order to keep pace with the global political climate, the Foreign Menace also encompassed nationalities that were perceived to pose more contemporary threats during the late 1980s, with the Iranian Iron Sheik and the Chinese Tiger Chung Lee representing what Ball labels the

"New Menace." Expanding this lineage of stereotypes through the neoliberal nineties, this study will detail the transition from New Menace to what this project defines as the "Domestic Menace." By identifying characters of this type whose stereotyped behavior is informed by neoliberalist discourse of the nineties, the study will show how such a character is both similar to and different from other prior menaces in its posing a perceived *homegrown* threat to America.

Written during the dawn of the WWF Attitude Era in 1997, Henry Jenkins' "Never Trust a Snake" echoes the observations of Ball, most notably in the passage included in the epigraph of this introduction. If, as Jenkins says, WWF wrestling "builds upon authentic anger and frustrations," then this practice would certainly extend to its methods of stereotyping and consequently its representation of race (1997, 64). This study will seek to prove the assertion that WWF stereotypes are indeed built upon contemporary cultural angst, for, as evidenced by the inclusion of the Flash Funk character among the roster of Attitude-era wrestlers, stereotyping race remained a common practice in the WWF during the period of expanding multiculturalism in the nineties. Critical race scholars Clint Wilson and Felix Gutierrez address the use of stereotyping as a literary and dramatic device to "quickly [bring] to the audience's collective consciousness a character's anticipated value system and/or behavioral expectations. Audience members are then able to assess the character against their own value systems and categorize the character as, for example, 'the villain' or 'the heroine'" (1995, 61). Reiterating the findings of Maguire and Wozniak, this type of short cut to character development is highly problematic in the context of a narrative environment

wherein the distinction between reality and fiction was purposely obscured, as during the WWF Attitude Era.

Methodology and Chapter Overview

Seeking to illustrate the manner in which the WWF product was inflected by American cultural attitudes toward race during the neoliberal nineties, this study utilizes the integrated methodology prescribed by Julie D'Acci (2004). Under D'Acci's definition, each site of analysis incorporated in a circuit of media study approach necessarily includes a focus on issues of representation. As such, this project incorporates historiographical work, industrial discourse analysis, and textual readings to analyze the representation of race in WWF programming. As the textual analysis will be accomplished primarily through an ideological reading of weekly *WWF Monday Night Raw* (*Raw*) broadcasts and various WWF pay-per-views, due to time limitations, this study will examine only the broadcast years of 1997-1999. Though a complete analysis of the 192 episodes viewed cannot be provided in its entirety, every effort has been taken to ensure an appropriate sampling of content and representational practice is included in this study. While still falling within the earliest years of America's sweeping neoliberalist discourse, the episodes included in this 1997-1999 range also encompass the WWF's Attitude re-branding. As mentioned, this was a period of surging popularity and heightened realism for the WWF, and as a key representative text of a "dominant commercial institution," the programming should thus provide for a richer analysis of the representation of race in television of the late nineties. As such, the storylines and characters discussed in this study will be placed in sociohistorical context with those

major cultural events and policies they attempted to annex. The representations of race in WWF programming will then be analyzed to show how they preferred and privileged a dominant meaning over all others.

A notable omission from this study is a comprehensive analysis of the role played by gender within the world of professional wrestling. To provide for ample consideration of the primary focus of the project, practices of racial representation, it became necessary to bypass a more nuanced examination of the depiction of gender roles within WWF programming. However, there remains an important overlap between gender and racial representation woven throughout this study insofar as we can understand professional wrestling as adhering to, and reinforcing traditional ideals of masculinity. As Patrice Oppliger observes in her study of professional wrestling and hypermasculinity, "wrestling is about physical violence and hostile verbal exchanges. Wrestling culture likewise rejects typical feminine traits such as caring and cooperation" (2004, 63). Along these same lines, the non-white characters in WWF programming frequently recall stereotypical notions of masculine non-white athletes as greedy, selfish, ungrateful, and borderline-criminal to such an extent that Sut Jhally has argued that the connection between being a non-white man and being violent is particularly strong in the realm of professional wrestling as compared to other media (*Tough Guise*, 2004). As masculinity is referenced throughout the study, it will behoove us to recall the traditional gender-racial roles that non-white characters are confined to in the WWF.

Chapter One of the study begins by returning to the WWF's origins in order to chart the historical usage of racial and ethnic stereotypes. This better enables us to

identify historical breaks where the articulation of stereotypes in relation to certain ideological meanings can be decoded. While the attendant cultural contexts for these constructions of race will bear major emphasis, so too will the influence of television, as its adoption in broadcasting wrestling bouts proves crucial in mediating the representations of race produced within the WWF. With a keen understanding of how wrestling stereotypes have routinely been predicated on a given sociohistorical condition, the chapter will then turn to a period in wrestling's history that has received only a modicum of academic attention with regard to racial representations: the 1990s. The associations between WWF kayfabe and cultural anxieties about race stemming from the Rodney King riots, the Million Man March, and gang violence in Los Angeles will be closely analyzed to show how this era gave rise to a new wrestling stereotype that this study defines as the Domestic Menace.

Despite its problematic appropriation of sociohistorical racial anxieties, the WWF reached the apex of its popularity during the late nineties, a fact many critics and industry insiders attribute to the adoption of a new edginess manifested in the re-packaging of its product as "sports entertainment" with "Attitude." Chapter Two will begin by asking the oft-overlooked question: what impact did this institutional re-branding have on the depiction and representation of race in the WWF during the particular cultural context of the late nineties? The study posits, via the historical exploration of the WWF brand, that the transition to the heightened realism of "sports entertainment" in the Attitude Era led to an increased dependence on authentic racial anxiety to manufacture emotional depth for storylines. Turning to the period of 1997-1999, the analysis will then examine

industrial discourse – comments made by WWF and USA Network executives as well as promotional materials that advertised this re-branding, along with observations made by the trade and popular presses – to detail how the WWF blurred and manipulated boundaries between authentic and artificial, and underscore the impact these claims to an improvised realism had on the representation of race in the WWF. Through the use of an industrial discursive analysis and textual analyses of WWF promotional videos, commercials, and interviews, the analysis herein will seek to provide a deeper understanding of why an organization like the WWF would engage in a re-branding effort at this time, and why this transition to realism meant certain racial anxieties were considered appropriate for address. That is to say, this chapter will examine what functions the Attitude re-branding served, why the WWF assumed a more "realistic" form of entertainment would appeal to – and therefore attract – larger audiences, and how the "realistic" representation of race implies specific industrial decisions were being made by both the WWF and USA Network to target a white audience.

Chapter Three will emphasize the correlation between WWF Championship discourse and the neoliberalist governmental policies of anti-welfarism and self-reliance through an exploration of the careers of Rocky "The Rock" Maivia and "Stone Cold" Steve Austin as they vied for various WWF Championships. While Stone Cold and The Rock were inarguably the two most popular characters of the WWF Attitude Era, they also stood to represent the values, ideas, and beliefs circulating in the broader contemporary culture. As the respective surrogates for the dark-skinned Other and the self-reliant white man off of whose "earned" success minorities leeched, The Rock and

Stone Cold represented archetypes uniquely situated within the sociohistorical context of the nineties. Textual readings of various matches and in-ring speeches surrounding a series of championship bouts between Stone Cold and The Rock will be conducted in tandem with a discourse analysis of the political sentiments circulating in the popular press of the time. A case study of these two figures enables an allegorical examination of the neoliberal policies against affirmative action and other social welfare programs. As the WWF relied upon a heavily codified address of race in order to reinforce these ideals, this chapter will stress that a racialized message prevails for those willing to read beyond the superficial *kayfabe* – a professional wrestling term defined below.

Notes on Terminology

As this study is focused on textual analysis of WWF programming and the storytelling, in-ring, and backstage speeches, as well as the play-by-play commentary contained therein, it will be important to have an understanding of basic wrestling parlance. Though the good versus bad monikers of *babyface* and *heel* have already been mentioned, these two terms deserve reiteration as they will be utilized repeatedly throughout the study. As storylines occasionally permit, babyfaces will team up with other good guys (and heels with other villains) in order to form *stables*, a cooperative faction of two or more wrestlers united in a common goal. It will be especially important to note the frequency with which hyperracialized characters and their respective stables are designated as heels within WWF Attitude Era *kayfabe*, the staged events and storylines within the WWF universe. While the word kayfabe generally refers to the scripted wrestling product, it may also be used in this study to reference a character being

portrayed in order to differentiate the performance from the individual who is performing. In the WWF, many wrestlers perform under a stage name, but several, like WWF Chairman Vince McMahon, use their real name during kayfabe. In these situations, every effort will be made to clearly identify which embodiment is being referenced.

Kayfabe also encompasses the scripted championship title bouts, including which characters vied for and won the various WWF Championships. The performers who were awarded the *World Heavyweight*, *Intercontinental*, or *Tag Team Championships* had not actually "won" any title, but were being rewarded by the WWF according to the writers' and executives' beliefs as to which wrestler might best "carry" the company; that is, which kayfabe character might sell the most tickets and boost television ratings for the company. The titles maintain hierarchal importance, thus each championship offers a different degree of prestige. For the purposes of this study, we need only be familiar with the World Heavyweight Championship as the premiere title in the WWF, and the Intercontinental representing a second-tier title intended to showcase developing talent in the *promotion*. The use of promotion here does not refer to the advertising of a product nor advancement in position, as in the traditional sense of its definition. Rather, promotion is utilized in professional wrestling vernacular as another word for "organization" or "company," as in: the WWF was frequently at odds with other wrestling promotions.

Chapter One: A Menacing Presence: Racial Anxiety and the Ideological Function of WWF Stereotypes Throughout the Twentieth Century

In 1985, sports columnist Dave Meltzer – who has provided journalistic coverage of professional wrestling since 1971 – succinctly addressed the World Wrestling Federation's (WWF) penchant for storylines involving race-baiting and xenophobia, saying, "That is not anything new to wrestling. But the WWF exploits racism more than any promotion I've ever seen. They exploit ethnic stereotypes, and by doing so they trivialize racism. Everybody buys it and thinks it's chic to laugh at somebody who calls blacks 'boy'" (Newman 1985). While Meltzer's exposure to and coverage of the WWF spectacle over such a long trajectory certainly lends his observation credence, we might problematize the company's representational practice in a manner that Meltzer's assessment only intimates. That is, while the WWF may indeed exploit racial stereotypes and thus trivialize racism, why would such a successful organization seeking to entertain audiences rely on such a tactic? The WWF is, after all, an industry concerned with entertainment, offering its viewers, as Henry Jenkins observes, "complexly plotted, ongoing narratives […] A demand for closure is satisfied at the level of individual events, but those matches are always contained within a larger narrative trajectory which is itself fluid and open" (Jenkins 2005, 34). In other words, the programming is scripted – to varying degrees – by the WWF, and thus the characters, which include those hyperracialized stereotypes mentioned above, are performed by the entertainers in its employ. To reframe the question then, what historical and ideological function do these

constructed and stereotyped representations of race serve for both fans and the cultural institution of the WWF during particular eras?

Stereotyping is a cultural practice that obviously has its ideological underpinnings well beyond the realm of professional wrestling, television, or entertainment. Critical race scholars and social psychologists – albeit via very different theoretical methods – have frequently addressed the widespread cultural use of stereotyping as constituent of the human need to categorize information and thus recall quickly the behavioral expectations and anticipate the value systems of others (see Allport 1979; Wilson and Gutiérrez 1995; Berg 2002). Deployed in literary and dramatic terms, stereotyping allows for audience assessment of characters as "villains" and "heroes" based on pre-conceived notions stored in the collective unconscious. In the professional wrestling context, then, stereotyping becomes a rampant practice as wrestlers affect stereotyped identities as intelligible shorthand for the *babyface* and *heel* characters integral to professional wrestling's melodrama.[2] Underlying this performative aspect, however, is the fact that decisions are being made as to what type of information – positive or negative – is emphasized. As Michael Ball observes, "The identities assumed by wrestlers […] offer a rare opportunity to observe, on the one hand, the nature of stereotypes held by the organizers, the wrestlers and the public, and, on the other, the interests of the public revealed in the need for explicit stereotypes" (Ball 1990, 4). Over the long history of the WWF's existence, then, the characters – and the storylines in which they found themselves mired – are ideologically articulated not only in relation to the pre-conceived notions of race held by the WWF personnel, but also those beliefs which resonated with

audiences given the particular sociohistorical climates. It is this ideological cultural function which wrestling stereotypes serve that this study is interested in assessing.

This chapter will begin by returning to the WWF's origins and, through the examination of academic and popular texts, chart the historical usage of their racial and ethnic representations in order to identify significant breaks where the linkage of these stereotypes to certain ideological meanings can be problematized. While the attendant cultural contexts for these constructions of race will bear major emphasis, so too will the emergence of television, as its adoption in broadcasting wrestling bouts proves crucial in mediating the representations of race produced within the WWF through making these racialized images available to a national audience rather than just a regional public. With a keen understanding of how wrestling stereotypes have routinely been predicated on sociohistorical context, the chapter will then turn to a period in wrestling's history about which there exists a dearth of academic work problematizing of racial representations: the 1990s. How were the cultural anxieties that surfaced in the wake of the Rodney King riots, the Million Man March, and rising gang violence in Los Angeles reflected in the WWF's representations of race during this period? In what ways were the historical stereotypes outlined in this chapter connected to the racially-indifferent Republican "Contract with America" and the accompanying "culture wars" advanced by the political Right?

Utilizing historiographic research and textual analysis of *Monday Night Raw* episodes aired on USA Network during 1997-1998, this chapter will show how the sociohistorical climate of the 1990s did indeed impact the representation of race in WWF

programming, notably through the emergence of a new wrestling stereotype this study defines as the "Domestic Menace." The qualitative analysis of the 104 episodes aired during this timeframe included specific attention to non-white performers, and how the WWF presented their characters in storylines. Rather than simply focusing on the positioning of these characters as either heel or babyface, the analysis concentrates on how the construction of race was specifically utilized to situate the audience against their struggles in the kayfabe of WWF programming. Consequently, those characters and storylines mentioned in the later portions of this chapter pose the most problematic form of racial representation constructed in the WWF. As such, the analysis will occasionally reference the live audience reactions as portrayed in these episodes in order to provide insight as to the effectiveness of the heel versus babyface positioning of these non-white characters.

Common Stereotypes in the World of Wrestling

As with any academic study, this chapter builds upon claims asserted in previously authored texts that have been similarly focused. That being the case, this project will benefit from first turning to several key works that have set the precedent for discussion of stereotyping in the sphere of professional wrestling. Here, the explicit goal of synthesizing the prior observations of journalist William C. Martin (1972), and academics Gerald Morton and George O'Brien (1985) and Michael Ball (1990) will be to establish the common stereotypes historically utilized in wrestling so that we might then turn to the academic project of understanding the strategic deployment of these types and their transformations in the WWF during particular historical periods. The stereotypes

discussed by each of these authors have been variously connected to race and ethnicity, sometimes subtly, other times overtly. This study provides a necessarily abridged overview, focusing on those types that speak to race or ethnicity most directly.

The first and perhaps most pervasive wrestling stereotype identified by all three authors is invariably denoted by its "foreign" status, and as such, procures the label "Foreign Menace." Typically large, brutish men hailing from nations with which the United States was formerly, or currently embroiled, Ball observes, "These characters usually made a point of insulting America in vague terms and questioning the motives and ethics of Americans in general and soldiers in particular" (Ball 1990, 64). Martin finds this particular type garnering popularity after World War II, with the performing wrestler assuming the identity of a Nazi or "Big Jap." Always playing the role of heel, typically counterpoised in battle with a patriotic babyface, The Foreign Menace, as Morton and O'Brien point out, "represents a justification of American distrust of foreigners" (Morton and O'Brien 1985, 130).

As the flag-waving, red-white-and-blue-wearing antithesis to The Foreign Menace, "The Patriot" type signified the jingoist response to the threat advanced by the foreign Other. Wrestlers performing this stereotype have persistently been young, virile, unambiguously white men, "the sort that little boys want to grow up to be, and men want to have as friends, and women want to have, also" (Martin 1972). In this sense, The Patriot conjoins with the more general "Hero" type, which Ball describes as, "generally white… Their speech is straight-forward and proper, and they bespeak a pride in their family, country, and peer-group" (Ball 1990, 66). Ultimately, both types conform to an

American sense of pioneering spirit; therefore, the Patriot/Hero will "break all rules, take any liberties that are necessary to defeat an evil foreigner and still be working within his proper realm of morality" (Morton and O'Brien 1985, 148).

Throughout the history of professional wrestling, there has been a pervasive interest in characters from the South and West, manifest in several variegated types designated by the three authors as "The Good Ol' Boy," "The Cowboy," and "The Outlaw." While these types each have several distinct characteristics, their overwhelming similarity finds them consolidated into a single category for the purposes of this study: a grouping I term The Rugged Individualist. While the Good Ol' Boy is a hero signified by "some of that old fashioned Southern ethic that even a Yankee can appreciate" (Morton and O'Brien 1985, 143), this ethic was more often than not the same sense of rugged individualism by which The Cowboy and The Outlaw were seen to abide (Ball 1990, 68; Morton and O'Brien 1985, 132). This latter type often occupied a liminal space between babyface and heel, but always possessed a moral stance analogous to the American ethic of fair play. Historically, wrestlers adopting the Rugged Individualist – and its constituent Good Ol' Boy, Cowboy, and Outlaw – type, have been categorically white performers.

The final historical stereotype that bears emphasis in this project is that of the "Racial/Ethnic Hero." Also known as the "Minority Hero," this category consists of – as the name might suggest – wrestlers, or the characters they purported to embody, identifying as black, African-American, Hispanic, Mexican, Mexican-American, Puerto Rican, Latino/a, and Native American (persons of Asian descent represent a notable omission). These performers were typically booked as heroes in matches against non-

white heels due to the fact that, "few promoters will risk a match that might divide the house along racial lines" (Martin 1972). These Racial/Ethnic Heroes thus "become symbols of those persons who have fought and will continue to fight to get to the top… call[ing] upon his racial or ethnic pride as his strengthening virtue" (Morton and O'Brien 1985, 151). In the 1950s, prior to the racial integration of wrestling matches, wrestlers of Italian, Irish, and other "white-assimilated" forms of ethnic ancestry performed as this stereotype. As the first notable use of stereotyping to articulate racial and ethnic specificity, it is this form of representation, positioned during the sociohistorical climate of the '50s, to which this study now turns its focus.

Representation and Sociohistorical Context in the WWF: 1950s-1980s

To begin, we might first seek to clarify why the WWF would address race and ethnicity through a heroic stereotype such as the Racial/Ethnic Hero. Recalling the dramatic function that stereotyping frequently serves, a babyface WWF character must be found to harbor the same system of values as those fans whose cheers are crucial in reifying the character's heroic status. Wrestling's use of "ethnicized" performers as a circumscribed means of stating these values, then, functions as a means of appealing to fans from similar ethnic backgrounds. Early wrestling promoters like the WWF understood the drawing power of this stereotype, showcasing Racial/Ethnic Heroes "billed as Italians in Italian neighborhoods or Germans in German neighborhoods. It was not unusual for stars to change ethnicities and names overnight to cater to a specific ethnic crowd" (Ball 1990, 51). This trend continued well into the 1960s, with Italian-born Bruno Sammartino representing perhaps the most steadfast and archetypal

Racial/Ethnic Hero of the period. In interviews, Sammartino frequently referenced his immigration to the US during World War II, and boasted with pride about helping to construct buildings in his new hometown of Pittsburgh. But as one *Sports Illustrated* columnist noted, his appeal extended beyond the Italian-American community: "In the whole history of the game, there have been few personalities as popular as Sammartino […] there was never a stronger box-office attraction than Bruno is today" (Gutkind 1971, 38). It is equally important, with regard to the focus of this study, to note that Sammartino's peak of popularity accompanied a significant decline in the number of Racial/Ethnic Heroes coded as white.

Many academics have surveyed in-depth the assimilation of certain ethnicities into the cultural sphere of whiteness (Ignatiev 1995, Dyer 1997, Hilmes 1997, Murray 2005, Wise 2008). As these texts each outline, the equation of "American" with "white" was written into laws and enforced via cultural practices throughout the nineteenth century. During subsequent decades, American identity continued to be defined as, in Michele Hilmes' words, "explicitly a white northern European identity," with ethnicities such as the Irish, Italians, and Germans welcomed into the fold, "and Asian, African, and Native Americans assigned to the realm of the unassimilable" (Hilmes 1997, 25). This excision of difference distinguishable by non-whiteness continued unabated into the 1960s through the actions of segregationists and local enforcement of Jim Crow laws, until a burgeoning civil rights movement brought about the end of many overtly exclusionary practices – though, just as problematically, racial exclusion and marginalization continue to this day through more codified means. The collapse of formal

racial barriers during the '60s, however, did provide for many cultural "firsts," among which we need include the first integrated wrestling matches and thus, the rise of non-white Racial/Ethnic Heroes.

As noted briefly above, prior to the 1960s, in the regional territories occupied by the WWF (then known as Capitol Wrestling Corporation) and other smaller promotions, most non-white wrestlers were forced to compete against other non-whites. This of course meant the construction of blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, and Asians as not just babyfaces, but heels as well. Segregating competition along racial lines, then, meant no white babyface would be booked to suffer defeat at the hands of a Latino heel, nor would a black babyface be delivered a loss courtesy of a white heel; promoters thus attempted to ensure audiences would not be divided "along racial lines," as Martin observes. This "harmony" would be upset when, in 1960, Jamaican-born Edward "Bearcat" Wright stood before an audience in Gary, Indiana and announced that he would no longer wrestle in arenas that banned integrated matches. Because this important cultural moment has received little attention, there is a dearth of evidence to explicate the degree to which Wright's outburst was scripted by a scrupulous wrestling promoter or the spontaneous actions of the black performer. However, Wright's consequential suspension from wrestling and a subsequent NAACP campaign to establish desegregated competition seem to suggest the latter. As a result, "mixed" wrestling matches slowly began to appear at events, and Wright was eventually welcomed back as a performer ("Negro Wrestlers" 1962).

While Bearcat Wright was not a wrestler who performed in the WWF, his story bears mentioning in this analysis of racial representation for multiple reasons. First, while the breaking of the "color barrier" in professional sports and other mediums of entertainment have prompted the attention of countless authors, the consideration of segregated performance in the realm of professional wrestling is only touched upon in anecdotes buried in books that devote the majority of their attention to the broader history of wrestling. A major reason for this lack of attention may be due in part to the fact that professional wrestling lagged behind other sports and entertainment in fostering an environment of desegregation: Jack Johnson became boxing's first black heavyweight champion in 1908; Jackie Robinson is commonly known as the first black member of a Major League Baseball team after he joined the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1945; Kenny Washington signed with the Los Angeles Rams in 1946 to become the National Football League's first African-American player; joining the Washington Capitols in 1950, Earl Lloyd was the first black player in the National Basketball Association; tennis player Athea Gibson became the first African-American to win a Grand Slam when she won the French Open Title in 1956.

These milestones in each of the major American sports predate the move toward integration in professional wrestling by nearly a half-decade. The apparent inattention to the desegregationist activism of wrestling's non-white performers thus speaks to an attempt to bypass the acknowledgement that professional wrestling remained behind the cultural and industrial curve. The emphasis here on Edward Wright's stance against this aspect of the wider American culture and policy of segregation aims to contribute in

some small part to the extrication of this important moment of desegregationist struggle from historical obscurity. Secondly, and pertinent to this study's assessment of the ideological functions served by stereotypes in the WWF, Wright's stance and the NAACP's successful campaign for the introduction of integrated matches meant the potential addition of competition between white babyfaces and non-white heels into the melodramatic fold of professional wrestling kayfabe.

While non-white heels certainly did exist in the WWF and other wrestling promotions, their ranks declined subsequent to the desegregation of matches as they were replaced by a preponderance of non-white Racial/Ethnic Heroes (Morton and O'Brien 1985, 151). While some blacks and Latinos maintained their heel personas, this was largely due to the need for opponents with whom the new Racial/Ethnic Heroes could battle (Ball 1990, 66). While Racial/Ethnic Heroes also competed against white villains, "Marginalized Villains," as we might refer to them, were not afforded the same opportunity until 1969, when former American Football League player Ernie Ladd entered the WWF (at that point, the World Wide Wrestling Federation) and became the company's first black heel to compete against white babyfaces (Oliver and Johnson 2007, 112). During the intervening nine years, however, the WWF presented black, Hispanic, and Native American heroes to the overwhelming admiration of audiences. This might prompt us to question why the Racial/Ethnic Hero was the primary mode of representation deployed by the WWF during this time. Why not depict some of these performers in more villainous terms, or allow the existing non-white heels to compete against white babyfaces?

In seeking an answer to these questions, we might note an observation made by Morton and O'Brien: "Perhaps one of the least noticed effects of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s is that in 1982, quite unlike 1962, a member of a minority group can step into the wrestling ring as a villain" (Morton and O'Brien 1985, 150-151). Considering the degree to which the WWF actively sought to under-represent villainous hypermasculine non-white characters as opponents for Patriot types and other non-white babyfaces in previous decades, the construction of non-white performers as to-be-jeered-at characters in the 1980s seems a counterintuitive conceit given the era of burgeoning racial consciousness. However, articulating this negative representation of race as a positive result of civil rights activism recalls Herman Gray's observations about the proliferation of the black urban ghetto in television sitcoms of the 1970s. Indeed, as Gray finds, activist calls for "relevant" and "authentic" images of blackness resulted in unforeseen, albeit variegated, representations of race (1995, 77). The civil rights era, of course, had an enormous impact on a wide variety of television programming, and the work of Sasha Torres provides a unique observation that proves helpful in understanding the movement's effects on the broadcast of professional wrestling matches.

Torres begins by pointing out that, "from 1955 to 1965, both the civil rights movement and the television industry shared the urgent desire to forge a new, and newly *national*, consensus on the meanings and functions of racial difference" (Torres 2003, 6). Indicating the television industry's dependence upon the "visuality and topicality of race across sectional borders" in order to continue the expansion of its profits, Torres finds, "television and the civil rights movement, then…formed powerful allies for each other

during this period," an alliance that positioned audiences to identify with blacks and the struggle for civil rights (Ibid.). Importantly, the WWF occupied a shared televisual space with the journalistic and documentary programming Torres references in her work. Television had been a critical component of wrestling for several decades by this point, with the WWF and other organizations airing weekly events on local television stations in a synergistic effort to increase ticket sales for their live spectacles (Taaffe 1985).

Understanding the industrial motivations affecting the representation of race as suggested by Torres, along with the prevailing attitude shift in the culture at large, it stands to reason that the WWF presented its non-white performers through the Racial/Ethnic Hero stereotype during the 1960s, and into the 1970s, in order to similarly position racialized performers for audiences to identify with. This is not to suggest that the WWF became "allied" with the civil rights movement, to borrow Torres' phrasing. Rather, I would posit that the WWF, an organization dependent upon the easy legibility of a babyface or heel's value system for efficient storytelling, continued to lean on race to make these readings more evident. It was simply the case that during the '60s, African-Americans (and to a lesser extent, other non-whites) were concurrently depicted as victims elsewhere on television. Thus, their positioning as the Racial/Ethnic Hero in the WWF of the 1960s seemed justified due to their concomitant need to "continue to fight to get to the top." While this would also potentially encourage the enthusiasm of a non-white audience, the prospect certainly faded as the use of the Racial/Ethnic Hero waned during the 1970s and 1980s.

During the ‘70s and ‘80s the Foreign Menace and the Patriot took center stage in the WWF, a transition that was due in part to the cultural resonance of the “threats” advanced by the Foreign Menace, as several countries with whom the US was engaged in conflict during this time, Russia, Vietnam, Iran, etc., were also seen to pose foreign threats to the nation. As real or imagined as these threats were, in WWF programming they could only be dispelled by a jingoist hero in the form of the Patriot (Morton and O’Brien 1985, 130). A relatively unchecked sense of xenophobia thus pervaded the WWF during this time, usurping the direct attention to race and ethnicity in domestic US terms that was prevalent during the ‘50s and ‘60s. Yet this does not entirely account for the apparent disregard of race and ethnicity in a domestic sense. Again, as Torres points out, “Since the mid-1970s, new right and neoconservative recodings have been organized around a central reversal… calling race consciousness per se antidemocratic” (Torres 2003, 9), which in turn allowed the Right to disseminate the notion of “reverse discrimination” – a repositioning of whiteness as victim rather than victimizer. This shift certainly accounts for the relevance of the Patriot type during the 1970s and 1980s: standing in for the US in its battles to assert American dominance, the Patriot’s mission is thus a codified attempt to reconstitute whiteness. The inconsiderable attention by the WWF to other domestic racial categories, especially in heel performances, remains notable.

Throughout the ‘80s, however, there were a few non-white performers in the WWF who found themselves portraying babyface characters that were problematically racialized. One such character, Junkyard Dog (or JYD, as he was known to audiences),

was portrayed by African-American Sylvester Ritter, a former two-time honorable mention All-American who played football for Fayetteville State University, from where he graduated with a degree in political science and a minor in geography (Johnson and Oliver 2012, 142). After a knee injury sidelined his hopes for a career in professional football, Ritter turned to the pro wrestling circuit in 1977, eventually adopting an over-the-top, stereotyped persona to get over with crowds during the early-1980s (Ibid., 144). As Ball observes, Ritter's character was stereotyped in such a way that he became one of the countless black performers to be depicted "as street-wise brawlers who would be good wrestlers if given the chance… JYD, as he is known, wears a spiked collar with a heavy chain attached. The crowd throws him dog biscuits which he eagerly retrieves and eats" (Ball 1990, 94). While the gimmick was astonishingly tactless, it is important to recognize that JYD was a babyface, a wrestler for whom the audience should be cheering. It is also critical to our understanding of the JYD character as a representation that existed in a contiguous space with other televisual images of blackness broadcast during the same time.

As Torres notes, "Television news in the 1980s participated actively in the new construction of black criminality, addiction, and irresponsibility. In the process, it helped undergird a national shift in the understanding of blackness that certainly eased the accomplishment of the Reaganite racial agenda at the level of public policy and discourse" (Torres 2003, 10). As a character about whom other wrestlers observed, "the man is a thief," and "watch your wallet, don't turn your back on him, he grew up in the projects" (Maguire and Wozniak 1987, 266), JYD seemed to epitomize this notion of

black criminality. The WWF sought to undermine this potential reading of the JYD character, though, by depicting him as possessing a childlike acumen and generally happy-go-lucky disposition – he frequently danced with young fans in the ring during his post-match victory celebrations. JYD was thus rendered a safer alternative than the dastardly heels he faced in competition. Nonetheless, the character remains an important precursor to the extremely problematic representations of race the WWF would soon showcase in its programming.

Similar representations of race would fade as the nineties, a decade which bore events that would burden the already tenuous race relations in the US, approached. It is in this climate that Torres postulates, "television was asking its viewers to perform identifications that are precisely the opposite of those we find in the earlier period, to identify *against* blacks, who are now generally associated with criminality, and *with* the state power of the police" (Torres 2003, 11). Assessing how this tension was reflected in the representational practices of the WWF now becomes the central task of this chapter. We turn first to a brief cultural history of the 1990s, which is necessary in order to provide sociohistorical context for the racial anxieties that are pivotal to the construction of race in WWF programming during this era.

Racial Anxiety in 1990s America: A Compendium

Despite the heightening of cultural tensions about race through the ubiquitous depiction of black criminality on television programming of the 1990s, there remained a distinct inattentiveness to questions of why these images proliferated throughout the decade. As the incarceration rate of African-Americans during this period was six times

that of whites,[3] prison statistics seemed only to legitimate the pervasiveness of black criminals on television screens. This legitimizing reified the dubious notion that, as David Dellinger observes, "blacks have a proclivity for criminality in their genes" (Dellinger 1995, 9), rather than point to the existence of systemic racism that pervaded the US economy, institutions, and culture at large. The televised presentation of several key events during the decade exacerbated the issue, characterizing both the act and threat of violence as emanating almost exclusively from non-white culture. Nowhere was this message made more explicit than in news coverage of the rising gang warfare occurring in America's urban neighborhoods.

In his 2002 study, Diego Vigil provides a breadth of insight into the cultural structure of various ethnic gangs common to the Los Angeles area. While mounting gang violence was by no means isolated to this single locale during the 1990s, the city does stand out, as Vigil notes, for having the highest number of both gangs and gang members within its borders. Vigil also points out that, "by the middle of the 1990s [gang homicides] nearly topped 1,000" (Vigil 2002, 5) in Los Angeles County. With television and print journalism frequently covering the mounting violence in the city, media attention redoubled in the wake of one 1995 death in particular: Stephanie Kuhen, a 3-year-old who had been killed when her family's car was shot at while driving through the gang-occupied neighborhood of Cypress Park in East Los Angeles. In the aftermath of the killing, President Clinton added his voice to the chorus of commentators, denouncing the gang involved and pledging federal support to quell the growing threat of gang violence (Pelisek 2005).

Emerging primarily in low-income ethnic minority neighborhoods, the street gang, Vigil argues, "is an outcome of marginalization…the relegation of certain persons or groups to the fringes of society, where social and economic conditions result in powerlessness" (Vigil 2002, 7). Seeking places where they are not marginalized, the persons in these communities often find refuge in the streets, and in the camaraderie of the gangs that occupy them. Several movies released during the early nineties dramatized the effects of this racial marginalization, with movies such as *New Jack City*, *Boyz n the Hood*, and *Straight Out of Brooklyn* each depicting black characters that attempted to elevate their status through gang involvement or drug dealing. Sharon Willis has drawn attention to the discourse that surfaced after the release of these films – each of which was directed by a black filmmaker – and the manner by which they "reflected contemporary anxieties about the connections between media images and real-world violence" (Willis 2008, 49). Linking the violence in these films to the non-white representations contained therein, the depiction of gang members and drug dealers in the films stood as further evidence of the violent nature inherent to these marginalized groups. The resultant cultural discourse thus articulated this group of persons who suffered discrimination via their marginalization in a manner that made them appear conjointly unsympathetic. As this study will later show, the WWF followed this model of representation in its depiction of hyperracialized characters.

While the media coverage of gang violence vacillated throughout the decade, another event that transpired in the city of Los Angeles became the focal point for public attention in 1992. Stemming from the widely broadcast videotaped footage of three white

members of the LAPD brutally beating black motorist Rodney King in 1991, the Los Angeles District Attorney charged four police officers – the three white officers mentioned above, along with their white Sergeant who was present for the flogging – with use of excessive force, and set a trial to be decided by jury in April 1992. Upon the predominantly white jury's acquittal of the four white police officers, black members of the Los Angeles community took to the streets to protest. These demonstrations devolved into looting, and eventually a full-fledged riot. Over the course of the next five days, a citywide curfew was placed in effect and the National Guard was called upon to aid the Los Angeles Police effort to stifle the rioting. Television coverage of the events proliferated, resulting in a period of, as Ronald Jacobs defines it, "public focus and attention on race equaled by few events in recent American history" (Jacobs 2000, 114).

Jacobs cites a *Times-Mirror* opinion poll taken shortly after the verdict was released which found that ninety-two percent of respondents were following the events closely. As with any mediated representation of actual events, however, there remains the potential for competing readings by audiences. As such, despite the unparalleled attention to issues of race at the time, viewers of these images understood them through the racial binaries resulting from their own subjective positioning. Again, as Jacobs observes,

> In focus-group discussions about the Los Angeles uprisings, African-American informants interpreted the television images of the uprisings as legitimate protest against racial and economic injustice; white and Latino informants […] interpreted the events primarily as criminal activities by anti-civil opportunists (Jacobs 2000, 132).

In the aftermath of the subsequent O.J. Simpson murder trial of 1995, likewise covered in the media through the lens of racial binaries, similar disparities could be found regarding responses to Simpson's acquittal:

> For whites, the verdict was wrong because of a belief that racial division had destroyed the institution of legal impartiality […] For African-Americans on the other hand, the verdict was correct because it vindicated longstanding complaints about police practices, because it sent a message to racist police officers, and because it was indeed possible for African-Americans to get a fair trial (Jacobs 2000, 137).

These "raced ways of seeing," as Jacobs refers to them, undoubtedly complicate the role racialized stereotypes are intended to serve in the WWF. Understanding the need for the wrestling audience to quickly assess the value system of a character in order to determine their positioning as either a babyface or heel, it is problematic, in other words, to expect that all audiences, irrespective of their individual life experiences, will read a character's motives in the same manner. How the WWF attempts to contain these potential counter-readings will therefore figure into the forthcoming textual analysis of late nineties WWF programming.

Amidst the O.J. Simpson trial and the media circus that surrounded it in 1995, the Million Man March, occurring in October of that year, nearly went unnoticed by the media. As a form of counteroffensive, vis-à-vis the "Contract with America" platform upon which a newly elected Republican majority Congress had been voted into office, the event was organized by the Nation of Islam and its leader, Minister Louis Farrakhan, to bring hundreds of thousands to Washington D.C. to promote black participation in voting and to demonstrate support for public assistance programs such as Medicaid, subsidized

housing, student aid, and education programs. In 1996, writing in his exhaustive qualitative examination of the stances held by the Nation of Islam, Mattias Gardell observes of Farrakhan, "He accepts financial aid from Libya, expressed sympathy for Manuel Noriega, and pledged his support for Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War… during the [Los Angeles Riots] Farrakhan said that violence was the only resort of the oppressed and stressed that unless justice is created, America will be doomed" (Gardell 1996, 5). Farrakhan was also frequently depicted in the mainstream media as a "reverse-racist" and an anti-Semite, thus the press – in tandem with their preoccupation with the Simpson trial – nearly disregarded the march totally, operating under the assumption that Farrakhan's views were too extreme to attract the million individuals called upon to participate. When the event attracted somewhere between 400,000 and 1.5 million attendees,[4] journalists hastily descended upon D.C. to provide coverage.

Though Farrakhan and the oft-labeled-as-militant Nation of Islam had organized the event, the crowd size suggested attendance well beyond the limits of their constituency. This was indeed the case, as Gardell notes the participation of local NAACP chapters as well as members of the Native American, Latino, and Korean communities in a demonstration of racial solidarity (Gardell 1996, 344). Media coverage of the event thus had the dual effect of presenting to America a unified non-white community, as connoted by the sheer size of the crowds, while at the same time depicting this community as "radicalized" through its affiliation with the Nation of Islam and Farrakhan. Familiarity with this perception of the unified and militarized non-white male was pivotal for wrestling audiences, as this image formed the basis of a new stereotype

that emerged in WWF programming at this time. The "Domestic Menace," as it will be referred to below, was not entirely "new" per se, but rather a contemporary take on the Foreign Menace type utilized by the WWF and other wrestling promotions in previous decades. Precisely how the two differ will be subject to further definition below, but for the moment, we must briefly touch on yet one more anxiety of the 1990s, which is necessary to illustrate the biased racializing of the Domestic Menace.

On 19 April 1995, two militia members, friends Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, parked a van in front of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City and detonated a bomb that killed 168 people (Capino 2008, 180). Less than a year later, on 3 April 1996, the "Unabomber" Ted Kaczynski, the target of the most expensive manhunt in FBI history, was arrested after years of executing targeted bombings through the delivery of US Postal packages (White-Stanley and Flinn 2008, 158). In the town of Littleton, Colorado on 20 April 1999, two teenagers, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, shot and killed thirteen people, injuring an additional two dozen, at Columbine High School (Holmlund 2008, 225). Each of the assailants in these three scenarios was a white male, and yet, while the media covered the events they perpetrated incessantly, their actions were never articulated as related to notions of whiteness. Nor did narrative film and television begin depicting villains as inherently unstable whites, predisposed to acts of domestic terrorism. It did, however, have no aversion to depicting blacks, Latinos, and other non-whites as "subjects of civil rights undone," a category of representation Torres sees comprised of "crack addicts, homeless people, teenage mothers, gang-bangers, drug dealers, and children threatened by 'random' ghetto violence" (Torres 2003, 89).

This one-sided representation of race in both narrative television and news coverage equally informed the WWF's construction of race via the Domestic Menace. That is, the WWF chose to depict the threat posed by the Domestic Menace as emanating from a black or Latino wrestler rather than a white male. Despite arguably representing the greater menace to American society during this time, these dangerous white males were often confused in the culture at large as an isolated exception as opposed to a marker of a wider threat posed by the socio-cultural group to which they belonged. While continuing to problematize the choice to depict Domestic Menaces as non-white rather than white, the textual analysis that follows will demonstrate how the WWF positioned audiences in the 1990s to identify against blacks and other non-whites by spurring "raced ways of seeing." Through attention to the Domestic Menace stereotype and the manner in which it represented race, we can observe these racial binaries being constructed via two contiguous channels: through the portrayal of groups suffering discrimination in WWF kayfabe as unsympathetic, and by presenting a very specific representation of race in the WWF that reflected the culturally pervasive image of the unified and militant non-white male.

WWF Programming and The Domestic Menace

Recalling the pervasiveness of the Foreign Menace character throughout the history of wrestling, as well as this project's emphasis on the sociocultural impact on televisual representations of race, we might expect to find fluctuations within the depiction of race as it was presented via the Foreign Menace stereotype. Indeed, other authors have charted this type's transition from German and Japanese in the '50s and

'60s, to Chinese and Iranian during the '70s and '80s (Morton and O'Brien 1985; Ball 1990). Despite heralding from different nations, the commonality between each of these villains is, as Ball notes, that "they represent perceived enemies of America… a vague sense of threat to national and cultural security" (Ball 1990, 85). The Domestic Menace, as I define it, poses an equal threat to national and social security. However, whereas the Foreign Menace reflected a threat to America from an opposing country, the Domestic Menace threat is especially charged because it originated from within the US citizenry. Frequently using militant language to confront matters of race and racial injustice, the Domestic Menaces threatened to expose the racist underbelly of 1990s America every time they appeared on screen in WWF programming. Often aligned with other Domestic Menaces who identified as belonging to the same racial category, these performers presented a united front against which other wrestlers, especially the Rugged Individualist, struggled to persevere. The Domestic Menace, in other words, was the WWF's melodramatic reflection of the perceived danger posed by all non-whites during this time, embodied as it were in the unified and militant non-white male.

Radicalizing the Non-White Male

The most popular black WWF performer at the beginning of the mid-1990s was unquestionably Ahmed Johnson, a hypermuscular Mississippi native whose signature interview style often saw him positioned glaring directly into the camera lens while remaining relatively silent. His physicality in the ring made him a crowd favorite and after just one year with the WWF, Johnson captured the Intercontinental Championship – a second-tier title in the WWF. While he thus became the first African-American

performer to ever attain a singles championship in the WWF, his title reign would be short-lived, as would his run as one of the top babyfaces in the company. After returning from an injury in 1997, Johnson transitioned from babyface to heel when he delivered a speech asserting the racial motivations behind his omission from WWF World Heavyweight Championship – the company's premier championship title – competition:

> I tried to please these people. I tried to get my shot at the belt. You think they backed me up? Did y'all back me up for a belt? No. Y'all didn't back me up. Why? Because I'm a black man […] I was *gonna* get a shot. Martin Luther King was *gonna* live ten more years, but he didn't. He didn't because he tried to preach peace and he got shot down for it. Louis Farrakhan, is he dead? No. Why? Because he doesn't preach the peace, he preaches it like it is. By any means necessary (*Raw* 1997, no. 25).

Positioning these comments within the broader sociohistorical context of late nineties America is integral to understanding why addressing the issue of race subsequently marked Johnson as a heel in the WWF universe in 1997.

Television audiences were indeed, as Torres claims, being positioned during this time to identify against blacks, with viewers subjected to the omnipresence of, as Herman Gray describes it, "the spectacle of black male-female hostility, judgments about black intellectual competence, and…menacing black bodies" (Gray 1995, 172). Undoubtedly, these mediated representations inform the WWF's depiction of Johnson as an angry black male seeking that which he has been heretofore denied. While the construction of Johnson's character thus adds to an already problematic and disproportionate collection of mediated images depicting menacing black males, the articulation of additional cultural notions about radicalized non-whites through his performance further positions his character as a loathed and feared heel within the WWF universe.

While Johnson's speech references Louis Farrakhan explicitly, it also does so implicitly by echoing those sentiments voiced by Farrakhan during an interview conducted just months prior in an episode of *Meet the Press*: "We want freedom… we want justice… we want justice applied equally to all, regardless of race or class or color… We want equal membership in society with the best in civilized society" ("The Hon. Louis Farrakhan on Meet The Press 1997"). Johnson is thus positioned as an agitator of racial anxieties, and by aligning himself with Farrakhan, representative of a militant threat to the cultural status quo. Relying upon the same pre-conceived notions of militant blackness as extreme and out of touch with American values apparent in media coverage of the Million Man March, it seemed as though the WWF had found its archetypal enemy for the period, manifest in the angry, articulate, equality-seeking, black Domestic Menace.

While this dangerous black male character was certainly central to the WWF representation of race in the nineties, the company also engaged in various other depictions of race utilizing the Domestic Menace stereotype that were, as Henry Jenkins IV claims, "nothing if not socially relevant and contemporary" to the period (2005, 342). One of these culturally relevant depictions was the WWF's nearly yearlong "Gang Warz" storyline. Stemming from the disbandment of a *stable* – a cooperative group of wrestlers united according to wrestling storylines – in June 1997, the WWF presented audiences with weekly matches that pitted former accomplices against one another as members of now-opposing factions drawn along lines of clearly racialized markers.

The "Nation of Domination," an all-black group that was a not-so-subtle allusion to the real-life Nation of Islam, wore leather kufi caps and black tights accented with red, green, and yellow, and were often seen raising their right fists in the air – the signature gesture of the Black Panther Party. "Los Boricuas," an all-Puerto Rican group characterized by their "hot tempers," frequently broke into Spanish diatribes (and occasionally, rap), and were outfitted in white tank tops, baggy jeans, and black fedoras. The "Disciples of Apocalypse" were known primarily for riding their motorcycles to ringside, which made this group of leather-clad, hulking white men with shaved heads akin to the WWF's version of the Hells Angels. Matches between the groups frequently deteriorated into melees that were described by on-air commentators as "gang fights" that "resemble[d] a drive-by," and racial epithets were not uncommon in exchanges between the wrestlers[5] (*Raw* 1997, no. 23).

The high profile media attention to gangs and the violence they perpetrated throughout the nineties undergirded the "Gang Warz" storyline, dependent as it was on audience knowledge of, and pre-existing opinions about, mounting gang violence in order to evoke the maximum emotional response. Indeed, while the WWF showcased its diverse group of multicultural performers, it ultimately represented blacks and Hispanics as simplified versions of racially marked Domestic Menaces locked in perennial war with one another and whites. The partitioning of whiteness here is intentional, as the Disciples of Apocalypse were unique not only in the contrast of their whiteness vis-à-vis the other two factions, but also in their characterization as Rugged Individualists rather than Domestic Menaces. Their whiteness thus becomes problematically linked to the different

set of values they are seen to abide by as compared to both the Nation of Domination and Los Boricuas.

For example, during one episode of *Monday Night Raw*, Los Boricuas were engaged in tag team competition with a very popular babyface duo, The Headbangers (*Raw* 1997, no. 28). While this pair had no previous conflict with Los Boricuas, they still became the victims of a four-on-two sneak attack after the match. With the two wrestlers out-numbered, and thus defenseless to the Boricuas' attack, the Disciples of Apocalypse emerged atop their motorcycles – which the commentators were quick to point out were "made in America" – and rode to the rescue of the prone Headbangers. Thus, by positioning Los Boricuas as victimizers and, inversely, the Disciples as saviors of other babyface characters, the WWF encouraged "raced ways of seeing" these groups. The effect, ultimately, is one that reinforces the construction of these groups along racial binaries that see non-whites as prone to cheating and opportunism, and whiteness as the locus of virtues needed to recuperate American values. As Los Boricuas and the Nation of Domination were depicted as increasingly radicalized and unified, the Disciples of Apocalypse thus became a symbol for a necessarily militant white response in defense of, rather than a radical attempt to agitate against, the status quo.

That this storyline could have just as easily been termed "Race Warz" mattered little to WWF Chairman Vince McMahon who, in speaking to the press stated: "I've stopped being [TV's] conscience or policeman. I've adopted the same philosophy as Hollywood: here it is – do you like it or not?"; "We're not concerned about being politically incorrect" (Leland 1998, 64; Roselini 1999, 52). John Downing and Charles

Husband note the cultural damage incurred through problematic racial representations such as these, offering the degree to which they operate beyond presenting "images or stereotypes for us to accept or reject, to learn or forget, or maintain at the back of our minds. It provides us with a well-worn script for a very familiar 'racial' play in which we are *all* performers in some regard or other, unless we consciously choose to walk off the stage" (Downing and Husband 2005, 43). As Douglas Battema and Philip Sewell further point out, "while the open-endedness of WWF programming makes such opportunities available…it does not encourage viewers to engage seriously in a critique of this form of racism" (Battema and Sewell 2005, 269). Indeed, throughout the nineties, it seems apparent the WWF presented its audience with the Domestic Menace stereotype, and asked them to participate in a repudiation of that character's claims of racial discrimination.

Marginalizing the Marginalized

In May 1997, the leader of the Nation of Domination, Faarooq, won a chance to compete for the WWF World Heavyweight Championship, and therefore potentially become the first African-American in history to carry the company's most prestigious title. Faarooq responded to a question about his thoughts on this "honor" with a question of his own:

> When was the last time the World Wrestling Federation had a black man that wore that belt? Can you answer that for me? No, you can't answer that because there never has been one. You've had token blacks in the position of Intercontinental Champion, like Ahmed Johnson for a short period of time, because you people don't feel a black man is worthy of wearing the World Wrestling Federation title […] But you do feel a black man is worthy of washing your car, washing your clothes… (*Raw* 1997, no. 19)

On the following week's episode of *Monday Night Raw*, commentators and wrestlers characterized Faarooq's comments as an attempt to "play the race card." This term has generally been used to devalue otherwise legitimate claims of racism, such that any substantive truth at the core of the original message can be overlooked. Consequently, we might note this action as a significant step toward positioning a discriminated character as unsympathetic. By portraying Faarooq and his discourse in this light, the WWF courted fans to disrespect the character, but more importantly, they urged audiences to link any discussion of the true-to-life racism in the WWF with those views circulating in nineties America that were contemptuous of claims of institutionalized racism. In other words, WWF programming echoed a discourse that, as Dellinger cautioned, is resoundingly rejected by the culture at large.

Even when racism was depicted overtly in the WWF, it seems fans were still positioned to reject the notion that it existed, as during one storyline featured on an episode of *Monday Night Raw* airing in October 1997 (*Raw* 1997, no. 42). The Nation of Domination, having just participated in one of that evening's matches, returned to their locker room to find it vandalized; Faarooq's luggage had been ransacked, toilet paper and garbage were strewn about the floor, and various vitriol had been spray-painted on the walls. Included among these markings were highly racialized references to Kentucky Fried Chicken, Uncle Tom, Malcolm X, and a caricature with an afro and massively oversized lips next to which read the words: "Homie Stay Home" (see Figure 2.1). There was also a Canadian flag conspicuously propped up against a wall, spray-painted next to which were flattering references to the "Hart Foundation," a stable of Canadian wrestlers

who had no recognizable feud with the Nation of Domination. Even the most oblivious of wrestling fans could sense the set-up, but of paramount importance for this analysis is the fact that some wrestler or wrestlers – in the scripted performance of WWF kayfabe – were responsible for attempting to antagonize a group of black wrestlers with blatantly racist vandalism.

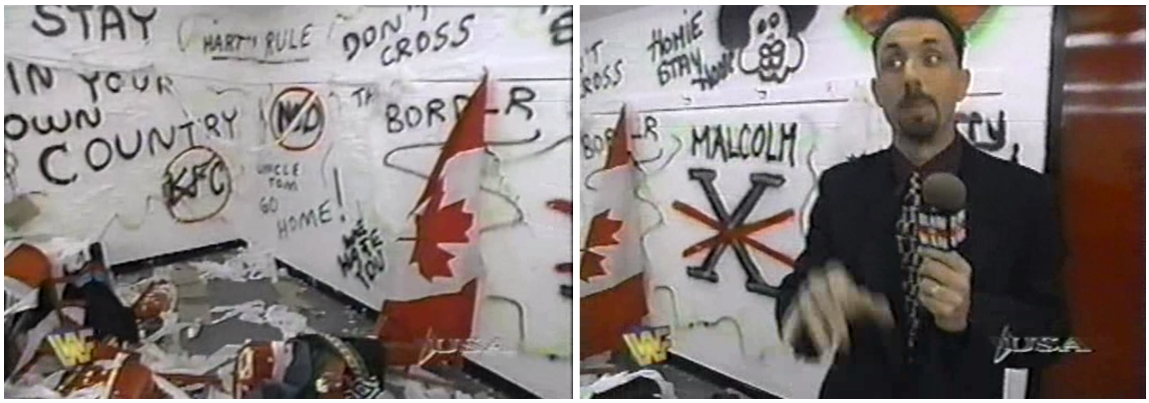

Figure 2.1: The vandalized locker room of the Nation of Domination.

As Faarooq and the Nation of Domination returned to the ring to address the offense, the group was initially met by murmured boos, until Faarooq began to posit the existence of racial inequality within the WWF – and American culture at large. The jeering audience reached its full-throated peak as Faarooq roared, "This country was built on the back of a black man! All my ancestors paid the price to live here […] As far as I'm concerned, black people are the original leaders of this country!" (*Raw* 1997, no. 42). Confronting Vince McMahon in the ring during the first segment of the following week's episode, Faarooq challenged the WWF Chairman to account for the existence of racism in the WWF. While commentators and McMahon agreed the previous week's vandalism was deplorable, they also sought to marginalize the racist connotations by referring to the

occurrence as "random" and taking measured care to clarify that the vandalism could be "to a certain extent, construed as racial slurs" (*Raw* 1997, no. 43).

As Faarooq pressed the issue through connecting the event to the centuries of antagonizing suffered by blacks in America, McMahon became increasingly defensive, asserting: "There is no racism here in the World Wrestling Federation! We don't allow it, won't allow it under any circumstances and that's the bottom line […] Let's get off this subject. Let's go to something else. We don't need to drive this into the ground" (Ibid.). Declaring the non-existence of racism and then quickly changing the subject situates McMahon as possessing the final authority on the matter, while effectively positioning Faarooq and his fellow Nation of Domination members' claims of racial discrimination as unfounded. This further emphasis on the Domestic Menace as an unsympathetic character yet again constructs within the kayfabe of WWF programming a distinctly racialized reading of discriminatory claims: chiefly, that more sensible white males have a clearer understanding of racism than the militant non-white males who suffer as a result of its institutionalized acceptance.

In order to reinforce this characterization of the Domestic Menace, the WWF also employed specific editing practices during the *Monday Night Raw* episodes in question. Because WWF programming is performed in front of live audiences, the broadcasts will frequently feature cutaways to fans holding up signs or otherwise displaying their admiration or disapproval of the wrestlers featured in that segment. During the aforementioned confrontation between the Nation of Domination and McMahon, the WWF regularly cut away from shots of Faarooq speaking in order to capture audience

members booing and jeering with great enthusiasm. While this study would not presume to accurately assess the racial categories to which these individuals might identify, each *appears* to be white, thus illustrating a rather stark contrast between the wrestler speaking and those fans who disagree with the message.

For example, during the same segment in which Vince McMahon vehemently denied the existence of racism in the WWF, another Nation of Domination member, The Rock,[6] stated, "I've been dealing with discrimination my entire life […] I'm going to show you what it's like to deal with discrimination […] The difference between you and me is when I knock your ass down, you won't get back up." Intercut with The Rock's dialogue were several oppositional camera shots of audience members, one of which included children booing as they emphatically waved their thumbs in downward motions, and another in which a man was shown hoisting a sign in the air that read: "The Stunner [a wrestling move executed by a popular Rugged Individualist type] Knows No Color!" The fact that editing practices such as these showcased only those responses that were oppositional to The Rock's message about discrimination certainly indicates a conscious production choice that not only attempted to demonstrate the audience's positioning against The Rock and the Nation of Domination, but also one which articulated a reflection of the larger cultural inattention to the discrimination suffered by non-whites. Interestingly, the usage of signs to marginalize Domestic Menaces – here, employed by audience members – was also a practice problematically adopted by wrestlers in a particular storyline that involved the targeted taunting of the Nation of Domination.

Over the course of the next few weeks, the Hart Foundation were found to have been framed for the locker room sacking in a ploy concocted by a rival stable of crude, rebellious, white wrestlers known as "D-Generation X" (DX) who were looking to gain an advantage over their Canadian competition. The discovery of the true culprits instantly triggered a feud between the Nation of Domination and DX, a conflict that would ultimately become one of the longstanding vendettas that defined WWF programming of the late nineties. Weekly altercations between the groups became commonplace, with DX often resorting to thinly veiled racism as when they mocked competing Nation of Domination members from ringside on a 1997 episode of *Raw* (*Raw* 1997, no. 42).

During a tag team match that involved several wrestlers representing the Nation of Domination, the members of DX made an unscheduled visit ringside, bringing along folding chairs and several homemade signs akin to those frequently touted by audience members. Throughout the match, DX raised these mocking signs in an attempt to distract the Nation of Domination and cost them the bout. While feuding wrestlers typically engage in antagonistic behavior, the overtly racist content of the signs apparently constructed by DX contributed to the WWF's troublesome dependence on real-life racial tensions to stimulate audience engagement; displayed on national television by these WWF performers were messages that included: "Black is Beautiful," "Buckwheat Rules," and "Uncle Tom 3:16". While this behavior is by itself problematic, an added danger surfaces through the explicit approval of these actions by fans participating in what amounts to a "feedback loop" of racial intolerance. For example, after DX taunted

the Nation of Domination with their overtly racist signs, fans soon exercised their right to dialogic approval by displaying racially-charged signs of their own (see Figure 2.2).

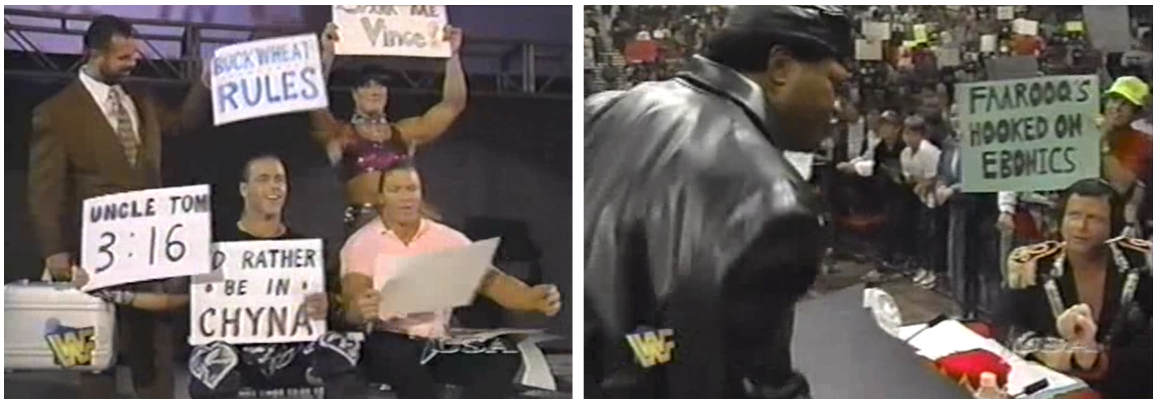

Figure 2.2: Fans get in on the "fun" by crafting their own racially-charged signs.

Fans could cheer on the "fun-loving" DX because they stood in opposition to the Domestic Menace values of the Nation of Domination. In so doing, however, as Jenkins IV observes, audiences "willingly overlooked the same kinds of megalomania and rule-breaking they'd previously condemned in other characters" (2005, 325). Nevertheless, the WWF continued to present DX and its members as babyfaces rather than heels, irrespective of the fact that the group continued to traffic in similarly racist hijinks. In one such instance, DX escalated their rivalry with the Nation of Domination as they conducted an entire interview "in-character" as members of the Nation – an act that included the members of DX performing in blackface. While the commentators seemed to enjoy the performance as much as the live audience, they were quick to point out: "The Nation ain't gonna like this!" and, "I'll bet the furniture in all their houses is flying around the room right now!" (*Raw* 1998, no. 27).

Deflecting any disgust for the act solely as the probable opinion of those black men being mocked, and without any mention of the offensiveness of a tradition rooted in minstrelsy performances of the pre-Civil Rights era, the WWF once again invited fans to view the Nation of Domination as unsympathetic despite the insidious discrimination they suffered. The Domestic Menace, as signified by the militant, articulate, non-white antagonist of racial tensions, was thus uniquely situated to become the quintessential WWF heel amidst the cultural anxieties about race in 1990s America.

Conclusion: Considering the Branding and Selling of Racial Anxiety

While this chapter has aimed to provide a measure of understanding as to the ideological function served by stereotypes, with particular attention to the Domestic Menace, in the WWF, sociohistorical context and textual analysis, despite providing important insight as to the basis and deployment of these images, illustrates only a portion of the complex system of racial representation. Because we now have a foundational understanding of how the WWF positioned audiences to identify against non-white performers, how these groups suffered discrimination and yet continued to be depicted as unsympathetic, and the methods employed by the WWF to contain divergent "raced ways of seeing" these characters, we can subsequently begin to problematize the industrial and organizational processes that led to these decisions.

Despite, or perhaps in part because of, the appropriation of the contemporary racial anxieties of the nineties, the WWF reached the apex of its popularity during this time, garnering massive ratings for their cable network partner, USA Network, and attracting multi-million dollar sponsorship deals. While much of this success has been

attributed to the heightened edginess of both the WWF brand and programming – featuring lewd conduct, coarse language, and more violent matches – frequently omitted from these considerations is the increased appropriation of authentic racial anxiety that occurred during this time. In what ways did these storylines appeal to an audience with whom the dramatized struggle for (white) redemption vis-à-vis the Domestic Menace resonated? To what degree was this new WWF product being marketed to an unnamed white audience? Chapter Two thus begins by investigating the role played by the institutional "WWF Attitude" re-branding effort in the company's practices of depicting race, given the particular cultural and industrial contexts of the late nineties. In so doing, this additional research will continue to problematize the representation of race in WWF programming. Images which, as this chapter has emphasized, remained a menacing presence throughout the late 1990s.

Chapter Two: "As the Times Have Changed, So Have We": WWF Re-Branding, Manufactured Realism, and the Assumption of White Viewership

As shown in Chapter One, the WWF has a long history of showcasing denigrating stereotypes via hyperracialized characters. While this study has thus far provided insight in to how the WWF's representation of race has historically reflected racial anxieties circulating in American culture at large, we also need to engage with the industrial machinations behind these constructs and their potential relationship to the rise in popularity of WWF programming during particular historical periods. In other words, if, as Jeffrey Mondak suggests, "Each of wrestling's peaks of popularity occurred during a period in American history when political events had fostered widespread feelings of isolationism or nationalism among the American public" (Mondak 1989, 145), we must problematize the WWF's appropriation of these sentiments through not only the construction of storylines and characters, but also via their articulation in relation to its branding and the strategies it utilizes to perpetuate this identity.

While the performance of race within WWF programming had for a long time been fraught with exploitation, stereotyping, and trivialization, the late nineties engendered the continuation of these practices as the WWF organization implemented a re-branding effort known as "WWF Attitude." With the launch of this re-branding effort in 1997, the WWF reached the apex of its popularity, a fact many critics and industry insiders attributed to the organization's promotion of a new "edginess" manifested in the re-packaging of the WWF product as "sports entertainment" with "Attitude." In the

episodes of *Monday Night Raw* and WWF pay-per-views of 1997, this "Attitude" and "edge" surfaced in the WWF identity through an association of the "sports entertainment" moniker with more sexually loaded, violent, coarse, and morally ambiguous programming. As with any branding effort, the content of this Attitude Era programming was explicitly designed to attract a specific audience – in this case, 18-34-year-old males.

The practice of branding, which Catherine Johnson defines as the "attempt to shape, control and/or manage the values attributed to products and, through this, the uses to which the product is put" (Johnson 2012, 4), was widely adopted during the 1980s and 1990s as the proliferation of cable channels attempted to remain distinct in a deregulated and increasingly competitive marketplace. Targeting these appeals to particular audience niches, an ad-supported-channel's brand image thus "intended to create a viewer identity that advertisers would understand and desire" (Fuller 2010, 288). The early branding efforts of cable channels such as MTV and Nickelodeon proved so successful at garnering specific audiences that by the mid-1990s, the Big Three (ABC, CBS, and NBC) networks began to adopt similar branding strategies. Soon thereafter, individual television programs began to be developed as brands unto themselves, in effect targeting niches of the already targeted audiences to which their network partners appealed. Despite being an entity known for more than just its weekly cable broadcasts, it was through this type of program branding that the WWF organization constructed a specific identity that attracted an audience both identifiable and desired by sponsors.

By the late nineties, the WWF had long relied upon television broadcasts, both local and national, to cultivate its brand identity – an industrial strategy which this

chapter will explore at great length. During the Attitude re-branding, however, the WWF attempted to position its product as more "realistic," admitting on the one hand that professional wrestling was indeed scripted – denoted by the "sports entertainment" moniker – while still actively producing promotional materials that blurred the distinction between performance and reality. How this WWF Attitude brand identity and its carefully constructed claim to an improvised realism impacted the representation of race in the WWF remains an unexplored subject of academic research. This chapter intends to remedy this problem by contextualizing the unquestionably troublesome strategy of encouraging viewers to understand WWF Attitude programming through a lens of realism in relation to the characters and storylines presented during this period. In this regard, the project of problematizing the WWF practice of racial representation during the late nineties that began in Chapter One remains the explicit goal of this analysis. This chapter, however, does so through attention to the branding and industrial strategies of the WWF, seeking to explain the function of realism in the production of WWF programming, focusing on how this form of realism impacts the WWF's attention to matters of race, and examining how these "realistic" representations of race imply specific decisions were being made by both the WWF and USA Network to target a white audience.

How then was race presented to this audience via the WWF Attitude re-branding efforts of the 1990s? Utilizing academic as well as popular press sources such as *Sports Illustrated*, *Newsweek*, and *The New York Times*, this study will answer the question by providing a historical overview of the WWF brand. This overview reveals that the

transition to the heightened realism of "sports entertainment" in the Attitude Era stood in marked relief to prior WWF identities. Positing that the desire for audiences to read WWF programming through a lens of realism led to an increased appropriation of authentic social anxiety in order to manufacture emotional depth for storylines, the subsequent analysis will examine industrial discourse during the period of 1996-1999. This analysis will elucidate how the WWF blurred and manipulated boundaries between authentic and artificial. Recognizing the loaded nature of these two words, the first section of this chapter will provide an ideological analysis of the terms in relation to the concept of realism, as theorized by John Corner and Ien Ang.

The subsequent discursive industrial analysis includes attention to the comments of both WWF and USA Network executives, as well as observations made by journalists in the popular press and trade journals like *Variety*, *Advertising Age*, and *Television Digest*. Synthesized here to underscore the impact this "manufactured realism" had on the representation of race in the WWF, this discourse analysis and ideological textual analyses of WWF promotional videos, commercials, and interviews, will seek to understand why an organization like the WWF would engage in a re-branding effort at this time, and how the strategies employed were implicitly racialized. That is to say, this study will show how the new WWF "Attitude" can be understood as a heavily codified address to an unnamed white audience, while also attempting to understand where such an organizational move fits within the history of the WWF's brand identity.

Classical, Empiricist, and Emotional Realism

John Corner stresses the importance of approaching a mediated concept of "realism" skeptically, cautioning against what he finds to be the scholarly tendency to assume a universal notion of realism that is then deployed in vague terms throughout media studies. Arguing that only in rare cases will a viewer take what they see to be "real" instead of a depiction, Corner asserts the "considerable speculative leap" required for academics to conclude that "What [audiences] *may* do is take [television] to be a 'straight' imaging of the real […] thereby blocking questions about the nature of its *construction*, or an 'imaginatively convincing' piece of artifice […] thereby perhaps investing *trust* in the reliability both of portrayed action and any general propositions inferred from the text" (Corner 1998, 71). Ien Ang, in her examination of audience responses to the primetime serial *Dallas*, similarly discounted these common understandings of mediated realism, referring to them respectively as the "classical" and "empiricist" forms.

As the classical notion of realism is more concerned with the form of the narrative as opposed to its content, it is dependent upon a "realistic illusion: the illusion that a text is a faithful reflection of an actually existing world [which] emerges as a result of the fact that the constructedness of the text is suppressed […] In short, the classic realistic text conceals its own status as narrative and acts as though the story 'speaks for itself'" (Ang 1985, 38). This theory's inattention to narrative content detracts from its overall efficacy, as Ang observes, "not all transparent narrative texts are experienced as equally pleasurable," and thus the "the thematic differences between such texts" become

important points of rupture (Ibid., 41). Inversely, the empiricist mode of realism is largely concerned with the media object's thematic structure, and as such "a text which can be seen as an 'unrealistic' rendering of social reality (however that is defined) is 'bad,'" while a more "realistic" depiction of the cultural climate is deemed to hold higher value (Ibid., 36). This perception, too, is problematic due to the contradictory ways in which a variegated group of viewers may find a program to be either realistic or unrealistic. Such a positioning also problematically assumes a text can be a direct or immediate reproduction of an "outside world."

Both the classical and empiricist understandings of realism require a denotative reading of a program, and thus Ang concludes that by reading a televisual text at the connotative level – the level at which associative meanings can be attributed to elements of a text – viewers can ascribe mainly emotional meanings to a program. *Emotional realism*, as Ang defines it, refuses to seek in mediated texts knowledge of an objective social reality. In opposition to the classical position that a "text is bad because it only creates an illusion of knowledge," as well as the empiricist view that "a text is realistic (and therefore good) if it supplies 'adequate knowledge' of reality," an emotionally realistic understanding instead recognizes "a subjective experience of the world: a 'structure of feeling'" (Ibid., 45).

It is through the utilization of the concept of "emotional realism," therefore, that this chapter proposes assessing the WWF's representation of race. It warrants acknowledging, however, that although the WWF actively encouraged a reading of its Attitude brand of sports entertainment programming through a lens of realism, this

analysis is not in a position to conjecture as to the degree which WWF audiences actively did so. However, the WWF encouraged audiences to approach its programming with these "structures of feeling" while presenting racialized characters problematically linked to the cultural tensions about race discussed in Chapter One. This fact seems to suggest that the by appropriating this form of realism, the WWF and USA Networks assumed WWF programming would be reaching a white audience that shared its subjective views of race. While we might presume this to be the WWF's racialized target audience dating back to the organization's inception, the industrial efforts and strategies – especially the appeal to emotional realism – of this rebranding effort were primarily unique to the Attitude Era, as the following historical survey of the WWF's brand will demonstrate.

The WWF Brand: Strategies and Identity from 1952-1997

It will be important to acknowledge four key phases of the WWF brand prior to the Attitude re-branding of 1997. The first of these phases took place as the WWF first formed in 1952, and then established itself as professional wrestling organization with a strong foothold in the Northeastern U.S. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the WWF brand was regionally focused, utilizing local TV syndication to attract audiences to their live events, and using ethnicized babyfaces to appeal to local ethnic viewership. The second phase, occurring from in the early 1980s, is an important transitional period for the WWF, as the company attempted to nationalize its product. Shifting attention away from the regional, ethnic communities of the Northeast, the WWF sought national attention during the '80s through cable broadcasting and crossover marketing, expanding into female and white, middle-class demographics. The intervening years between the

mid-eighties and the early '90s – until 1993 – represent the third phase of the WWF brand, with the company remaining focused on attracting a white middle-class audience, but moving toward an appeal to children and their parents. A period of massive multimedia conglomeration, these few years brought about massive licensing agreements and potential overexposure of the WWF product, all while the company sought to cast off the vestiges of its product's relationship to actual sporting contests. The final phase to which this section focuses its attention began in 1994, and is marked by a significant downturn for the WWF. With dwindling television viewership, stagnant merchandise sales, and declines in live event attendance, the WWF sowed the roots of its Attitude re-branding effort, constructing a product that would appeal to a more specific niche of its former white middle-class audience.

1952-1979: The Territorial System

Though channel and program branding proliferated in the 1990s, the WWF has long cultivated a brand identity, seeking to distinguish itself amidst vigorous competition with other professional wrestling companies. During the '60s, professional wrestling was still being billed as a sporting competition that pitted combatants against one another in athletic bouts, and the wrestlers engaging in these contests were contracted to regional wrestling promotions that occupied "territories" throughout the US, Canada, Japan, and Mexico (Morton and O'Brien 1985, 58). Explicit in the consolidation of most of these organizations under the banner of the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA) was the understanding that no other NWA promotion could host a wrestling event outside of their territory, and the booking of matches in each territory would be the responsibility of

those owners and presidents of the established subsidiary promotion in the region (Ball 1990, 49). Each individual promotion therefore maintained a roster of wrestlers who were recognized as the talent of that specific wrestling organization (Ibid., 50). In this sense, each wrestling promotion constructed their brand identity – and thus cultivated interest in their product – through the localized broadcasting of matches that featured their respective stables of performers, especially those personalities who drew large live audiences. Popular wrestlers could be "loaned" from promotion to promotion, so long as the promoters – who were the sole beneficiaries of exchanges such as these – could reach an agreeable price for the trade.[7]

In 1963, after a disagreement over the exchange of one particular wrestler, former-NWA Champion "Nature Boy" Buddy Rogers, the Capitol Wrestling Corporation promotion promptly exited the NWA in protest. With controlling interest of the Northeast territory, the CWC named Rogers its World Champion and re-designated itself the World Wide Wrestling Federation (WWWF) (Assael and Mooneyham 2002, 15). The WWWF and its owner, Vincent J. McMahon, soon became known for poaching talent from other territories, including its future eight-year champion, Bruno Sammartino, whom McMahon lured from NWA's Toronto territory (Johnson and Oliver 2012, 20). Recalling the discussion of the Racial/Ethnic Hero in Chapter One, we might note the ability of the Italian-born Sammartino and other similarly positioned babyface wrestlers to attract large assemblages of immigrants and other non-white audiences to their matches, thus presenting the first notable strategy employed by the WWF to target a specific demographic: the ethnic residents of their local territory. While the WWWF broadcast

matches during the '60s via locally-syndicated programs, it also utilized coverage of Sammartino's surging popularity in New York-based magazines to circulate its brand image beyond the borders of its Northeastern territory. The promotion – which was renamed World Wrestling Federation in 1979 – remained respectful of these borders insofar as the booking of matches was concerned for nearly two decades. Then, in 1983, Vincent J. McMahon sold the company to his son, Vincent K. McMahon.

As Vince, Jr. explained in a 1985 interview with *Sports Illustrated*, "We had been very successful in the Northeast, and I felt we could be equally successful elsewhere… So we decided to disassociate ourselves from the other promoters and make a lot of enemies all at once" (qtd. in Newman 1985). While the young McMahon positioned the WWF as a more opportunistic organization mired in an old-fashioned industry of archaic gentlemanly agreements, he soon found the project of "nationalizing" professional wrestling to be an uphill struggle given the relatively unknown status of the WWF brand in territories dominated by other local wrestling promotions. McMahon therefore devised a "marketing masterstroke," as *Sports Illustrated* referred to it (Ibid.): an event and its ancillary hype that might provide the WWF an unprecedented degree of national recognition, and which would attract an audience that swelled beyond the communital borders of the Northeast.

1980-1985: The "Rock 'n Wrestling Connection"

During the summer of 1984, pop artist Cyndi Lauper was riding a wave of commercial success after the release of her 1983 album, *She's So Unusual*. Looking to distinguish the WWF from more localized wrestling organizations, Vince McMahon

approached Lauper and her manager, David Wolff, with the suggestion of a cross-promotional arrangement – one that would promote Lauper's album and the five Billboard-topping singles it produced, while also attracting to McMahon's WWF an audience more variegated than the standard professional wrestling devotees (Attanasio 1985). In light of Lauper's appeal to teen girls, and the recognition of singles like "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" as feminist anthems, the agreement with Lauper provided the WWF not just with an association to scores of young, hip, MTV viewers, but also an explicitly female demographic.

MTV in fact abetted the synergistic effort, coining this promotional venture the "rock 'n wrestling connection," and broadcasting two WWF wrestling events, *Brawl to End it All* (July 1984) and *The War to Settle the Score* (February 1985), live on the MTV network (Newman 1985). These events proved to be major ratings boons for MTV, with the *Brawl to End it All* becoming the most-watched program in the history of the channel, based on its 9.0 Nielsen rating (Beekman 2006, 125), only to later be topped by *The War to Settle the Score* (Assael and Mooneyham 2002, 56). McMahon's product was also garnering high ratings elsewhere in the cable television landscape, with two of his wrestling productions – *Tuesday Night Titans* and *WWF All-American Wrestling*, both broadcast on the USA Network – appearing in the Nielsen listing of top-ten cable programs during this period (Newman 1985).

By the mid-1980s, professional wrestling had emerged as a true phenomenon of American popular culture. Whereas just a decade prior, wrestling had been confined to smoke-filled gymnasiums and the occasional syndicated program on a local television

station, the performances were now attracting crowds that filled entire stadiums and garnered the attention of millions of Americans via cable broadcasts. As sports commentator Bob Costas observed, "The WWF is the force behind this new perception of wrestling. Like it or not, what's causing wrestling to go mainstream is the McMahon approach" (qtd. in Ibid.). Owing much of this success to its new affiliation with MTV and the irreverent, hip sensibility the WWF brand subsequently assumed through this association, we must also consider the degree to which this relationship implicated that the target MTV audience then became the desired WWF audience. That is, if MTV was geared toward reaching the children of baby-boomers, largely understood to be middle-class and white, then the WWF appeared to be appealing to the same demographic. This marked a significant shift away from the attention to regional, ethnic audiences of the past.

The "McMahon approach" sought to pursue this new, more "mainstream" (read: white, middle-class) audience in two key ways. First, by relying on cross-marketing such as the "rock 'n wrestling connection," the WWF constructed a type of generic synergy that appropriated the popularity of other performers and forms of entertainment to "establish wrestling as a leisure-time activity for a new generation" (Attanasio 1985). For this reason, the marketing spectacle surrounding McMahon's inaugural *Wrestlemania* event in March of 1985 threatened to overshadow any of the actual wrestling matches scheduled for the one-night, three-hour extravaganza. During the lead-up to the event, the WWF's promotional work sought to prove that wrestling had indeed "become the new barometer of hip for the '80s" (Newman 1985), touting the involvement of Cyndi Lauper

as well as Mr. T – the latter riding the success of his popular series *The A-Team* (1983-1987) – in two of the evening's matches. McMahon also guaranteed viewers the event would be attended by several special guests, and he did not disappoint: Gloria Steinem, Andy Warhol, David Letterman, and Joe Piscopo were all in attendance that night, while Muhammad Ali and Liberace were both included in the card's final match, serving as guest referee and timekeeper, respectively (Attanasio 1985).

If McMahon's goal was to market a professional wrestling event that was accessible in its appeal to even non-wrestling fans, then the $12 million revenue from the combined gross of live, pay-per-view, and closed circuit admission seemed to indicate that he had succeeded, as it was an amount that "no one in the wrestling world had thought was possible" (Taaffe 1985; Assael and Mooneyham 2002, 58). While there is no notable record as to the racial and class demographics of the live event attendance or pay-per-view purchases, we can observe the latter's status as a premium form of content delivery likely precluded its widespread use by persons of lower socio-economic standing. As Patrick Parsons and Robert Frieden point out in their study of the cable and satellite television industries, the tiered structure of cable pricing finds pay-per-view content – still a new service at the time of *Wrestlemania* – at the peak of revenue progression (1998, 225-226). While cost would certainly not prevent low-income audiences from attending public or group viewings of the event, it certainly would seem to price them out to the point that we can safely assume they represent a significantly smaller portion of the millions of dollars earned in pay-per-view revenue. As such, we

can conclude that the WWF brand at this time was primarily reaching its target middle-class audience.

Along with synergistic cross-marketing, the second way in which McMahon capitalized on the new mainstream perceptions of wrestling was to sell WWF programming to new regional and national television markets. Saturating the television landscape with WWF performers and storylines in this manner would, McMahon ventured, further increase demand for the WWF product while forcing smaller wrestling promotions to collapse. McMahon was seldom timid about addressing the opportunistic direction in which he took the company, though he frequently presented this opportunism as a matter of consumer choice: "We already had our network in the Northeast and we started selling these shows to stations in other fiefdoms… the WWF brand of wrestling was something new. We had better athletes – more upscale and more charisma. The local guys were lazy. They weren't listening to the marketplace… We gave the public what it wanted" (McMahon qtd. in Johnson 1991). While the public may indeed have been clamoring for the WWF product and its larger-than-life characters, McMahon hardly provided for a competitive alternative, frequently leveraging his pocketbook and a familiarity with cable platforms to strong-arm other promotions.

In those markets where local wrestling promotions presented strong competition, McMahon paid stations an exorbitant amount to ensure his product maintained a television presence – in some cases, upwards of $10,000 per week (Assael and Mooneyham 2002, 53). As the local programs were forced from the airwaves, it resulted

in a WWF television "empire," as journalist William Taaffe referred to it, which included:

> […] three shows a week on the USA Network […] two shows per week on WOR-TV, the New York super-station that can be picked up around the country; a weekly nationally syndicated program on 124 stations; occasional special-event shows on MTV, on pay-per-view cable services and in closed-circuit theaters; a 90-minute show that will substitute for NBC's Saturday Night Live once a month […] and a Hulk Hogan cartoon series on CBS… (Taaffe 1985)

By deliberately overexposing WWF characters in both the regional and national markets, McMahon negotiated a thin line between creating a brand that fatigued audiences with its omnipresence, and one which effectively created audience demand for his product in order to eliminate weaker promotions. The exposure of larger-than-life characters such as Hulk Hogan, Andre the Giant, and Rowdy Roddy Piper in programs like the Hulk Hogan cartoon mentioned above also attracted an even younger white, middle-class audience – a demographic the WWF would increasingly court throughout the next several years.

1986-1993: Family Entertainment

As the 1980s elapsed, and more children followed the animated exploits of Hulk Hogan and the rest of the WWF wrestlers in the Saturday morning cartoon *Hulk Hogan's Rock 'n' Wrestling* (CBS, 1985-1986), journalists marveled at the successful marketing of WWF's glitzy brand of professional wrestling as family entertainment. One *Sports Illustrated* columnist, William Johnson, even observed, "These days, WWF wrestling shows compete for audiences with the Ice Capades, the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, the Harlem Globetrotters and Walt Disney Productions" (Johnson 1991).

This targeted appeal to children and families represented an attempt to capture a heretofore-untapped market in the realm of professional wrestling, the culmination of a major branding and licensing project ancillary to the WWF's media saturation. In addition to promoting the product as more than strictly adult and/or teen entertainment through flashy national broadcasts and locally syndicated television programs, the WWF also produced a bimonthly self-promoting magazine entitled *WWF*, which boasted a circulation of nearly 200,000 – twice that of its nearest competitor. It also licensed more than forty products and toys (Wayne 1986).

Included in this catalog of WWF-branded merchandise were numerous products tailored to a youth demographic: lunchboxes that were licensed to Thermos, ice cream bars licensed to Gold Bond, and children's multi-vitamins licensed to Solaris Marketing Group (Johnson 1991). Toys were by far the highest grossing branded product during this period, with the WWF's master toy licensee, LJN Toys Ltd., selling more than four million eight-inch wrestling dolls – at $6 to $8 per doll – during a single year (Wayne 1986). With the annual revenue from the licensing and merchandise sales of these products estimated at $200 million by the early nineties (Johnson 1991), merchandising profits seemed to indicate parents had little objection to entertaining the interests of their children as consumers, yet this did not always translate to live event ticket sales. Confronted with a parallel industrial legal difficulty in 1989 – which is described below – the WWF would utilize the opportunity to yet again augment the WWF brand. This time the alteration in brand identity was related to the WWF's perception as a legitimate sporting contest, and was done in order to attract the youth demographic *and* their parents

to stadiums and arenas around the U.S. As a result, the adoption of the phrase "sports entertainment" to supplant the term "professional wrestling" signified a transformation that prompted the director of the Family Entertainment Division of Madison Square Garden, John Urban, to observe about that venue's audiences, "People used to think, pro wrestling, *ugh*, Ice Capades, great. No more" (qtd. in Johnson 1991).

This shift was motivated in part by the New Jersey Senate's introduction of a bill in 1989 that aimed to levy a ten-percent surtax on profits from sports television revenues. Because professional wrestling bouts were still recognized – both legally and culturally – as sporting contests, the WWF took swift action to prevent this tax from impacting the company's bottom line. The organization issued a statement to the New Jersey Senate arguing that professional wrestling be defined as: "An activity in which participants struggle hand-in-hand primarily for the purpose of providing entertainment to spectators rather than conducting a bona fide athletic contest" (qtd. in Kerr 1989). Interestingly, Vince McMahon separately articulated the genesis of the term "sports entertainment" as a moniker to more accurately describe the WWF product, and thus attract a wider audience during this period: "There was too much emphasis on the sports element and not enough on entertainment in the old days. Now we call it sports entertainment. We don't want to deemphasize the athleticism of wrestling […] But in the WWF, entertainment is the key" (Vince McMahon, qtd. in Ibid.). McMahon's posturing, though a transparent attempt to spin a political-financial story into a branding opportunity, did manage to shift the discourse from one about the WWF's unimpeded financial growth to a conversation

about the entertaining appeal of the WWF product, a message that seemed to resonate with its audience of middle-class white families.

As John Urban, again, observed, "Once Vince moved past the big question – Is it real or not real? – they [the WWF] shook off the last vestiges of the old pro wrestling image. It became more respectable than ever" (qtd. in Johnson 1991). Other venue managers similarly noted the trend, with the general manager of the Los Angeles Coliseum, Peter Luukko, offering, "Wrestling always produced strong crowds, but it was often a very rough night – mostly males who were beer-drinkers and had a tendency to get into a lot of fights […] Vince not only called it entertainment, he made it over into real entertainment […] and that brought fans out of the closet from every age and economic group […]" (qtd. in Ibid.). Observations such as these, while emphasizing the popularity of the WWF brand with a wider audience, raise the complicated notion that, as a consequence of its admission that wrestling was fake, the WWF product was perceived as a somehow more "legitimate" form of entertainment. This problematic correlation links the success of the WWF product and its branding strategies to an audience increasingly implied to be middle-class and white.

As the mid-nineties approached, the WWF's position as pop culture phenomenon and family entertainment powerhouse was beginning to fade. In 1993, the organization moved into primetime television production with their long-time cable partner, USA Network,[8] and while initial ratings for its new flagship program, *Monday Night Raw*, looked promising, this was largely due to relatively weak competition offered by cable competitors during the program's Monday evening timeslot ("USA First in Primetime"

1993). This market dynamic would be unequivocally altered when the Ted Turner-backed World Championship Wrestling (WCW) – which featured remnants of the former NWA – began poaching well-known wrestlers such as Hulk Hogan and Roddy Piper from the WWF. The rival wrestling promotion then announced in 1995 that it would offer its own primetime wrestling program, airing in the same timeslot as *Monday Night Raw*, on Turner's TBS Superstation (Flint 1995). Perhaps signifying the audience's fatigue with the overexposed WWF product, WCW's *Monday Nitro* rapidly began outperforming *Monday Night Raw* in the Nielsen ratings ("TNT Tops All Basic Cable" 1996). Though the WWF filed several lawsuits against WCW citing unfair competition, trademark infringement, defamation, and trade libel (Flint 1996; Richmond 1996), it was evident that the WWF would need to act swiftly in order to stave off the continued decline of television ad revenue and live event attendance.

1994-1997: The WWF's New "Attitude"

While emerging competition from WCW certainly contributed to the strain on WWF viewership, experts were also quick to identify the correlation of the WWF's early- to mid-nineties downturn to its over-marketing during the late 1980s. For example, commentators such as John Wendt, director of the University of St. Thomas' MBA sports and entertainment program, noted, "They [the WWF] got hit by saturation big time […] wrestling almost became a parody of itself. It lost credibility and audience" (qtd. in Shermach 1997). McMahon seemed to acknowledge the shortsightedness of the WWF's tightrope venture of media saturation, confessing, "We haven't been able to adapt to market conditions as quickly as we should have" (qtd. in Richmond 1997). His senior

vice president of licensing and merchandising, Jim Bell, offered a more defensive stance: "Wrestling wasn't overmarketed in the '80s. If anything, we're risking overmarketing it now [… but] we're choosing licensees very carefully in key categories. We don't want to overlicense…" (Jim Bell, qtd. in Shermach 1997). Despite the insulated nature of Bell's comments, they suggest an organizational course change spurred by the WWF's past marketing oversight.

With the company thus merchandising more cautiously, it allowed the WWF marketing machine to shift its focus to the project of re-branding its tired image away from attracting audiences of adults and children, and toward an identity that would appeal to a narrower – though no less white or middle-class – demographic. Most industry insiders referred to this re-branding effort as a matter of product differentiation, with the WWF attempting to distinguish itself from rival WCW, whose brand of the time suggested a desire to attract a broad audience of both young and old viewers. As noted in an early-1998 issue of *Advertising Age*, "WCW is in the early stages of planning an ad campaign to trumpet its family-friendly positioning [while] WWF is positioning itself as edgier, using the tag: 'WWF attitude'" (Jensen 1998). The WWF's re-branding effort proved enormously successful, corresponding to an increase in pay-per-view buy rates by 56 percent and television ratings by 64 percent over the course of the following year (Spring 1998). But what, really, did this new "attitude" represent? What constituted this "edgy" identity and how was it different from the WWF brand of entertainment it displaced?

As mentioned above, the WWF had several years earlier formally declared that it was not an actual athletic competition, but rather a sport-based form of entertainment. Several journalists pointed out, however, that in spite of this re-designation, WWF programming, at least initially, remained largely the same. That is, "The conflicts and characters of television wrestling – what industry experts call its story lines – maintained an odd, almost stilted kind of innocence" (Johnson 1998). Yet this approach would change dramatically during the Attitude re-branding, with McMahon claiming the WWF "has been working hard to improve its story lines," and "That was only the beginning of it. We have a product with attitude and edge" (qtd. in Spring 1998). As mentioned in the opening pages of this chapter, the "edgy" content of WWF programming at this time pushed the limits of acceptability for cable broadcasting, frequently presenting violent, vulgar, and salacious material that found the WWF in trouble with its cable partner, USA Network. Despite the network's handwringing, the WWF continued to present its Attitude-laden content, even to USA Network's begrudging benefit. That is, by adopting this brand identity, the WWF bolstered not just its audience of 6- to 17-year-old boys, but also increased viewership amongst the coveted 18- to 44-year-old male demographic (Shermach 1997).

The term "edgy" was utilized widely throughout the media industries during the late nineties as a shorthand definition for various cultural texts intended to hail a hip youth demographic. Jennifer Fuller has discussed the manner in which blackness was utilized as a signifier for "edginess" in cable programming of the mid-to-late nineties, which "cultivated white enjoyment of black culture […] while deferring frightening

connotations of blackness" (2010, 297). With this move, programs such as *Chappelle's Show*, which offered an overt critique of white supremacy, was marked safe-for-consumption for the scores of Comedy Central's core (i.e. young and white) viewership. Interestingly, the direction of *Monday Night Raw* programming at this time appropriated a very different form of "edginess." While the WWF program adopted a more frenetic style of editing – quickly cutting between cameras throughout the arena and cameramen stationed around the ring – and utilized loud, flashy pyrotechnics throughout the show's two-hour span, *Monday Night Raw*'s "edge" was thematically defined by a rather typical, white middle-class, anti-establishment fervor.

Since cultural decorum and network censors wouldn't permit lewd behavior and cursing on air, the WWF offered its viewers the spectacle of both tenfold. As WWF programming was taken to task by critics for its hyperviolence, the company introduced the Hardcore Championship – a title which was vied for in matches that required the use of weapons to bludgeon opponents. And when the WWF needed heroes to espouse anti-establishment merits, they chose to present audiences with tough white men like members of the Disciples of Apocalypse and the quintessential Rugged Individualist, "Stone Cold" Steve Austin. The WWF Attitude Era was thus constituted by an "edginess" that, in direct contradiction to Fuller's definition, cultivated white enjoyment of *white* culture while *advancing* frightening connotations of non-whiteness.

While there is no officially recognized date for the inauguration of the Attitude Era, this Chapter points to a December 1997 episode of *Monday Night Raw*, during which

WWF Chairman Vince McMahon, in an atypical pre-recorded direct address to the audience, openly discussed the changing direction of WWF programming:

> It has been said that anything can happen here in the World Wrestling Federation, but now more than ever truer words have never been spoken. This is a conscious effort on our part to open the creative envelope, so to speak, in order to entertain you in a more contemporary manner […] We borrow from such program niches like soap operas, like *Days of Our Lives*, or music videos such as those on MTV, daytime talk-shows like *Jerry Springer* and others […] We in the WWF think that you, the audience, are quite frankly tired of having your intelligence insulted. We also think that you're tired of the same old simplistic theory of "Good Guys vs. Bad Guys." Surely the era of the superhero who urged you to say your prayers and take your vitamins is definitely passé. Therefore, we've embarked on a far more innovative and contemporary creative campaign, that is far more invigorating and extemporaneous than ever before […] Through some fifty years the World Wrestling Federation has been an entertainment mainstay here in North America and all over the world. One of the reasons for that longevity is: As the times have changed, so have we (*Raw* 1997, no. 50).

Of note in these comments is, first, a concerted effort to abandon the perception of the WWF image as one that maintained the stilted innocence, to paraphrase Johnson's earlier observation, from its period as an over-the-top spectacle of family entertainment during the eighties and early-nineties. By repositioning WWF programming as a more contemporary form of entertainment that rejected the simplistic "good guys" and "bad guys" intrinsic to professional wrestling's melodramatic storytelling, the WWF also took an initial step toward shifting its attention away from the youth audience – associated with the same earlier period of cartoonish excess – demonstrating instead a desire to court an older demographic. Despite the moral ambiguity of its heroes and villains, however, the use of racialized characters and their positioning in WWF storylines against popular white babyfaces indicated an attempt on the part of the WWF to ensure the appeal to this older audience remained no less white-centric.

The second and, as this chapter suggests, most important takeaway from McMahon's message concerns his claim that this new direction for the WWF was "far more invigorating and extemporaneous than ever before." The use of the term "extemporaneous" here would seem to imply that the WWF intended to take a more improvised approach to its new mode of entertainment. While not inherently problematic, this claim raises several important questions regarding the WWF's history as scripted programming. Provided the company's earlier admission that performers struggled "hand-in-hand" in order to "provide entertainment to spectators," we need to consider in what ways this performance might be invigorated through heightened improvisation. To what extent, for example, did this claim imply the athletic performance and/or the expressed emotions of performers would be more spontaneous during this era? How might the perception of spontaneity been utilized to present WWF wrestlers as building their performances upon authentic emotions grounded in personal experience? Most importantly, how can we understand the effect of this emotionally rooted construction of performance on the WWF's representation of race?

While a discursive analysis of McMahon's on-air comments allows us to raise these questions, the following ideological textual analysis of the promotional materials advertising the Attitude re-branding offer potential answers to these queries. Additionally, in examining interviews intended to promote the re-branding efforts, we can observe a clear attempt to proclaim the WWF product was adopting some greater measure of realism, as when Vince McMahon stated in *The New York Times*: "Life is not about black and white issues – it's shades of gray – so it's important that our

characterizations and performances be somewhat gray. Sometimes, *as mirrored in life*, it's the good guys who do bad things [emphasis added]" (qtd. in Johnson 1998). Indeed, it seemed that, as Doug Battema and Philip Sewell have noted, "by the late 1990s […] The WWF [had] blurred and manipulated the boundaries between good and evil, real and fake, text and context" (Battema and Sewell 2005, 263). The racial implications of this move toward a more "lifelike" moral ambiguity, however, need to be considered in relation to the positioning of non-white characters vis-à-vis white characters in the kayfabe of WWF programming. That is, the degree to which audiences were expected to accept the questionable actions of white characters and deplore the behavior of racialized non-white characters reveals an industrial strategy on the part of the WWF and USA Network to use race to engage with ideas of realism and edginess. In order to clearly articulate this strategy, this chapter now turns to the project of analyzing specific promotions of the WWF Attitude re-branding by performing an ideological textual reading of these texts. Through this analysis it will be possible to demonstrate how the company encouraged viewers to approach its content with a sense of emotional realism.

Branding Attitude and Selling Realism

During the episode of *Monday Night Raw* that featured Vince McMahon's direct address, the company also unveiled a new logo, marking not only the WWF's departure from its preceding brand identity, but also as a means of symbolizing the company's new "edgy" attitude (*Monday Night Raw* 1997, no. 50). The new company logo was, in many ways, simply an update of the classic WWF logo, which featured two vertically-stacked block-letter "W"s, the right-hand sides of which extended outward into a makeshift letter

"F." While this classic logo was occasionally tilted on its axis in promotional material of the early-nineties, it had been otherwise unchanged for approximately twenty years. The re-vamped logo of the Attitude Era discarded the block lettering in favor of a script that appeared to be more "scratched," and included a similarly etched accentuating red line appearing underneath the letters (See Figure 3.1). Though this new logo initially appeared in the lower left corner of WWF's *Monday Night Raw* programming without any mention of its appearance, over the next several months its presence became more ubiquitous, as it soon emblazoned the wrestling ring-skirt and turnbuckles, adorned the elaborate stage entrance, and appeared in commercials promoting the WWF brand.

Figure 3.1: The three phases of the WWF logo.

One such commercial, the first of what would be many WWF Attitude promotional spots, each alike in content, aired the Monday following McMahon's address, during *Monday Night Raw*'s first commercial break on the USA Network (*Monday Night Raw* 1997, no. 51). Throughout the 50-second montage, eight WWF performers were presented independently of one another and solemnly offered narration as to their ancillary athletic accomplishments. The spot included a three-time golden

glove boxing champion, two college football champions, and an ultimate fighting champion. Other performers featured in the advertisement intoned equally gravely about the real injuries sustained during in-ring competition, citing countless stitches, concussions, broken bones, and an incident when a wrestler "damn near broke [his] neck." Each man thus broke character in an apparent address to viewers as the "real" individual behind the performance. The commercial ended with the wrestlers asserting, "This is who I am," "This is what I do," "I'm not really an athlete?," "This isn't real?," "Try lacing my boots," followed by the slow fade-in of the WWF "scratch" logo with the word "Attitude" scrawled underneath.

Of key importance to the advertisement's underlying message is the fact that each performer is depicted wearing their signature wrestling attire, obfuscating the men's narrative claims to realism by tying them visually to their wrestling alter-egos. Given an environment in which, according to WWF wrestler Mick Foley, McMahon levied a behind-the-scenes charge to his performers that, "everybody was going to have to put a little bit more of themselves into the characters" (qtd. in *WWE: The Attitude Era*, 2012), it becomes obvious that a major component of the WWF Attitude re-branding entailed the conflation of the performers' real personalities and those fake wrestling personas they assumed. As this advertisement, based on its inclusion in a *Monday Night Raw* commercial block, was clearly targeting an audience of active WWF viewers, we can problematize this promotional strategy to the degree that it invited audiences to read the characters and performances of the new WWF Attitude brand as more "realistic" than

earlier representations, rooted as it was in a particular "structure of feeling," as Ien Ang might call it.

In addition to these promotional spots, the WWF produced ancillary media for the more devoted WWF fan during this period that also promoted a "realistic" way to perceive its wrestlers and storylines. John Campbell has noted that, "For loyal wrestling fans, secondary texts such as wrestling magazines promote the circulation of meanings of the primary text, televised wrestling matches. The meanings from the secondary text are read back into the primary text, creating a new reality of the images on the screen…" (Campbell 1996). While the WWF had produced one such secondary text – the aforementioned *WWF Magazine* – since April 1984, the company launched a second publication, *Raw Magazine*, just prior to the dawn of the Attitude Era in May 1996. The magazine was advertised as being "for the mature fan," and was purported to offer an inside look at behind-the-scenes activity, focusing on wrestlers' "real life" profiles. While the issues of *Raw Magazine* produced during the Attitude Era did occasionally refer to the scripted nature of WWF programming, it often constructed an ambiguous relationship between reality and performance. As Battema and Sewell observe, "Behind-the-scenes accounts mark some elements within the texts as fictional and, by implication, other elements as real" (Battema and Sewell 2005, 265). With the circulation of *Raw Magazine*, then, the WWF once again invited fans to speculate about the realism of the performance, a perception that seemed all the more plausible due to the company's more straightforward admissions about its "hand-in-hand" entertaining nature.

If the Attitude re-branding effort was proposing a new way for its established audiences to perceive the product, we might question how these appeals compare to the manner in which the WWF brand was being presented to non-WWF audiences, or at least, those viewers not actively watching WWF programming at the time. In other words, how did the WWF attempt to attract a wider audience to its new brand of sports entertainment, and to what degree did this appeal also rely on claims of realism? One advertisement that was clearly aimed at a wider viewership, having been broadcast on the Fox network in 1999 during one of the commercial breaks of Super Bowl XXXIII, featured several wrestlers offering farcical "clarifications" about the WWF brand as they toured the WWF Headquarters in Stamford, Connecticut ("WWF Superbowl Spot"). Irony pervades the advertisement as the wrestlers, strolling comfortably in their ring attire amongst brawling men and women clad in suits and office-wear, assert such wildly misleading claims as, "We're a non-violent form of entertainment," "We never use sex to enhance our image, " and "We're good, wholesome, family entertainment." The success of the advertisement depends upon the viewer's understanding of the comments as tongue-in-cheek, therefore reinforcing the WWF image as being antithetically positioned in relation to each claim. Herein we find, as is common for much of the promotional material produced during the "edgy" Attitude Era, the WWF brand being presented for consumption via the mantra that sex and violence sells.

Another, more understated commercial that was also directed at a viewership other than WWF-viewers aired intermittently throughout 1999 on the Fox Sports Network. This 60-second spot begins with a slow fade-in on a sepia-toned gymnasium, as

a single flute and accompanying piano affect a serious mood, bordering on somberness ("WWE/WWF Commercial Promo"). One by one, five former WWF wrestlers recognized as "legends" within the organization proceed to reflect upon the industry as it existed – or more accurately, was *perceived* – during their careers, with many of their comments touting the comparable lack of frills in prior decades: "There were no pyrotechnics. No fancy flashing lights." The men also emphasize their own masculinity to such an extent that it seems as if they are reflecting upon their careers as a competition rather than a "performance." The commercial ends with these men conferring upon the Attitude Era-performers this same status, as they affirm, "We were men of courage, men of steel. They are men without fear… Today, I cheer for them." The dubious connection the advertisement seems to draw between performance and competition is heightened through its nostalgia for a past that predates the WWF's New Jersey Senate confession of 1989. It longs for, and thus reinforces, sports entertainment's perception as a "real" athletic contest rather than a form of entertainment in which "participants struggle hand-in-hand."

The reality blurring tendency of WWF Attitude programming and the company's concomitant encouragement of viewers to understand these texts through the lens of emotional realism remains as yet unexplored in relation to representations of race. More specifically, the branding and industrial strategies of the WWF Attitude Era must be understood to affect the way in which audiences interpreted the racialized characters mentioned in Chapter One, emblematic as they were of racial tensions circulating in the broader American cultural discourse. As such, the WWF's branding and advertising

strategies of the late nineties were both explicitly and implicitly racialized, a fact that the remainder of this chapter further illustrates.

WWF Attitude: A Racialized Re-Branding

The WWF Attitude re-branding effort can be understood as explicitly and implicitly racialized in two ways: explicitly, through its dependence upon "structures of feeling" to position audiences against non-white characters; and implicitly, as a result of the concomitant presumption that this message would be well received by an assumed white audience. As the WWF encouraged viewers to read WWF programming as emotionally realistic, and expected them to understand characters and storylines through a "structure of feeling" that was specifically racialized, the actions of white babyfaces increasingly became presented as justifiable in response to the conduct of non-white heels. This in turn revealed that the WWF and USA Network, while never articulating their imagined audience publicly, certainly valued the viewership of an overwhelmingly white audience – a fact that becomes equally evident via the positioning of *Monday Night Raw* on the USA Network schedule.

Speaking to the connotative meanings inherent in the melodramatic performance of professional wrestling, Henry Jenkins has observed that "the events are staged to ensure maximum emotional impact… there is something at stake in every match – something more than who possesses the title belts" (Jenkins 2005, 40). Marc Leverette elaborates upon these stakes, asserting that professional wrestling can be understood as "social drama in which morality plays are acted out by stereotypes who signify various rungs on the social ladder," serving a symbolic function as "sociological propaganda"

(Leverette 2003, 49). As Chapter One has shown, stereotypes have proliferated throughout the WWF's history, but during the Attitude Era, two types in particular became popular avenues through which to symbolize this "sociological propaganda": the Domestic Menace, linked as it was to the militant, unified, non-white male who agitated against the white status quo; and the Rugged Individualist, who embodied the pioneering spirit and neoliberal ideal of self-reliance, positioned as a nostalgic American hero coded to be the intrinsically white response to the "threats" advanced by non-white groups at the time.

It is the text's encouraging of fans and viewers to connect with white babyface types such as the Rugged Individualist, and the adverse instigation to jeer the non-white Domestic Menace type that imbues WWF programming with its emotional realism. Provided a narrative environment wherein the distinction between babyface and heel was increasingly obscured, and in which the WWF positioned racialized stereotypes within these storylines, we can begin to discern the problematic association between an active reading of WWF programming as emotionally realistic and the company's representational practices. That is, the WWF encouraged a reading of their programming via a "structure of feelings" that reified contemporary racial tensions through the use of performances that explicitly invited audiences to disrespect the Domestic Menace type as the era's archetypal heel. With respect to the representation of non-whites through the characterization of the Domestic Menace, this type's presence served to reflect the predominant sociohistorical perception of non-whites circulating in American culture at

large, and as such, further evidenced the WWF's strategy to use cultural notions of race to inflame a sense of emotional realism in WWF programming.

Though Vince McMahon has never directly admitted to the appropriation of racial tensions in WWF programming, he did profess that if a personal or social experience could be utilized in service of storylines, "we will unabashedly capitalize on it. I don't believe any subject matter is sacred. It is the American way" (qtd. in Heath 1998). This philosophy is most evident in Attitude Era programming through the use of Nation of Islam-inspired militant discourse by Domestic Menace characters like Ahmed Johnson and the Nation of Domination, and the gang-like characterization of a stable of Puerto Rican wrestlers known as Los Boricuas, who frequently outnumbered and assaulted white babyface wrestlers and fled at the first sign of an evenly-matched fight. The willingness to appropriate cultural tensions regarding militant and violent non-whites, thereby characterizing these performers as menacing and aligning audiences with their less threatening, predominantly white opponents, thus positions the WWF product as dependent upon a viewer identification with these characters that is rooted in an explicitly *racialized* "structure of feeling."

Because of the overtly racial implications of this subject positioning, we need to consider the extent to which viewers chose to passively accept this participatory manipulation by the WWF, availing themselves to this positioning against racialized menaces. The decision to generally accept, negotiate, or resist the representation of race in the entertainment provided has just as much to do with the way a company brands itself as it does with a culture that allows a company to pervasively and purposefully

present racialized characters that aim to keep the non-white Other marginalized and feared. In this sense, we also need to acknowledge the positioning of WWF viewers within the larger schema of the American citizenry, and thus, as susceptible to hegemonic ideologies disseminated in contemporary cultural discourse. The WWF audience then, must be understood to approach WWF programming with a racialized structure of feeling rooted in a culture that was increasingly invested in a colorblind approach to matters of race, but no less focused on privileging whiteness.

As the colorblind ideology asserts that "race no longer matters and […] the problems afflicting people of color are fundamentally rooted in their pathological cultures," Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has argued that, "most whites endorse the ideology of color blindness and that this ideology is central to the maintenance of white privilege" (Bonilla-Silva 2003, 13-14). As Bonilla-Silva thus posits the unquestionable pervasiveness of a colorblind ideology and its possessive investment in whiteness during the nineties, we need to question the degree to which WWF programming of this period relied upon a structure of feeling rooted in this ideology, an indication that the WWF and USA Network assumed their programming would resonate with a largely white audience. Though no discourse uncovered in the research for this study evidenced a marketing strategy that explicitly targeted the Attitude re-branding at a white audience, it is the noticeable omission of any mention of racial demographics entirely that indicates a need to consider the manner in which these racialized structures of feeling were expected to resonate with viewers.

Much of the discourse concerning the audience demographics of WWF programming during this time focuses on changes in viewership, particularly among adult males, with trade journals such as *Advertising Age* noting, "Wrestling has always been an effective vehicle for reaching kids and teens but now is also a good way to get men 18 to 49 years old" (Jensen 1998). The expansion of this particular demographic is perhaps unsurprising, owing to the lascivious presentation of scantily clad female bodies and hyper-violent matches on WWF broadcasts during this period. To arrive at such a conclusion would also assume a generalization about the variegated class backgrounds constituting the WWF viewership, an assumption *Variety* refuted by similarly citing a change in demographics that acted to emphasize the WWF's earlier perception as a form of low- to lower-middle-class entertainment:

> In December 1998, the WWF's 'Monday Night Raw' achieved a 100 index in households with incomes of $50,000, meaning that wrestling viewers rank on par with the rest of the TV landscape in that upscale demographic. In December 1997, the WWF had only a 79 index in this category […] In households with four-plus years of college, 'Monday Night Raw' increased from a paltry 39 index in December 1997 to a better, but still below-average 60 index in December 1998 (Katz 1999).

While these observations certainly make a strong case for an understanding of WWF viewership as undergoing major changes during the late nineties, an important way in which the demographics of WWF programming remained the same – and which goes unmentioned in this commentary – can be observed in the context of its positioning on the USA Network schedule. In airing WWF broadcasts in a primetime Monday slot since 1993, USA Network had consistently scheduled *Monday Night Raw* between hour-long dramatic series that featured white leads and predominantly white casts. Programming of

this sort was commonplace to the USA Network schedule during this time, with other notable live-action programs including *La Femme Nikita*, *Weird Science*, and *Pacific Blue* (which did manage to include one Latino in its primary cast). During the 1993-1996 seasons, *Monday Night Raw* was preceded in the Monday night lineup by re-runs of *Murder, She Wrote* (CBS), and followed by episodes of *Silk Stalkings* (CBS; USA Network), while the 1997-2000 television season saw the displacement of *Murder, She Wrote* with *Walker, Texas Ranger* (CBS), and *La Femme Nikita* assumed the program slot previously held by *Silk Stalkings* (Shapiro 2012). The programming block constructed around an additional hour of WWF programming, *Sunday Night Heat* (1998-2000), which was introduced on USA Network in 1998 and garnered substantial ratings in its Sunday night slot (Dempsey "USA Pins Wrestling" 1998), was no different: the program was preceded in the Sunday night lineup by *G vs. E* (USA Network) and followed by re-runs of *La Femme Nikita* (Shapiro 2012).

What all of these details ignore, therefore, is the fact that WWF programming was positioned on a cable network that broadcast predominantly white programming, amidst particular primetime lineups that we might safely presume were directed at white audiences. As such, the representations of race manifest in WWF programming need to be understood as based upon the assumptions made by USA Network and WWF executives that WWF programming was similarly reaching a largely, if not categorically, white audience. If, as this study has argued, the sports entertainment performance can be seen as a symbolic representation of the audience's social struggles, and, as Marc Leverette has observed, "[professional wrestlers] are not simply athletes, but signifiers of

specific positions within the social order" (Leverette 2003, 116), then the WWF programming of the Attitude Era stands as a symbolic narrative about cultural and racial superiority. Addressing the white audience through programming that positioned non-white performers as threats to the (white) cultural status quo, while at the same time engaging in a re-branding effort that attempted to present these characters and storylines as being grounded in "reality," WWF Attitude Era programming does not simply reflect the racial tensions circulating in late nineties America: it problematically reifies them.

Conclusion: The Impact of a Colorblind Ideology

In spite of the WWF's problematic attention to matters of race and racial difference during the heightened realism of its Attitude-branded programming, much of the press only seemed interested in discussing the company's unparalleled success throughout its re-branding effort of the late nineties. During the last quarter of 1998, *Monday Night Raw* garnered record ratings for USA Network, with *Variety* noting, "Season to date (Sept. 21-Nov. 30), USA harvests an average of 2,017,000 males 12-34 […] That number puts USA ahead of all the broadcast networks for the time period in that demo – except for ABC, whose 'Monday Night Football' is averaging 3,251,000 males 12-34…" (Dempsey "Young Men" 1998). While the notion of a cable program's ratings trumping those of network broadcasts is commonly discussed today, the WWF and USA Network's successes during the late nineties mark a notable early victory for a cable network. Revenues were at an all time high for the company, swelling from $81.9 million in 1997 to $251.5 million in 1998, the same period during which its bottom line ballooned from a loss of $6.5 million to a profit of $56 million (Roberts 1999). However,

the press wasn't entirely favorable about the WWF during the Attitude Era. Many publications and media outlets noted the backlash to the WWF's new insolent brand of sports entertainment, seeing this new brand as a significant departure from the company's family friendly identity of the eighties (Oldenburg 1999, Reardon 1999).

For example, one of the segments featured in a March 1999 episode of *Inside Edition* included the findings from an *Inside Edition*-commissioned Northwestern University study regarding the WWF's troubling program content. The quantitative study cites the number of instances throughout 50 episodes of *Monday Night Raw* wherein actions and verbal exchanges construed as sexual, lewd, or coarse were exhibited ("'Inside Edition' Slams Wrestling" 1999). Nowhere on the program, though, is attention devoted to problematic representations of race, nor potentially racist actions and dialogue. This lack of attention to race is not uncommon, as the research for the discursive analysis included in this study yielded only one article – in a 1999 edition of *Television Digest* – that included any mention of race in its criticism of WWF programming. While *Television Digest* is an American publication, the article in question concerns the Canadian cable sports network TSN, and a series of complaints filed with the Canadian Radio-TV & Telecom Commission regarding the "violence, adult content, simulated sexual activities, profane language, and *offensive portrayal of blacks* and women… [emphasis added]" in the WWF programming broadcast on the network ("Notebook" 1999). It is especially noteworthy, therefore, that the only journalistic coverage critical of the WWF's representation of race is mentioned in relation to the reception of WWF programming by non-American audiences.

If, as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam argue, "spectators themselves come equipped with a 'sense of the real' rooted in their own experience, on the basis of which they can accept, question, or even subvert a [media object's] representations," and thus, "the cultural preparation of a particular audience can generate counter-pressure to a racist or prejudicial discourse" (Shohat and Stam 1994, 182), then what might we be able to note about the unwillingness of the American press to challenge the appeal to racialized structures of feeling in WWF programming? Because of the integral role assumed by audiences in the performance and spectacle of sports entertainment, "raced ways of seeing" and racialized structures of feeling will always represent a problematic component of WWF programming, but as the evidence included in this chapter has shown, audiences were bolstered by the lack of attention to race from the television industry and press, and thus were encouraged to actively ignore the prejudices manifest in WWF programming. The concurrent embrace of colorblind (and other political-cultural) ideologies during the late-1990s, therefore, further burdens the reading of race in WWF programming due to the fact that, through the ideological explanation of contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics, white privilege and racial injustices become taboo topics which are no longer discussed socially. Future research thus needs to consider WWF programming of the late nineties in relation to the contemporary political-cultural ideologies, assessing in yet further detail the impact of this discourse upon the WWF's representation of race.

Chapter Three: "The Ragin' Climax": Reconstituting Whiteness Through the Cultural, Political, and WWF Championship Discourse of the Late Nineties

As this study has shown, racial anxieties were rife in America during the 1990s. Chapter One explored tensions that stemmed from increased media attention to cultural events such as the L.A. uprising, the Million Man March, and mounting gang violence in urban locales, and then revealed how these tensions were manifest in the radicalized and militant Domestic Menace throughout the Attitude Era. Chapter Two then explicated how components of the television industry – the WWF and USA Network, specifically – reified these tensions through the production of racialized structures of feeling in programming broadcast to an assumedly white audience. While political discourse can certainly be understood to inform the socio-cultural responses discussed in these other chapters, this study has not yet fully examined the degree to which the politics of the dominant social order were privileged within these media texts.

As the presidential administration of Bill Clinton transitioned into its second term in 1997, it continued to propagate the neoliberalist policies of the late eighties and early nineties: chiefly, the privatization and/or elimination of social safety nets, which disproportionately victimized those members of society who belonged to the same non-white cultures that the neoliberalist investment in multicultural rhetoric sought to celebrate. As Henry Giroux and other academics have pointed out, mediated representations produced during this time bolstered the hegemonic power of neoliberalist tenets by advancing discourses that asserted the virtue of white middle-class normativity,

reconstituting white dominance amidst a cultural moment these academics define as the "crisis of whiteness" (Giroux 1997; Wellman 1997; Kincheloe and Steinberg 1998; Kusz 2007). At stake in this period of perceived crisis was the illumination of white privilege as it stood in marked relief from discourses circulating about disadvantaged members of non-white cultures. The effect was to "racialize" white identity, revealing it to be a social construct rather than the cultural status quo. The linkage between mediated representations and neoliberalist ideals thus became a project concerned with reasserting, through codified means, the "naturalness" of white centrism – in other words, to reconstitute whiteness.

As television texts already shown to be trafficking in problematic practices of racial representation, how might WWF programming have contributed to these practices of bolstering white normativity? Unique to the realm of professional wrestling, there exists the possibility of tying the discourse of the "crisis of whiteness" to the scripted programming that was concerned with the capturing of championship titles. In this way, championship belts can be understood as physical manifestations of the redemption of whiteness. Henry Jenkins has observed that "Championships are sometimes unjustly granted to rule-breakers but ultimately belong to the virtuous. WWF wrestling offers its viewers a story of justice perverted and restored..." (Jenkins 1997, 41). In problematizing the linkages between WWF programming and the sociopolitical discourse of the late nineties, the issue at the core of this chapter is concerned with the perception of this struggle in relation to the representation of race. That is, this chapter asks: how does the representation of the struggle for WWF championship titles during the late nineties

privilege neoliberal discourse and mark an effort to reconstitute whiteness? Lest the allegorical implications of this struggle for justice occurring within the WWF ring be overlooked, let us briefly consider the storyline and discourse constructed around one such title match.

At a WWF pay-per-view event during December 1997, Rocky "The Rock" Maivia, a member of the stable of militant black wrestlers known as the Nation of Domination, was set to compete for the Intercontinental Championship against the "raging redneck" – and hugely popular babyface – "Stone Cold" Steve Austin. In a kayfabe speech delivered prior to the match, The Rock was adamant that he would be "defending" the Intercontinental title, despite the fact that he only obtained possession of the championship belt after literally stealing it from behind Stone Cold's back several weeks earlier. Throughout the subsequent bout, Stone Cold battled not just The Rock, but also the three other members of the Nation of Domination who frequently interfered in the proceedings. The group ultimately proved no match for Stone Cold and his pick-up truck – which he drove ringside – as he quickly dispatched with The Rock, thus retaining his title of Intercontinental Champion and regaining his stolen property. It seemed nothing would forestall the jubilation of justice having been served, as one of the on-air commentators exclaimed, "Steve Austin has done it! Taking on the entire Nation, and overcoming all the odds!" (*WWE: The History of the Intercontinental Championship*, 2008). Indeed, Stone Cold surmounted much opposition to recapture his "stolen" property. But his hard work didn't mean the belt would remain his for long. The next

night, he was forced to forfeit the title, on a technicality, to the man from whom he had just reclaimed possession.

The Rock and Stone Cold, as the respective surrogates for the dark-skinned Other seeking to game the system and the self-reliant white man off of whose "deserved" success the dark-skinned Other leeched, represent characters uniquely situated within the political context of the late nineties. The conflict between the two characters provides an allegorical examination of the neoliberalist ideologies and discursive investment in white normativity that governed much of the contemporary cultural attitudes about race. This chapter expands on these ideas by offering a closer examination of WWF programming as a struggle between hero and villain in order to reveal how the political climate informed the match-ups between these two characters. The Rock and Stone Cold were selected for this study because their struggles for championships during the period of 1996-1999 now define the WWF Attitude Era in company retrospectives. They were also the most popular heel and babyface of the time, as will be evidenced below.

This chapter will begin with an analysis of several academic studies of neoliberalism in order to provide a foundational understanding of the concept, so that it may then be shown to inform the "crisis of whiteness." The chapter then addresses the resultant mediated representations of race produced during this time. Next, turning to WWF programming once again as a series of texts reflective of the dominant commercial institution of television, this chapter will utilize an ideological textual analysis of various televised matches and speeches between Austin and The Rock to show how this political-cultural discourse is privileged in the championship struggles of the period. Examining

Stone Cold and The Rock as archetypal heel and babyface, Domestic Menace and Rugged Individualist, victimized white man and undeserving Other, this chapter will reveal how the ultimate justice to be "perverted and restored" – to borrow Jenkins' phrasing – within the WWF ring during the late nineties was that of whiteness' position of privilege atop the U.S. social order.

Political Climate of Late Nineties America

The tenets of neoliberalism discussed below are often associated with the Presidential administration and policies of Bill Clinton, but are actually rooted in the earlier Reaganist policies of the 1980s. While the Reagan and Bush I administrations garnered widespread support for the privatization or outright elimination of institutional apparatuses concerned with advancing the welfare of the citizenry, as well as the consequential contraction of the federal government through an appeal to self-reliance, Clinton co-opted such initiatives during his 1992 Presidential bid. This resulted in the continued circulation of what Ron Becker observes as "policies aimed at dismantling the liberal welfare state and their legitimating discourses […] becoming what one critic called, 'the new hegemonic ideology'" (2006, 121). In order to present itself as oppositional to Reaganism, however, neoliberalism would address the bifurcated experiences – largely correlative to racially-marked signifiers – resulting from privatized revenue generation and social support services. It did this not by trumpeting an appeal to a singular (white) social order as with Reaganism, but by confronting and celebrating individual and cultural differences. But while, as Becker summarizes, "tolerance, and diversity gained a new currency among a growing number of Americans" (Ibid, 113), the

move toward multiculturalism also spurred the genesis of a separate but parallel discourse intended to buttress the dominance of the white status quo.

Mass appeals to tolerance existed concurrently with classist, racist, sexist, and homophobic discourses, all of which continued to define and structure social hierarchies. As such, the U.S. social order could hardly be seen to jibe with the optimistic rhetoric of this multicultural progress narrative. Further complicating this embrace of a multicultralist ideal in American society was the discordant neoliberal appropriation of fiscal conservatism. As David Theo Goldberg explains, "Neoliberalism is committed to privatizing property, utilities, and social programs… As the state was seen increasingly to support black employment, to increase expenditures on black education, and to increase regulation to force compliance, white neoconservatives found neoliberal commitments increasingly relevant to their interests" (2009, 337). This overlapping segment of common interests between neoliberals and neoconservatives included the abolishment – or at the very least, shrinking – of the liberal democratic welfare state.

Frequently derided as a tool of the welfare state, the policies of affirmative action were an integral outcome of the Civil Rights movement, intended to combat the historical effects of institutionalized racism. But, in the paradoxical decade of the neoliberal nineties, there began to surface a hotly contested debate over these policies and practices of "reverse discrimination." According to the cultural logic, minority groups who complained about unfair treatment based on their identification with a particular racial category were the true purveyors of intolerance (Wellman 1997, 314). During the 1990s, the number of "reverse discrimination" cases in America doubled (Evans 2004, 49),

which, irrespective of each case's merit, signaled an intensifying presumption that affirmative action awarded jobs, access to schools, and generally provided aid to individuals inherently less deserving than whites. It became apparent that, as Goldberg succinctly states, "Liberalism's very instrument for undoing the effects of racism became neo-liberalism's poster child for the condition of racism itself" (2009, 337). Those individuals participating in circulating this discourse, who viewed affirmative action as a form of welfare that determined need solely based on skin color, found comfort in the neoliberal ideal of self-reliance.

While the post-Reagan era deregulated economy left lower-class workers earning less in wages, and Clinton's signing into law of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 saw many working-class manufacturing jobs lost through American deindustrialization, there remained a zealous adherence to the neoliberal tenet of self-reliance – a late-twentieth-century embrace of the old adage to "pull yourself up by your bootstraps." As already discussed, social welfare programs were targeted by neoliberal discourse for their perceived racism, but as Becker articulates, welfare was also "now to blame for fostering a culture of poverty that failed to instill a sense of personal responsibility. The market was now the solution; its competitive environment would improve the moral fiber of the underclass, nurturing a 'responsibilization of the self'" (2006, 122). Those who depended upon welfare programs in order to maintain their marginal existence within the U.S. social order were, according to this logic, afforded all of the same opportunities as the rest of the citizenry; they simply chose not to work hard enough to improve their socio-economic condition.

The coded positioning of non-whites as oppositional to, rather than victims of, the neoliberal political policies of deregulation and privatization, as well as the rhetoric of self-reliance, supported a growing movement that discursively constructed whites and their culture as besieged by a group of apathetic non-white Others. This "crisis of whiteness" triggered a rise in membership of white supremacist groups at the fringes of society throughout the nineties, and stimulated enrollment in the Patriot movement, "a largely rural-based, grass-roots movement led by whites whose agenda of recovering civil liberties… also contained a barely concealed desire to recover white privilege and even white supremacy in the United States" (Kusz 2007, 4). But the mantle of "whiteness" in this crisis was also taken up, no less dangerously, by middle-class whites who viewed state-sanctioned social assistance as the unfair privileging of one particular segment of society (read: non-whites) over another. Troubled equally by the multicultural call for and presence of an increased visibility of non-whites in the media, whiteness was also in crisis due to the fact that the heightened representation of non-white culture "made issues of white identity inextricably more fragile and fluid" (Giroux 1997, 106). Revealed through its complicity in the oppression of these cultures, whiteness was no longer capable of dominating the social order as an invisible hegemonic power structure. To preserve its position of unnamed privilege, whiteness thus needed to be rhetorically rendered powerless in plain sight, even if only temporarily.

This feat was accomplished through two interrelated means of discourse, the first of which involved the flat out denial of white privilege. As Peggy McIntosh defines it in her seminal essay on the subject, "White privilege is like an invisible weightless

knapsack […] which puts [white people] at an advantage" (1997 [1988], 291). As multiculturalism illuminated these advantages, a distinctively neoliberal discourse was produced which denied the existence of a decidedly white privilege. Incorporating a colorblind ideology into the rhetoric, the racial privileges of whites were disavowed by claiming that without race as a structuring category of cultural thought or actions, no single race would possess an advantage over another (Kincheloe and Steinberg 1998, 15). Immediately dubious as a claim due to its indifference to the centuries of racial oppression endured by non-whites as well as its revisionist understanding of institutionalized racism, this discourse allowed whites to wipe the slate clean, as it were. Such a discourse – which, importantly, occurred at both the conscious and subconscious levels – eliminated any consideration of the social standing that conferred their privileged positioning: their whiteness. Once "devoid" of its perceived power and privilege, whiteness could then return to the process of *reinforcing* its power and privilege, which it produced through a secondary discourse aimed at depicting whiteness as a victimized category.

As mentioned, reverse racism cases were on the rise during the nineties, and as they grew in stature, they became rallying points for the cause of whiteness and those wishing to reinforce its privilege. As Kyle Kusz observes, "by the late 1990s whites were increasingly portraying and imagining themselves as unprivileged, disadvantaged, and socially marginalized, while African Americans […] were being portrayed as an excessively (and undeservingly) privileged, entitled, and socially protected group in American culture and society" (2007, 2). In accordance with colorblind rhetoric, these ills

were never addressed through their relationships to the social construct of race, but rather through heavily codified language that referenced "welfare reform, neighborhood schools, toughness on crime and 'illegitimate' births" (Giroux 1997, 94). The effect was to evoke white fears of the Other without constructing an explicitly racial binary, mobilizing a yet again unnamed whiteness to defend a privilege that was never truly challenged in the first place.

This investment in a discourse of white centrism, bolstered by the tenets of neoliberalism, allowed white society to retain its power to define what constituted "race" in America as it continued to hegemonically articulate itself as the national identity. But how did mediated representations promote the discourse and politics of neoliberalism and the "crisis of whiteness"? As Kusz again observes, "They [representations] subtly work to naturalize a connection between whiteness and American national identity that responds to, as it cultivates, a popular contemporary white desire to express 'authentic' ownership of the United States that has been destabilized by the emergent emphasis on multiculturalism" (2007, 12). In WWF programming, then, this emphasis on ownership of the American national identity by whiteness is manifest in several, relatively unsurprising ways. First and foremost, commentary during this time about WWF Championships and champion-caliber characters frequently invoked the ideal of self-reliance, with the babyface being a character who could "pull themselves up by their bootstraps" and the heel being an irresponsible leech who gamed the system. Secondly, anti-welfarist discourse that constructed whites as victims of, and non-whites as dependent upon, an unjust system of reward reverberated in the production of multiple

bouts between Stone Cold Steve Austin and The Rock as they competed for ownership of various championship titles. It is to the analysis of these texts that this chapter now directs its attention, focusing on the degree to which neoliberal discourse and the struggle to reconstitute whiteness is evident in the WWF product.

The Domestic Menace vs. The Rugged Individualist

In order for this chapter to offer a truly comprehensive analysis of the matches and feud between The Rock and Stone Cold Steve Austin, it will first consider the histories of each character. As fully constructed characters, the creative choices made by and for each performer will thus be contextualized not just in relation to the socio-political context of late-nineties America, but also to the self-contained narrative the WWF presented to its audiences for consumption from 1997 to 1999.

<u>The Rock</u>

As the son of former WWF wrestler Rocky Johnson, and the grandson of Samoan professional wrestler-cum-promoter Peter Maivia, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson was quickly added to the WWF roster in 1996 as the company's first "third-generation" superstar. Despite a high profile pay-per-view debut in 1996,[9] his early career was plagued with issues of "getting over" – professional wrestling parlance used to describe a performer's ability to elicit the appropriate reactions, either positive or negative, from the live crowd (*The Epic Journey of Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson,* 2012). While Johnson's babyface character, Rocky Maivia, was cut very much from the archetypal mold of the Ethnic Hero type observed in previous decades, fans refused to cheer for him. Faced with

jeering crowds chanting "Rocky sucks" and "Die, Rocky, die," Johnson and the WWF accepted the audience response and incorporated it into Johnson's character arc by transforming him into a heel and having him assert that he was fed up with the fans' constant disrespect. This decision had two important effects on Johnson's wrestling career: immediately, it preserved what marginal existence Johnson maintained in the WWF at that point; and more importantly, it allowed for the genesis of Johnson's swaggering, trash-talking, eyebrow-raising alter ego, The Rock.

After a brief stint away from WWF television, The Rock returned during an August 1997 episode of *Monday Night Raw*, emerging through the crowd during an ongoing match between the leader of the Nation of Domination, Faarooq, and a member of the Disciples of Apocalypse, Chainz (*Raw* 1997, no. 32). Entering the ring as the referee's back was turned, The Rock assaulted Chainz, providing Faarooq with a controversial win and intimating himself to be a member of Faarooq's Nation of Islam-inspired stable of wrestlers. On the following week's program, Faarooq addressed questions about the Nation of Domination's newest member, saying, "Here's a young man that came to the WWF, trying to do things the American way. What did you people do? You frowned on him" (*Raw* 1997, no. 33). The Rock himself then took the opportunity to rationalize his actions, admonishing the audience that, "Rocky Maivia and the new Nation of Domination lives, breathes, and dies respect. And we will earn respect by any means necessary."

Through this alignment with the Nation of Domination and their creed, Johnson transitioned from floundering Ethnic Hero, Rocky Maivia, to the full-fledged Domestic

Menace, The Rock. Important to this transformation and its articulation of the socio-political discourse circulating in the culture at large, the rhetoric of the "any means necessary" approach of the Nation of Domination was juxtaposed to The Rock's earlier attempts "to do things the American way." It is through this particular construction of professional struggle within the WWF ring that we can discern the representation of non-white groups as oppositional to the "American" ethos, coded here as a categorically white ideology.

In addition to this positioning and his subsequent demands for increased respect, The Rock utilized dialogue that was sarcastic, roguish, and above all narcissistic. He also began to wear – and publicly boast about – a wide collection of Versace shirts, Italian leather shoes, and designer sunglasses. On the microphone, the self-proclaimed "people's champion" garnered the ire of audiences by pretentiously claiming them among his "millions and millions of fans" whom he entertained by vanquishing opponents with the "people's elbow." In this sense, Johnson was performing for contemporary audiences an updated version of the heel character of "Gorgeous" George Wagner, a wildly flamboyant, charismatic, and narcissistic white villain who during the 1940s and '50s became "one of the first icons of television's golden age" (Assael and Mooneyham 2002, 11). The Rock generated the resentment of audiences by embracing this egotistical persona. By merging this narcissism with those traits of the Domestic Menace type, the character potentially signified more, however: that of a brazen, non-white Other who happily advertised his undeserved success in opposition to the white status quo. As The

Rock's heel performance increasingly made him the target of fan revilement, a babyface opponent with an equal amount of fan support would be a necessary balance.

Stone Cold Steve Austin

Born Steve Anderson – later changing his surname officially to Austin – the man who would go on to become "Stone Cold" Steve Austin was, in opposition to Dwayne Johnson, a journeyman wrestler by the time he received his WWF contract in 1995. After failing to garner much attention from fans with his initial "Ringmaster" persona – a greedy, yet extremely technically-proficient heel wrestler – Austin and the WWF decided to funnel the performer's frustrations into another heel character loosely based on an HBO documentary about "Ice Man" Richard Kuklinski (Johnson and Oliver 2012, 43). Adopting the moniker "Stone Cold," this new character was originally rendered as a heel "Outlaw," described by Gerald Morton and George O'Brien as a type who is "as willing to take a beating as give one… [and who] believe[s] in settling feuds in the middle of the ring" (1985, 132).

As discussed in Chapter One of this study, the Outlaw type conformed closely with other historical stereotypes, namely "The Good Ol' Boy" and "The Cowboy," in that all three types abided by a sense of pioneering, rugged individualism, and have been performed predominantly by white males throughout the history of professional wrestling. Consolidated, therefore, in this study as The Rugged Individualist type, this category of wrestler epitomizes what the Stone Cold persona was attempting to embody, and given the parallel cultural investment in neoliberal discourse, offers an explanation for the unforeseen enthusiasm with which audiences responded to the character. As an

individualist who proudly defied authority while espousing the ethos of a fair-play "Don't Trust Anybody" competitiveness, the Stone Cold character – despite being constructed as a heel – proved that, at least within the in-ring struggle of WWF programming, success could yet be attained by those *white* individuals who adhered to the ideal of self-reliance. Consequently, as one *Newsweek* columnist found, "the more antisocial he got, both in the ring and in 'story lines' […] the more the crowd loved him" (Leland 1998, 61). Austin himself later elaborated on this turning point, observing,

> I was trying to be a heel and that's just the way the world took me. We never did change what Stone Cold Steve Austin was. We just transitioned the people I was working with; I started working with heels rather than babyfaces […] Had I come along ten years earlier than I did, I'd have been a total heel. But at the time I came around, that's what people were looking for, and that was the flavor that became the hottest thing to ever sell tickets and merchandise and pay-per-views (Johnson and Oliver 2012, 41).

With Austin's popularity evidenced by the record-breaking sale of Stone Cold merchandise – *Newsweek* reported his most popular t-shirt sold two million units (Leland 1998, 61) – the way in which audiences responded favorably to what had heretofore been perceived as the tactics and personality of a heel situates the Stone Cold character as an intriguing point of analysis. On the one hand, Austin's foul-mouthed and beer-swilling tendencies undoubtedly appealed to the audience's attraction to "shock television," an allure that, as Chapter Two explained, the WWF frequently promoted during this "Attitude Era." More importantly though, the "Texas Rattlesnake" – as fans and commentators affectionately took to calling Stone Cold – can be read as an empowering symbol for audiences who viewed themselves as increasingly oppressed in a social

system that neoliberal discourse and the "crisis of whiteness" portrayed as excessively rewarding of personal irresponsibility.

The endorsement of "rattlesnake" as the nickname for Stone Cold is worth stressing, as it represents a token that Bethany Bultman, in her cultural study of whiteness, describes as an ideal symbol for "redneck" culture. As she explains, "The rattlesnake is… unique to North America. It has no eyelids, so it's always vigilant… once engaged with an enemy, it will fight to victory or death. It never attacks its own kind […] while it did not become the nation's icon, it has remained important to rednecks" (1996, 290). As the sigil for the most popular WWF wrestler performing during a period of white racial anxiety unmatched since the Civil Rights era, the rattlesnake and its intimate relationship to whiteness – and the fringe white identity of "redneck" at that – further elucidates the understanding of the Stone Cold character as a simulacrum for the neoliberal image of a self-reliant white male who, despite hard work, found himself a victim of unjust welfare policies and a system which valued the plight of minorities over that of whites.

As the Rugged Individualist untrusting of others and the egotistical Domestic Menace in search of respect "by any means necessary" amidst the larger cultural "crisis of whiteness," the characters of Stone Cold Steve Austin and The Rock were akin to, respectively, the victimized white man and the undeservedly successful dark-skinned Other. As the pair feuded and vied for the WWF Intercontinental and World Heavyweight Championships during the late nineties, their showdowns reflected the parallel socio-political discourse, which constructed whiteness as encroached upon by

non-white apathy. While grudges frequently emerge and dissipate in the WWF, the legacy of Stone Cold versus The Rock stands as the defining feud of the late nineties WWF programming, with the pair headlining three Wrestlemania pay-per-view events from 1993 to 2003 – a feat since unmatched by any other WWF performers ("Stone Cold Steve Austin Bio").

Privilege, Status, and the Intercontinental Championship

Beginning in November 1997, The Rock and Stone Cold became embroiled in a month-long feud, the initial focus of which was Stone Cold's Intercontinental Championship. The night after he had recaptured the title from another wrestler who had, in real life, accidentally broken Austin's neck during their previous match, Stone Cold's in-ring celebration was interrupted by The Rock and his Nation of Domination comrades (*Raw* 1997, no. 45). Presenting himself as the "best damn Intercontinental champ there ever was" – referring to a brief and ill-timed reign that occurred shortly after his WWF debut – The Rock challenged Stone Cold to put his title on the line in a match at the following month's Pay-Per-View event. Accepting the challenge, Stone Cold advised The Rock, "All you've got to do is sign the damn piece of paper, and I'll beat the hell out of you right here in the middle of this ring." Over the course of the ensuing month, Stone Cold and The Rock traded barbs with one another as the WWF built up interest for their one-on-one match-up. The on-air commentary and promotional build-up surrounding this particular feud reflected the neoliberal climate in two key ways: through repeatedly showcasing Stone Cold's codified privilege, and by depicting The Rock as inherently unable to earn the same coveted status.

The week after accepting The Rock's challenge, Stone Cold entered the ring on *Monday Night Raw* and, stating that he did not want to wait a month to "whip The Rock's ass," attempted to provoke a fight right then and there (*Raw* 1997, no. 46). As The Rock emerged through the entryway, he was once again flanked by the members of the Nation of Domination. This time, however, The Rock motioned for his stable-mates to attack Stone Cold while The Rock withdrew back behind the entrance, presumably to return to his locker room. As the three other members of the Nation of Domination converged on the ring, Stone Cold, ever the Rugged Individualist, refused to back down despite being outnumbered. He pounced on the first Nation member to enter the ring, "striking like a rattlesnake," an action which left him too preoccupied to notice The Rock running back out to swipe the Intercontinental Championship belt from behind his back. As the Nation of Domination members and The Rock, with Stone Cold's Intercontinental belt in hand, retreated to the back, an expression of fury spread across Stone Cold's face. Marching to the announcer's table and forcibly removing the headset from one of the commentators, Stone Cold bellowed into the microphone, "He ain't safe nowhere… He's gon' get his damn payback!"

Immediately worth noting here is the fact that despite instigating the events, Stone Cold, along with the commentators, quickly presented himself as a victim once the Nation of Domination had bested him. More importantly though, as Stone Cold confiscated microphones and practically assaulted a commentator, he was in effect brandishing his privilege to behave in such a manner. While Stone Cold's penchant for doing as he pleased is partially explained by the construction of the character as an anti-

authority Rugged Individualist, another more glaring justification is manifest through his embrace of the "Raging Redneck" moniker. Given this and his other nicknames and their ties to whiteness, Stone Cold must also be viewed as a white male "redneck," whose pride in his "designated role of cultural jerk" (Goad 1997, 84) was revealed as he interrupted the broadcast to offer his own frustrated opinions on what had transpired and how he was going to avenge his victimization.

The actions of Stone Cold, unlike the cultural response to those members of other racial categories, weren't presented as being indicative of all white people because white privilege acts powerfully to obscure itself. Indeed, as Tim Wise has observed, "Whites can take it for granted that [they]'ll likely be viewed as individuals, representing nothing greater than [their] solitary selves" (2008, 53). Amidst the "crisis of whiteness," however, white identity and its concomitant privilege were socially visible, and for that reason, were rendered devoid of their power by depicting whiteness as a victimized category. The invisibility of privilege is thus reconstituted through its apparent impotence, as was Stone Cold's when he was depicted as the victim of an unethical act of theft perpetrated by The Rock and his fellow Domestic Menaces.

The codified expression of Stone Cold's privilege intensified as the contest for the Intercontinental Championship drew closer. During one episode of *Monday Night Raw*, as The Rock delivered an in-ring speech wherein he proclaimed himself the new Intercontinental Champion, Stone Cold commandeered a production truck and forced the technician to cut out The Rock's microphone and shut off the arena lights (*Raw* 1997, no. 47). Stone Cold's defiant and disrespectful behavior continued the following week, as he

again interrupted The Rock, this time as he was in the midst of a match with another wrestler (*Raw* 1997, no. 48). Accompanied by a fellow Nation of Domination member, and proudly displaying the Intercontinental belt over his shoulder, The Rock strutted in to the ring and prepared to engage his opponent. As the bell rang to signal the start of the bout, fans in the audience turned their heads in the direction of a loud noise; the sound of a truck engine and thunderous rock music. Stone Cold had driven a pick-up truck into the arena and proceeded to blast the music of AC/DC from its speakers as he stood atop the truck's roof and began imbibing a six-pack of beer. Throughout the match, Stone Cold taunted his soon-to-be opponent, raising one or both of his middle fingers in The Rock's direction, and swinging his belt hostilely over his head, all while the on-air commentator gleefully exclaimed, "Austin does what he wants, when he wants! Austin wants his property back!"

As he quite literally utilized his privilege to stifle The Rock's speech, Stone Cold's repeatedly disrespectful – and occasionally hazardous – behavior went completely unpunished and uncommented upon by anyone in a position of power. In fact, commentators and an audience who appeared to offer its support of Stone Cold's quest to reclaim the championship belt routinely glorified his actions. With apparently "universal" support, Stone Cold could thus leverage this privilege in order to maintain his status until he could recapture the belt, which offered true "status." This struggle to redeem himself through the reclaiming of that which had been unjustly taken from him thus echoes the struggle to redeem whiteness through the restoration of white privilege. However, as can be discerned from the discourse surrounding The Rock's pursuit of the Intercontinental

Championship, relying upon a title to signify status is not simply about possession, but rather merit.

When he initially challenged Stone Cold to the title match, The Rock foreshadowed the following week's plot to abscond with the title, warning Stone Cold that, "One way or another, I'm gonna be wearing my Intercontinental title" (*Raw* 1997, no. 45). When he swiped the championship belt a week later – leaving aside for a moment the connotations associated with an act of thievery perpetrated by a Domestic Menace – The Rock literally assumed a title that went unrecognized by everyone except his partners in the Nation of Domination because it had not been *earned*. Each time he referred to himself as "the best damn Intercontinental champ," or advised the crowd that an imminent match would be a "non-title" affair, the on-air commentators were quick to point out the fallacy as they opined, "Oh give me a break. He's not even a champion" (Ibid). The Rock was plainly in breach of decorum by declaring himself champion, yet the backlash against his presumptiveness at claiming he deserved the Intercontinental title signifies more than a simple upsetting of WWF protocol. As he and Stone Cold were set to square off in their pay-per-view match in December 1997, his month-long feud with Stone Cold had plainly characterized The Rock as wholly unfit for champion status.

As The Rock's quest and subsequent inability to attain the same title as Stone Cold was paralleled by neoliberal discourse and the "crisis of whiteness," the representation of struggle in their pay-per-view match for the Intercontinental Championship further marginalized The Rock as an Other undeserving of privileged status. While a summary of this match was provided at the outset of this chapter, we can

note how Stone Cold's privilege is again demonstrated through both the driving of his pick-up truck ringside, as well as the official disregard of his use of the vehicle as a weapon against his opponents – an action which, in most other title matches, would result in the aggressor's disqualification. Counterposed to the expressed commentator approval for these actions, The Rock was repeatedly admonished by the on-air announcers for intermittently cheating throughout the match and for relying upon his Nation of Domination cohorts to inflict "unfair" damage on Stone Cold. This dualistic interpretation of the equally unsportsmanlike actions of The Rock and Stone Cold reify the privileged nature of Stone Cold's actions and present The Rock's as intrinsically meritless, a point which is evinced by the commentary offered as The Rock left the ring in defeat: "The Rock was not, is not, and may never be the Intercontinental Champion."

On the next night's *Raw*, however, the owner and CEO of the WWF, Vince McMahon, demanded Austin re-defend the title against The Rock as punishment for "endangering the lives of WWF fans" by driving his truck into the arena (*Raw* 1997, no. 49). Having only recently emerged on WWF television in his decades-long capacity as owner of the company, the Vince McMahon character was presented as a foil for Stone Cold's anti-authority rabble-rousing behavior. Important to the representation of Stone Cold as continually victimized despite his hard work, McMahon's first authoritative reproach of his actions only surfaces *after* Stone Cold has struggled for and reclaimed his title.

Daring McMahon to impose a consequence, Stone Cold offered the rather predictable response, "I done whipped his ass once - I'm not gonna do it again." In turn,

McMahon reluctantly offered the admonishment, "You're forcing me to strip you of the Intercontinental title […] and give it to The Rock." Ever the individualist doing "what he wants, when he wants," Stone Cold refused to compete and was consequently ordered to hand over the Intercontinental title to The Rock. Proffering the belt in one hand and extending his other to grant The Rock a congratulatory handshake, Stone Cold assuaged The Rock's obvious reticence by obliging, "Trust me, champ. This is on the up and up." As The Rock accepted the belt with a condescending grin, Stone Cold shook his hand and raised it in the air, conveying to the audience his apparent endorsement of the title change and the new champion. But as The Rock turned to leave the ring, Stone Cold spun him around with their still joined hands and delivered a blindside blow that left The Rock splayed on the mat. After dropping to his stomach and barking, "Don't trust anybody!" into the motionless face of the prone champion, Stone Cold directed a middle finger at McMahon, then rolled out of the ring with The Rock's Intercontinental Championship in tow.

Notwithstanding the irony of The Rock becoming a victim of theft, the manner in which the transgression was presented during the next week's episode of *Monday Night Raw* exonerated Stone Cold of any wrongdoing (*Raw* 1997, no. 50). Referring to Stone Cold as a "gutless thief-in-the-night," The Rock demanded he return the stolen belt within the hour. Rather than afford The Rock the same courtesy extended to Stone Cold and extol his quest to be reunited with his stolen property, the commentators challenged The Rock: "I thought stealing belts was your M.O.?" This deflection not only strengthened Stone Cold's privilege, but further denied this status to The Rock. The

Intercontinental Championship, as with white privilege, cannot simply be conferred; it must be earned. Putting the finest point possible on this message, Stone Cold responded to The Rock's demand via satellite video: "When I gave this belt to you, I did just that. You didn't have to earn a damn thing." Stone Cold then tossed the Intercontinental belt into an icy river located down the road from the stadium as the commentator exclaimed, "Austin has done it again! He's defied authority!" With this final act of defiance in the pair's feud over the Intercontinental Championship, white privilege had been restored.

Anti-Welfarism, Self-Reliance, and the World Heavyweight Championship

Provided the contemporary cultural climate, the hierarchically mandated exchange of the Intercontinental title undoubtedly evokes a powerful recall of the socio-political investment in anti-welfarist discourse and the neoliberal appeal to self-reliance. That is, The Rock and Stone Cold, as the respective surrogates for the dark-skinned Other in search of his next handout and the self-reliant white man off of whose hard work these Others leeched, were archetypes uniquely situated to reproduce the discourse of neoliberalism and the "crisis of whiteness" as they vied for a WWF title even more prestigious than the Intercontinental belt: the WWF World Heavyweight Championship.

Throughout November 1998, The Rock competed and emerged victorious in numerous qualifying matches that allowed him to procure an opportunity to challenge for the World Heavyweight Championship during a one-night round robin tournament dubbed "Deadly Games." Facing white babyface Mick "Mankind" Foley in the final round of the tournament, The Rock slammed his opponent to the mat and turned his head toward the contemptible Vince McMahon, who – having now fully embraced a heel,

corporate CEO persona – was positioned ringside to oversee the event (*WWE: The Attitude Era*, 2012). With an arch of his eyebrow, The Rock turned back to Mankind and applied a submission hold intended to force his opponent to quit the match. As soon as the hold had been executed, and without waiting for Mankind to signal his capitulation, McMahon vehemently called for the bell to be rung. In a move that controversially awarded the championship to The Rock, it became apparent that Vince McMahon and The Rock had been in league with one another for weeks leading up to the tournament.

In a betrayal of the fans' trust and a desertion of the principled self-reliance that was deemed essential according to neoliberal discourse, The Rock revealed his allegiance to the despicable McMahon; an alliance which once again positioned The Rock to be representative of the dark-skinned Other who could not succeed without "subsidizing" aid. Provided his earlier acquisition of the Intercontinental title, this second championship reign – inarguably more important due to the higher degree of prestige bestowed upon the World Heavyweight title – solidified The Rock's inability to earn his champion status on his own. As the repeated recipient of titles and privilege conferred by McMahon, The Rock and his reign as World Heavyweight champion exposed the fact that the struggle for championships within the WWF was systemically rigged against those who worked hardest to attain them. Recalling the discursive investment in "reverse discrimination" and the belief that socialized aid such as affirmative action rewarded the inherently undeserving, this backlash against The Rock's championship reigns is thus evocative of the neoliberal anti-welfarist discourse circulating at the time.

The night following his controversial World Heavyweight Championship victory, The Rock inflamed fan outrage during an address wherein he explained his actions:

> The Rock never sold out. The Rock just got a hand […] You [fans] are all unintelligent pieces of trailer park trash […] You work your asses off day after day after day, nine-to-five, for minimum wage. Well, The Rock did what The Rock had to do to get to the top… You and Austin can have your morality. You can have your honesty. You can have your blood, your sweat, and your tears (*Raw* 1998, no. 46).

The Rock's reference to the WWF fans as "trailer park trash" certainly evokes the phrase "white trash," which John Hartigan finds to be a distinctively derogatory term due to the "highly emotional response of loathing and disgust the image generates among the white middle class. Even among the white lower classes, 'white trash' is primarily a distancing technique before it is an identity" (2003, 105).

Through verbal abuse such as this, not only is The Rock depicted as assuming a position of self-identified power against an audience coded as white, but the audience itself is situated to align with more middle-class notions of identity vis-à-vis The Rock's disparaging remarks. The Rock is thus categorically divorced from a middle-class identity. As one of the WWF commentators observed, "The Rock took the easy way to get ahead. Whatever happened to principles, and values, and morals? […] Respect is earned. It's not awarded. It's not an endowment." Belonging to a distinctively *not*-middle-class category, but also undeserving of the privileged status connoted by the World Heavyweight Championship, The Rock remained a jilted Other, marginalized by his dependence upon the aid offered by those in positions of power. Over the next

several months, The Rock repeatedly relied upon the aid of McMahon and his cronies to maintain possession of his World Heavyweight Championship.

Through the use of McMahon-ordered match stipulations, frequent run-ins from corporate teammates, and other general underhandedness, The Rock had managed to retain his champion status for six months as the WWF approached Wrestlemania XV – the annual pay-per-view extravaganza recognized as the pinnacle event of the professional wrestling calendar. Paranoid about McMahon's increasingly convoluted plotting to keep Stone Cold from obtaining the World Heavyweight Championship, The Rock began to openly question McMahon's intentions as that year's Wrestlemania drew near. During one particular episode of *Monday Night Raw*, McMahon cautioned The Rock, "What you need is a reality check, *Dwayne*.[10] After all I've done for you […] Look at who you are, who you've become. And who do you owe, who can you thank for that?" (*Raw* 1999, no. 11). Presented thusly as a champion who could not achieve that status in the WWF without a hand (out) from the powerful Vince McMahon, The Rock character conforms to the neoliberal notion of an undeserving Other who utilizes an unjust system of welfare to achieve unearned success.

Buttressing this anti-welfarist discourse while assuaging the anxiety associated with this particular aspect of the "crisis of whiteness," self-reliance was presented as the virtue through which those who heeded its value would truly earn rewards. As Stone Cold Steve Austin's rugged "Don't Trust Anybody" attitude perfectly conformed to this neoliberal ideal of self-reliance, his construction as the protagonist in contraposition to The Rock during their struggle to obtain WWF championships was logical. In particular,

Stone Cold's construction as a self-reliant Rugged Individualist was showcased repeatedly as he faced increasingly insurmountable odds, set in place by the partnership of The Rock and McMahon as he contended for the World Heavyweight Championship. In a narrative that spanned six months, Vince McMahon and The Rock colluded in a plot the pair described as "the screwing of Stone Cold Steve Austin" (*Raw* 1998, no. 42).

After having won the World Heavyweight Championship at Wrestlemania XIV in March 1998, Stone Cold Steve Austin quickly garnered the ire of McMahon, who was not subtle in voicing his disapproval of Austin's foul-mouthed, beer-guzzling, redneck lifestyle and the "public relations corporate nightmare" it created (*Raw* 1998, no. 11). In the months that followed, McMahon attempted to stack the deck against Stone Cold as much as possible, finally managing to wrest the title from Stone Cold by effectively vacating the World Heavyweight Championship in September 1998. This void was ultimately filled by the handpicked corporate champion, The Rock, upon his victory in the aforementioned "Deadly Games" tournament of November 1998. Speaking about his shrewd machinations the next night, McMahon asserted, "Whoever it was that said, 'You can't fool all of the people all of the time,' was a damn fool. A damn fool is someone who insists on doing things the hard way. A damn fool is someone who embraces middle-class ethics and values" (*Raw* 1998, no. 46). While McMahon's comments can certainly be interpreted as an indictment of the WWF audience, they also refer to the main target of their devious plot: Stone Cold. Linking Stone Cold's brand of "Don't Trust Anybody" self-reliance to "middle-class ethics and values" in this way implicitly articulates Stone

Cold's struggle to win the World Heavyweight Championship as being akin to the struggles of middle-class life.

Vince McMahon and The Rock spent the ensuing four months attempting to thwart Stone Cold's determined pursuit of the World Heavyweight Championship. In response to every tactic, Stone Cold proved a tenacious ability to offer his own counter-measures. When McMahon "fired" Stone Cold from the WWF in October 1998, Stone Cold convinced McMahon's son, Shane – also a member of the WWF board of directors – to sign him to a new contract (*Raw* 1998, no. 42). Several months later, during the annual Royal Rumble event – wherein 30 wrestlers are entered at timed intervals into a single match to determine the number one contender for the World Heavyweight Championship – Stone Cold was burdened not just by being the first entrant, but by having a McMahon-sanctioned $100,000 bounty placed on his elimination from the match ("WWE Royal Rumble 1999"). Regardless, Stone Cold still emerged with the prize of the number one contendership. Thus, despite the best efforts of McMahon and The Rock to prevent Austin from obtaining any opportunity to compete for the World Heavyweight Championship, Stone Cold was depicted as managing to overcome their hindrances through perseverance and the virtue of self-reliance, ultimately securing his title shot against The Rock at Wrestlemania XV in March 1999.

In a match rife with all the emotional tension befitting the "ragin' climax" tagline billed in advertisements, Stone Cold and The Rock battled throughout the arena in their main event World Heavyweight Title match, which had been designated a "No Disqualification"[11] contest by Vince McMahon (*WWF: Wrestlemania XV*, 1999). Though

intended to favor The Rock, this stipulation resulted in a relatively even, back-and-forth bout, as both competitors utilized the increased leeway to their advantage. The Rock appeared to gain the upper hand, however, as McMahon entered the ring and blatantly interfered in the match as he joined The Rock in delivering a beat-down of Stone Cold. Managing to incapacitate McMahon outside the ring, Stone Cold returned to his one-on-one contest with The Rock and, after a dazzling display of reversals, delivered his climactic "Stone Cold Stunner" finishing maneuver to The Rock. The crowd erupted in jubilation as the referee counted the pinfall and raised Stone Cold's arm, signifying his victory in the match and his successful reclamation of the WWF World Heavyweight Championship.

While the content of the match itself constructs Stone Cold as a self-reliant hero, persevering against an impromptu second opponent a la Vince McMahon, the commentary also represents a positioning of the character as a virtuous individualist. As one commentator in particular exclaimed while Stone Cold celebrated in the ring with his customary post-match beers, "The Rattlesnake rules! The Rattlesnake rules again! […] Stone Cold is the man! He's toasting everybody that works for a living!" This likening of Stone Cold's struggle for the World Heavyweight Championship to the tribulations of "everybody that works for a living" invariably depends upon the kind of audience investment discussed in Chapter Two. This emotionally realistic reading of the text is especially disconcerting when considering the earlier implicit association of Stone Cold with "middle-class ethics and values." That is, manifest in this WWF representation of struggle is a discourse that articulates a neoliberal denunciation of subsidizing aid in

favor of a "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" mentality quite specifically identified with middle-class whiteness.

While the climactic payoff of Stone Cold's World Heavyweight Championship victory is certainly heightened due to audience investment in the yearlong narrative about Stone Cold's personal struggle, it is the story's articulation of neoliberal discourse that provides the greatest, and also its most harmful, appeal to an audience presumed to be white and middle-class. While his victory provided a outlet for their frustrations, "the screwing of Stone Cold Steve Austin" was also an important mimetic device for this audience, constructing a dramatized representation of the "crisis of whiteness" and the broader socio-political cultural discourse. As a hero who could substantiate the virtues of a white working-class livelihood vis-à-vis the personal irresponsibility of the dark-skinned Other, Stone Cold Steve Austin and The Rock offered audiences an essentially neoliberal form of vindication through the ability to champion self-reliance and deride an unfair system of welfare.

Conclusion: Whiteness Reconstituted

In examining the contests between Stone Cold Steve Austin and The Rock as they struggled for the success and status offered via ownership of the WWF Intercontinental and World Heavyweight Championship titles, the privileging of neoliberal discourse is initially apparent through the WWF's positioning of these characters as the company's top heel and babyface, respectively. As the self-reliant Rugged Individualist espousing a "Don't Trust Anybody" approach to his pursuit of WWF championships, Stone Cold was implicitly connected to the middle-class through a neoliberal interpretation of his work

ethic, and he was explicitly linked to whiteness through his self-identification as a "redneck" – a characterization that often conflated both middle-class and working-class identity under the umbrella of "whiteness." Inversely, The Rock, constructed as a narcissistic Domestic Menace who was repeatedly handed his WWF success without merit, was connected to an Othered status of class and race due to his reliance upon a system of support that neoliberal discourse presented as being intricately connected to irresponsible non-whites. The pair's high profile struggles over WWF championships thus situates them as representations of, respectively, the hard-working but victimized white man and the undeservedly successful dark-skinned Other circulated via the discourse of the "crisis of whiteness."

Within these struggles, we can locate the reconstitution of white privilege as an invisible force of power through the repeated presentation of Stone Cold as a victim in spite of his use of a distinctly privileged status to marginalize The Rock. This strengthening of white privilege can also be found within the repeated denial of champion status to The Rock, who never truly "earned" his success. The Rock's multiple reigns as both the Intercontinental and World Heavyweight Champion exposed a systemic failure to reward those who worked hardest, and as such, emboldened whiteness during this era of neoliberal interest in self-reliance. As he relied upon this notion of self-reliance to reach the top of the WWF pecking order, Stone Cold's WWF struggles in general and his World Heavyweight Championship victory at the "ragin' climax" of Wrestlemania XV in particular represent the most damning instance of the reconstitution of whiteness yet. Considering the articulation of the Stone Cold character in relation to middle-classness

and white identity amidst the "crisis of whiteness," his victory signifies a cathartic release not just in his attaining a championship belt. Rather, his is a win that symbolically reconstitutes whiteness by placing a distinctly neoliberal, middle-class whiteness back in its privileged position atop the American social order.

Conclusion: "The Rattlesnake Rules"… Again?: Nostalgia, Erasure, and the Future of Racial Representation in the WWF/E

As this project has shown, the representation of race in WWF programming of the Attitude Era was articulated in such a way as to privilege the broader cultural discourses about race that circulated during the late nineties. In my research, I have aimed to demonstrate how cultural notions of race were articulated within WWF pay-per-view events and episodes of *Monday Night Raw* in relation to the historical, industrial, and political contexts in which the programming was produced. Chapter One examined stereotyped representations of race in relation to their historical context throughout WWF history and particularly the 1990s, explicating how these characters – and the Domestic Menace in particular – were linked to the particular historical moment in order to construct "raced ways of seeing" via WWF spectatorship. Turning to the industrial context in which these programs were produced, Chapter Two provided an analysis of the Attitude re-branding effort of the late nineties, illuminating the extent to which the WWF's branding and industrial strategy during this period was racialized. As the chapter showed, this feat was explicitly accomplished through the WWF's encouragement of audiences to approach programming with "structures of feeling" that understood racialized characters to be "emotionally realistic," and implicitly racialized through the presumption that WWF programming was being watched by an overwhelmingly white audience. Finally, Chapter Three focused on the political context in which this programming was produced, demonstrating through a textual analysis of the

championship struggles between The Rock and Stone Cold Steve Austin, that the programming of the Attitude Era privileged neoliberalist discourse and represented discourses and ideologies linked to the political struggle to reconstitute whiteness. Through attention to the WWF and its programming in these historical, industrial, and political contexts in the 1990s, we can discern a clear practice of representation that privileges hegemonic whiteness vis-à-vis non-whiteness.

Though this project has provided a comprehensive analysis of racial representation in WWF programming of the late nineties, the research performed should by no means be considered exhaustive. While touched upon in the analysis here, issues of gender and masculinity and their connection to representation in professional wrestling programs warrant deeper attention in subsequent studies. An examination of these linkages will undoubtedly reveal distinctions between the characterizations of male versus female performers that mirror the representational practices utilized to depict race in a manner that privileged the discourse of the dominant (white, male) social order. However, a study of representational practices, whether it be concerned with gender roles or race or both, can, at best, make an argument for a particular reading of the cultural artifact being analyzed. As such, future research on the subject of representation in WWF programming might incorporate empirical audience studies to examine the extent to which real viewers interpreted the performance of race and gender. Interviews conducted with audiences who watched WWF programming of the late nineties would offer not only affirmation of the findings of this research, but they would also provide a necessary space to problematize oppositional, negotiated, and ironic readings of the texts. While an

analysis such as this would further reveal broader discourses localized to the particular moment of the late nineties, additional research might also position the characters and storylines of the WWF Attitude Era within the enduring legacy of the WWF (now WWE) in order to more fully consider its cultural resonance.

Marketed Nostalgia and Targeted Erasure

In recent years, the WWE has appeared keen to capitalize on a growing nostalgia for the WWF Attitude Era (see Figure 5.1), releasing a line of "Classic Superstars" action figures modeled after wrestlers from the mid-to-late-nineties. The company also incorporated an Attitude Era "mode" in its 2013 videogame release, *WWE '13*, wherein gamers can play as a wrestler in re-created storylines from the period. Additionally, WWE Studios and WWE Home Video recently distributed a 3-disc DVD set titled *WWE: The Attitude Era*, a collection of the most infamous moments and matches from the period. Noticeably absent from these homages to this period in WWF history are several of the moments discussed within this study, especially as they relate to the most overtly racist content associated with the Nation of Domination, Los Boricuas, and Ahmed Johnson. Coupled with the nostalgic celebration of the Attitude Era, then, we can note a concurrent endeavor to erase certain "offensive" moments from the annals of professional wrestling, a type of revisionist history being authored by the WWE. Given the findings of this study, and the degree to which we can understand WWE programming to have deployed hyperracialized characters largely for consumption by white working- and middle-class audiences during the late nineties, these efforts can thus be understood to

gloss over a history that might otherwise be perceived as objectionable to an increasingly diversified and globalized WWE audience.

Figure 5.1: The marketed nostalgia of the WWF/E Attitude Era: (L to R) Classic Superstar "Nation of Domination" version of The Rock, *WWE '13* Attitude Era menu on PS3, *WWE: The Attitude Era* 3-disc DVD packaging.

As reporter Kevin Robillard noted in late 2012, the WWE announced it would be "scrubbing some dated and edgier footage from its website" in yet another "rebranding effort" aimed at mirroring its "current content [that] is rated PG or G" (Robillard 2012). The footage, much of which is circa the Attitude Era, is simultaneously being flagged for removal from other sites such as YouTube, DailyMotion, and Vimeo as well, under an alleged attempt to combat online piracy. While the WWE claim certainly has some degree of merit, concerns have been raised over the political impetus behind the expunging effort; namely, that Linda McMahon, who was co-chairman with husband Vince during the Attitude era, was seeking political office during the 2010 and 2012 election cycles, and some of this footage was being used against her in smear campaigns. Regardless of the motivations – rather than focusing on whether the efforts were necessary for branding or political reasons – we need to see these actions for what they attempted to do: perform a targeted erasure of a problematic past.

This erasure complicates the audience's ability to connect contemporary practices of representation to those of the problematic past, and in the globalized 21st century, the uncensored access to this archive of material remains important for fans, casual viewers, or scholars examining the WWE product to determine whether or not the organization's troublesome approach to racial representation is truly an aberration of the Attitude Era and the WWE's past. While the production of this content in the particular context of the late nineties can be understood to reify hegemonic notions of race during that period, the modern-day erasure and/or editing of these programs obscures the degree to which these representational practices persisted, and reinforce the dominant contemporary cultural discourse about race – that is, the view that the U.S. has moved beyond the serious discussion of race as a structuring concept of American society, and has progressed into a period of "post-racial" thinking.

Recently, scholars such as Herman Gray and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva have parsed the problematic definition of America as "post-racial," a label that was embraced in the wake of President Barack Obama's 2008 election – "Obamerica," as Bonilla-Silva calls it (Bonilla-Silva 2008, Gray 2012). This new racial outlook in the U.S. finds its roots in what Bonilla-Silva has defined elsewhere as an ideology that, while not ignoring the social category of race, "explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics," such as "market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and blacks' imputed cultural limitations" (2003, 2). While the claim that race no longer structures cultural thinking or actions maintains its currency today under the re-designated moniker of "post-racial," it remains a destructive form of discourse through its

designation of race as a taboo subject, ensuring that frank discussion of racial privileges and injustices are subjects deemed too uncomfortable for the broader American society to consider.

Within the nostalgic capitalization upon the financially successful WWF Attitude Era of the late nineties, there thus exists an industrial strategy to eliminate the taboo address of race, which culturally and ideologically reifies the contemporary notion of a "post-racial" America. Through the erasure of this content, we lose sight not just of media texts that problematically represented race, but of the linkages these mediated representations possessed to the broader American social order and thus what they are able to reveal about the contemporary cultural attitudes about race. These include the fear of radicalized non-whites, agitating against the status quo, as well as the consequential movements to further marginalize these already-discriminated-against groups. These moves are all undertaken in an attempt to reconstitute the authority and privilege of whiteness, which never faced a perceived threat it could not quell by demonizing the non-white Other. It is this cultural investment in hegemonic whiteness that needs to be problematized as it remains a powerful discursive tool of the dominant social order, privileged not just in programming of the Attitude Era and the WWF/E's past, but more broadly in television, film, and other mediums of mass communication and consumption.

The WWE Network and New Questions About Representation

As this project neared completion, the WWE took the initial steps toward distributing their content over a platform that was for the first time divorced (potentially) from linear television. At launch, on February 24, 2014, the "WWE Network" offered

subscribers over-the-top (OTT) access to each of its monthly pay-per-view events as they aired live, as well as on-demand access to approximately 1500 hours of the WWE's extensive back catalog of matches, programs, and pay-per-view events ("WWE Network Launches February 24"). Following the lead of Major League Baseball and the National Basketball League, the WWE provided access to this exclusively licensed OTT content via Internet-capable devices such as computers, tablets, smart-phones, and gaming consoles. With a development cost of $40 million, and the near certain loss of revenue from individuals who would no longer pay the $45-$65 cost to purchase pay-per-views, the venture requires nearly one million subscriptions simply to break even (Graser 2014). While WWE executives remain hopeful that fans will become early adopters of the new technology, this new platform for distribution and the changing industrial dynamics that surface as a result prompt several questions regarding the future study of racial representation in the WWE.

With the breadth of WWE's library extending as far back as 1952, we might note that some of the same stereotypes discussed in this study – as well as some that this project has perhaps overlooked – will be immediately available to subscribers upon their inclusion in the index of WWE Network content. However, as this access will only be provided by the WWE at such a time, and in the manner they deem appropriate, we still need to be mindful of practices of erasure. That is, should the WWE choose to never add certain "offensive" matches to the catalog of available OTT content, or if they determine that certain content needs to be edited before it can be made available, there is nothing to stop the company from doing what it finds to be in the best interest of its brand identity.

While the WWE has claimed at this point that the archived content will be presented unedited, as it originally aired ("What Content Will I Find on WWE Network?"), there still remains a significant gap in the programming that has been made available. For example, there currently exists only two episodes of *Monday Night Raw* from 1998 on the WWE Network, and no episodes from 1997 or 1999 have been made available. Though the omission of this content could very well be the result of technological limitations, the fact remains that despite paying a subscription fee, the content is neither universally available nor owned by the viewer. WWE still holds the license to the programming, and as such, has the freedom to do with it whatever they choose.

In addition to providing an avenue through which audiences can watch older programming, the space opened up by offering original programming should provide more opportunities for the WWE to showcase its diverse cast, and as such, should be monitored for the representational practices that are employed. It will be interesting to see if the WWE does indeed take the opportunity to begin producing content that increases the degree to which the company presents viewers with more diversity in its programming. While the WWE has a large, multiracial roster of female and male performers, screen time on the flagship programming of *Monday Night Raw* and *Friday Night Smackdown* (SyFy) is typically reserved for recognizable talent who might attract a mainstream audience and therefore, advertising dollars. This talent, though not categorically so, is majority white and predominantly male. With on-demand OTT programming lessening the advertising burden, there may be less WWE resistance to

providing existing non-white and/or female talent the screen time they aren't so willingly afforded in commercial television.

As the WWE continues to expand the catalog of OTT content available on the WWE Network, it will fall to the future analyses of racial representation to fully question and problematize the company's practices. In the short space of these last few pages it has primarily been my intention of demonstrating that the practice of studying mediated representations of race does not begin or end with commercial television. The WWE will continue to air its two major broadcasts on cable television so long as that mode of distribution remains in the WWE's financial favor. If the WWE Network and other OTT content providers can prove themselves to be financially solvent alternatives, future analyses will need to consider in what ways the original programming contained therein continues to privilege the racial discourses of the dominant social order given the historical and political contexts, as well as the as yet relatively unexplored industrial context of OTT distribution.

Notes

[1] The World Wrestling Federation changed its name and acronym to World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) in 2002 following a lawsuit filed against the company by the World Wildlife Fund for Nature, which had been trademarked WWF at an earlier date.

[2] *Babyface* is wrestling parlance for "good guy" or "heroine," while *heel* is the term utilized for "bad guy" or "villainess."

[3] According to statistics from 2009 and 2010, this ratio has gone unchanged in the interceding decades. The incarceration rate of non-white Hispanics, meanwhile, also remains higher than that of whites by a margin of 2:1.

[4] The total number is disputed, with Gardell citing that police estimated 400,000 attendees, while organizers asserted the crowd reached in excess of 1.5 million. (Gardell 1996, 344)

[5] On the 9 Jun 1997 episode of *Raw*, Savio Vega, the leader of Los Boricuas was ridiculed as being "plucked from the fields" where he was "picking jalapenos."

[6] Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson portrayed the character being referenced, though at this early point in his career he had not starred in any movies, and was not yet widely known by any name other than his wrestling moniker, Rocky "The Rock" Maivia.

[7] The performers typically earned no additional income and were afforded little input regarding these exchanges; unionization and athletes' rights have always been – and continue to be – inconceivable in the professional wrestling industry.

[8] The WWF produced programming for USA Network since the 1983 debut of *All American Wrestling* (1983-1994). Subsequent WWF programs that aired on USA Network include *Tuesday Night Titans* (1984-1986), *Prime Time Wrestling* (1985-1993), *WWF Mania* (1993-1996), *Monday Night Raw* (1993-2000; 2005-present), *LiveWire* (1996-2001), and *Sunday Night Heat* (1998-2000). (Assael and Mooneyham 2002; Leverette 2003)

[9] Johnson debuted on November 17, 1996 in a match at *WWE: Survivor Series*. In addition to being broadcast in the hyped format of pay-per-view, the event was held in the hallowed venue of Madison Square Garden.

[10] Up to this point, The Rock's real name, Dwayne Johnson, had not been mentioned on WWF television or pay-per-view programming. McMahon's use of his first name here therefore represents a significant breaking of the fourth wall.

[11] In professional wrestling parlance, the "No Disqualification" stipulation means that normal wrestling rules do not apply to a contest. The use of weapons, the interference of others, and any other means by which a competitor might be disqualified, are all within the bounds of acceptability.

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