THE DARK CARNIVAL: THE CONSTRUCTION AND PERFORMANCE OF RACE IN AMERICAN PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING

Nicholas Porter

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green
State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

August 2011

Committee:

Dr. Montana Miller, Advisor

Dr. Dalton Jones

Dr. Kristen Rudisill

ABSTRACT

Dr. Montana Miller, Advisor

The aim of this thesis was to analyze the presence of race in American professional wrestling. Wrestling is a performance form, and draws much of its inspiration from the culture of the American nation. It reflects cultural trends through its wrestlers, who portray characters designed to appeal to a mass audience. However, its predetermined or "scripted" nature implies a huge degree of control on the part of its producers. Everything in wrestling is a pre-meditated and as such representations of cultural issues such as race can be interrogated for the cultural mentality that lies behind them. My interest falls in investigating how race was and is displayed within wrestling, and how the performance today addresses this complex matter in an increasingly multicultural American audience. An underlying theme is that the construction and depiction of racial wrestlers is the result, or avoidance of, of crucial changes in the wider American culture. The actual formation of wrestling characters—and the negotiations non-white wrestlers have to make between their racial identities and the nature of the characters they portray—is a recurring theme that I believe vital to a deeper analysis of the subject.

The focus of my thesis is a chronological one. I begin with wrestling's emergence and development between 1870 and 1920; its establishment as a white-dominated sport; and the presence of a few select individuals who challenged the prevalent racial hierarchy of the period. I next progress to the arrival of wrestling on regional television between 1948, and analyze the development of racial wrestling characters on television through to 1983. The thesis concludes with an analysis of the period 1983 to the present, when wrestling has become established as a national entertainment presence and non-white wrestlers perform before a vast national audience.

My conclusions are that American wrestling, as a field that draws heavily on its cultural surrounds, must reflect the evolutions in American race relations. The necessity of presenting valid multidimensional non-white characters is essential for wrestling to continue to evolve as a cultural form relevant to its changing cultural surrounds.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the vital contributions of Dr. Montana Miller, Dr. Dalton Jones, and Dr. Kristen Rudisill, all of whose expertise and advisement helped this project reach fruition.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

Introduction.

Within the cosmos of American performance entertainment, professional wrestling occupies a peripheral position. Its present incarnation is that of a quasi-fantastic spectacle emphasizing exaggerated personas, a degree of physical appearance only obtainable for the devoutly image-conscious, and an intricate pantomime of choreographed and improvised violence. Deliberately fantastic, wrestling purposefully straddles a line between masterfully-arranged showpiece and shallow fakeness. Watching wrestling in the States today, either the multi-million dollar globe-conquering empire that is World Wrestling Entertainment or one of the innumerable "independent" promotions that stage intimate shows in small venues across the land, the viewer must suspend his disbelief in order to get the most enjoyment from watching the performances. Behind the mystique of expensive pyrotechnics and lasers transforming colossal sports arenas or a cheap, rented dry-ice machine injecting some color into the starkness of a high school gym, wrestling contains the same complex DNA as many of the other cornerstones of American performance. The connections to traditional folk performance, Vaudeville, and Jim Crow have been obscured with wrestling's transcendence into the popular consciousness as an extravaganza of color and vibrancy.

American entertainment has always drawn upon the confluence of representations that swirl within its social fabric. Race, perhaps more than any other socio-cultural phenomenon, remains an enduring staple of different performances, one with an intensely debated history of popular representation serving to accentuate its continuing status as a point of heightened social urgency. The subject of race abounds with controversy and contradiction and to this day a very public phenomenon, embedded within American history and infused with generations of visual

signification. The various readings afforded race in the popular media offer up a multitude of different opinions on the subject, and many performance media have been the site of meditations on its continued significance to American life. Wrestling's relationship with race is one that on the surface appeals tellingly undeveloped. The lurid characters that are the hallmarks of American pro wrestling in 2011 imply a simple approach—one of shallow figures not appropriate to deep social commentary. But behind first impressions wrestling stands at an important junction between race and performance. Questions of racial equality and advancement have always leant themselves to visual representation and wrestling, with its glamorizing of the body, is a deceptively insightful medium. It may not appear the most sensitive medium for such powerful discourses such as those regarding race but its history, as this thesis will attempt to illustrate, is intertwined with a compelling collision of spectacle and relevancy that provides much hidden insight into the culture of the nation.

What wrestling shares with its fellow performance media is an evolutionary path steeped in a performance tradition that came of age prior to the advent of the production techniques which would turn it into a profitable enterprise. Emerging in the eighteen-sixties, wrestling would develop throughout the remaining decades of the nineteenth century. Before the bright lights and meticulously-honed showmanship were pioneered, wrestling was a travelling show, a carnival attraction that would roll from town-to-town across impoverished Middle America. The contests, at first legitimate tests of sporting and athletic prowess, gradually morphed into a semi-choreographed pastiche of sport, a shady practice that bore distinctly carnival-style overtones of deception and under-handed business chicanery. In many ways, modern wrestling companies like World Wrestling Entertainment, regardless of budget and hopes of mainstream acceptability,

remain connected to the business's roots in post-Civil War poverty, depression, and the ruthless pursuit of customer cash. At the smaller shows, this mentality of working the rubes for their money is still very much apparent, evidenced in gaudy merchandise tables set up amidst the stale confines of National Guard Armories where wrestlers charge fans for ingratiating Polaroid photo-ops. The WWE effects this on a grander scale, albeit with a rigid insistence on presenting itself as legitimate family-friendly entertainment at all times—a business with little connection to the grimness that colors the birth of wrestling as a business. In short, try as it might, wrestling remains locked firmly in a process of performative and fiscal development from which it cannot ever truly distance itself.

Key to wrestling, as every performative form, is the presence of performers able to master its many nuances. In order to achieve success in the business, wrestlers have to become hybrid performers. The roots of legitimate sport still run throughout, with amateur wrestlers, bodybuilders, and legions of failed college football players taken in by the prescribed image of the wrestler as an icon of physical perfection, seeking to put their physical talents (and appearances) to use in what many see as a related field. However, the complexity of wrestling extends beyond the outer image. To truly succeed, one must develop numerous skills to compliment physical conditioning. As an essentially fictional production, wrestling is in constant need of characters that can appeal to the widest possible demographic, thus ensuring lucrative revenues. Therefore, a wrestler is required to captivate, to draw the audience into the emotional play that takes place within the ring. Knowing what to do and when is crucial, and incredibly difficult when coupled with the need to manage the safety of oneself and one's co-performers. Michael Kirby outlines a linear scale running from "not-acting" to "acting." Kirby defines acting

as an exercise in pretense (Kirby 1972). The more layers are added, the more a person is said to be performing. Acting is not presented as strict category—Kirby identifies different levels of complexity within "acting" that differentiate performers from non-performers. With increasing "elements" (emotions, mannerisms, etc.) incorporated into the acting, the more complex the overall performance becomes.

Wrestlers have progressed from the "non-acting" end of Kirby's scale to the "acting" end as time has progressed. In the eighteen-seventies, wrestlers were effectively non-performers engaged in real sporting contests. Over time, deliberate elements of acting were added (co-operation on certain moves, agreed falls, etc.) without sacrificing believability on the part of fans, leading to a high watermark where the casual fan would completely believe in the realism of the matches. Wrestlers in and out of the ring maintained the act in defense of wrestling's realism. Over time though, more and more intricate forms of acting have been introduced to the point where anyone who watches wrestling today is immediately aware of its acted nature. A wrestling match, when executed to receive the optimal emotive response from the crowd, is a densely layered performance in which paced displays of athleticism and pantomimed outbursts of violence are complimented by moments of subtlety (a grimace, a hand gesture, a pause) that can potentially elevate the proceedings to an artistic level that wrestling has never truly occupied in the public imagination. When done sloppily, on the other hand, wrestling looks like a mess, with mistimed movements and breakdowns in communication in front of the audience leading to the creation of an awkward car-crash style display that emphasizes the time-tested stereotype of wrestling as fake show- a charmless show for the tasteless consumer. The true art of wrestling,

and the factor that has ensured its continued popularity, is the way in which wrestlers inject their performances with the believability and appeal of their "gimmicks."

There is without doubt an ever-present quasi-element of crude minimalism that lingers over every wrestling match. Regardless of the physical mastery of the wrestlers, it has never been regarded as a performance art form with the nuances and high cultural status of performances such as ballet. Whereas ballet thrives on the spectacle of beauty, with dancers evoking the more fantastic emotions through their movements in which dancer and character effortlessly merge into one, wrestlers always seem to be playing a role. The haphazard characterizations of wrestling personae point to the inherent humanity of the men and women behind them—of wrestling's grounding in the awkwardness of simply performing. Even down through the many decades of wrestlers defending their business as "legit", there was a detectable magic to the barely concealed happenings that marked it out as a spectacle of the masses. Bereft of the sheen of "high art," wrestling deals in characterizations that are both immediate and resonant. A wrestler's gimmick—the character which is, in essence, their bread and butter—has to be interesting and relevant enough to the audience so that it can persuade them to be drawn into the spectacle. In keeping with the most skilled performers in any genre, the most successful wrestlers are able to completely occupy their personae so that any lingering boundary between actor and character is blurred. Wrestling characters thus represent both the fantasy of assuming a role, and the reality of those who visibly participate in the matches. A mass-cultural form, American pro-wrestling is inextricably connected to the everyday cultural landscape in which it takes place. Framed within the daily social reality of its audience, it draws upon the fabric of life

within the nation so much so that the context for the matches is always firmly within the present macrocosm of American society.

*****

The origins of wrestling in the US echo the multiculturalism that would increasingly come to define the country in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Wrestling was traditionally a folk pursuit existing in civilizations as diverse as India, Mongolia, Turkey, Greece, and Japan. Each society had its own traditional forms of wrestling, often with ceremonial imperatives. In its basest format, wrestling was a sporting practice (pre-dating the modern concept of sport as an institutionally-administrated entity) that emphasized the unaided physical superiority of one competitor, typically male, over an opponent. This core definition was flexible within the context of the numerous different societies and groups that practiced grappling forms. For instance, the symbolism and social significance of Indian *Pehlwani*[1] differed markedly from the wrestling that took place on the Mongolian Steppes, but the presence of legitimate competition translated across cultures. Wrestling took place at the ancient Olympics, and firmly branched into the view of the industrializing West in the early nineteenth century, becoming a staple of taverns and other establishments of the urban lower classes in cities such as Paris, a twin of sorts to the violent bare-knuckle boxing displays that had been popular for decades prior.

The folk tradition of American wrestling draws on an incredibly intricate tapestry of myriad ancient cultures, ranging from the aforementioned *Pehlwani* to Greek *Palé*. To trace such a diverse heritage would be another project (and one that would delve deeply into the social

[1] The deep cultural symbolism and significance of *Pehlwani* and other forms of indigenous wrestling has been the subject of analysis by writers such as Joseph Alter ("The Wrestler's Body: Identity and Ideology in North India")

composition not just of the tribal and indigenous points of origin, but also the expansive reach of cultural imperialism that brought diverse traditions into contact). However, the folkloric roots of wrestling, dispersed as they may be across cultural boundaries, remain an indisputable starting point for contemporary American "sports entertainment." Wrestling in its folkloric forms existed amongst the indigenous peoples of the North American continent before colonization. Upon settlement, the various European groups indulged recreationally in different forms of wrestling that related directly back to the folk styles of the Eurasian super-continent. Particularly popular were British "catch-as-catch-can" and "freestyle"—an Americanized bastard form of the traditional "Greco-Roman" form. By the eighteen-sixties, wrestling had become a popular past-time. William Muldoon, a Unionist soldier who saw service in the Civil War, would emerge as the father of American wrestling, laying the faintest blueprint for what would come in the proceeding century. Muldoon had been exposed to wrestling whilst in barracks, and would be introduced to traditional styles following the war (particularly Greco-Roman) whilst overseas in Prussia. Gaining proficiency, Muldoon began competing in legitimate sporting contests upon his return home, and his burgeoning public fame led to the birth of the first American touring wrestling parties. Muldoon travelled the nation, typically facing international competitors in dispute over a vaguely-conceptualized "world championship." Away from Muldoon's showcases, wrestling had long been firmly entrenched in the public imagination as a legitimate sporting pursuit. The first inklings of professionalization took place in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, with Muldoon leading the way as a full-time competitor (occasionally parlaying his fame into theater). The early history of wrestling in the States is one shrouded in the violence of the times—the realities of poverty and war which affected so many in the wake

of the Civil War. Wrestling thrived on the carnival circuit, with the bloody grittiness of the matches and the raw quest for supremacy of the wrestlers drawing in customers, particularly in the Midwest with its land-working ethos and large European immigrant population.

Wrestling, in its formative years, was the domain quite literally of the toughest men around. A sport only in the sense that an official would arbitrarily stop the extremes of body-to-body violence, wrestling demanded that its practitioners possess a physical toughness that could only be obtained through rigorous exercise and conditioning. The hardship of the times spurred many a young field hand to try it out, and the Midwest gave rise to several figures who would have a profound stylistic impact upon its development into a form of entertainment. Martin "Farmer" Burns typified the wrestler during this period. An Iowan farm-worker who, like Muldoon, had been exposed to wrestling through grappling soldiers, Burns would travel around Midwestern carnivals facing other wrestlers as well as audience members willing to try their luck for a cash prize. Like Muldoon, he also had an eye for spectacle, allegedly hanging himself from a noose to demonstrate his prodigious neck strength. The carnival, with its aura of rustic toughness, hard toil, and alternate lifestyle, would prove to be one of the true forming grounds of American wrestling. Not only would wrestlers engage in brutal contests before rabid crowds, but the first aura of spectacle would permeate the obscurity of the carnival experience, with Burns and others offering rewards to audience members desperate for both cash and possibly the sliver of notoriety necessary to rise above the grind of farm life.

With wrestling still a genuine sporting practice premised solely on the superiority of one wrestler over another, matches could continue for hours-long stretches. Towards the end of the eighteen-eighties, Muldoon, one of the sport's figureheads and key promoters, began the subtle

process of modifying bouts so as to prevent them from boring customers desirous of shorter slices of sporting entertainment (Beekman 33). Beginning with Muldoon himself choosing to apply time limits to his matches (Beekman ibid.), promoters soon moved on to pairing wrestlers of mismatched experience levels so as to ensure easier (and quicker) wins. The seeds of American wrestling's evolution from sport to performance were, by the close of the nineteenth century, definitively sown. Eventually, Muldoon would engineer his matches to such an extent that any vestiges of sporting reality were decidedly obscure. Although the leading competitors in the States engaged in real contests free of such burgeoning trimmings, by the dawn of the twentieth century, the lure of profit would begin to exert an ever-tighter grip upon the practice of wrestling.

Frank Gotch[2], another Iowan, was recognized as "World Champion" for much of the century's first decade. Entering the sport in 1899, Gotch enjoyed a meteoric rise to the top of the sport, and the period up to his retirement in 1913 saw the sport (and his career) reap the benefits of increased public exposure. Portrayed in the media as a grass-roots hero from the heartlands (*Auburn Citizen*, Feb 28, 1907), Gotch's popularity carried over into other avenues of popular culture: he was featured on cigarette cards and followed in Muldoon's footsteps by appearing in plays. Wrestling's simple focus on physical superiority made it an ideal medium for nationalism during the nineteen-hundreds, and Gotch was America's wrestler, contesting the "World Championship" with Europeans such as Stanislaus Zbyszko and George Hackenschmidt. His battles with Hackenschmidt especially played upon a trans-Atlantic rivalry, and were hugely

[2] Remaining close to his roots (he lived his entire life in the town of Humboldt, Iowa), Gotch epitomized the ability of the wrestler to transcend normality through physical prowess. Upon retirement, he further immersed himself in wrestling's carnival heritage as a circus attraction back in the Midwest.

successful at the box office, with a 1911 match drawing 30,000 fans to Comiskey Park in Chicago (Beekman 49).

After Gotch won their 1908 title bout, he famously double-crossed Hackenschmidt in the 1911 re-match—nullifying a previous closed-doors agreement that Gotch would ensure that an injured Hackenschmidt retained some of his super-athletic image so as to deliver a contest primed to encourage return customers. According to supporters of Hackenschmidt, Gotch (in an act symbolic both of wrestling's roots in sporting prestige and the rising consciousness of stardom and self-worth that would consume the practice in the coming years) elected to defeat his injured opponent in a publicly humiliating fashion. Debated as these events were, they place Gotch in a crucial position regarding the demise of any shred of genuineness in wrestling and firmly embracing its potential for theater.[3] By the nineteen twenties, wrestling was fully predetermined with the Gold Dust Trio of wrestler Ed "Strangler" Lewis, promoter Billy Sandow, and Lewis's trainer Joseph "Toots" Mondt finally patenting a form of decided performance. Lewis was a bastion of credibility for wrestling as a proving ground of toughness, winning innumerable legitimate bouts over his career and becoming one of the most bankable figures in the twilight of wrestling's "real" era. Owing to his proficiency and lack of showmanship (the "Strangler" was notorious for immobilizing opponents with his "headlock," causing many of his matches to descend into audience-numbing monotony), Lewis and Sandow deigned to form a touring troupe of wrestlers who would engage in shorter "worked" or predetermined bouts featuring more impactful maneuvers that would go on to become staples of the wrestling performance genre. With these innovations, which were naturally kept secret from

[3] Gotch would not play any further part as wrestling evolved into fighting theater. In something of a nod towards wrestling's carnival roots, he retired to the Midwest where he became a circus performer.

the public, Lewis and his compatriots created the blueprint for modern wrestling as pure spectacle. With his "challengers" selected for him[4], Lewis's superstardom persisted into middle-age, by which time his vision of wrestling as an outlined quasi-sport was a nationwide institution.

By the time of Lewis's initial retirement in 1935, wrestling had morphed fully into an arranged affair, although the toughness of the participants remained on a par with that of their forebears. Despite its transition towards showmanship, which theoretically prolonged the health of the performers, wrestling remained a grueling profession that demanded physical exertion and constant risk of injury. Additionally, wrestling was a closed community essentially mandated by its promoters—who typically regarded their performers in pragmatic terms relating to their box office appeal. Office politics were rife, with promoters' dealings with each other typically characterized by distrust and fears that their rivals would attempt to undermine them by poaching their star attractions. The wrestlers themselves were typically ex-amateurs who possessed genuine grappling and fighting skills. The embracing of calculated match outcomes thus aggravated many who in the old days would have thrived upon triumphing (and profiting) as a result of natural skill and labor-honed masculine resolve. Lou Thesz, Lewis's prized pupil and his successor as one of wrestling's new cross-the-board stars long into the forties and fifties, was notoriously reluctant to compromise his hard-man credibility by constructing performances with wrestlers he regarded as preoccupied with achieving stardom through image alone.

[4] In 1925, Lewis and his associates selected Wayne Munn, a star-athlete (but non-wrestler) from the University of Nebraska, to be his successor, and arguably the first pro wrestler in the modern sense. The experiment backfired as Munn lacked the requisite skills as a "true" wrestler to defend himself from being routinely embarrassed (and exposed as a "fraud") in the ring.

This style-over-substance debate flourished in pro wrestling's early years, as the gulf between grim combat and staged performance was uneasily bridged in the name of raw profit. Where once wrestling had been almost a Siamese twin to boxing in terms of raw physicality and open violence contained under vague precepts of sport, now it was moving closer to the low-end vaudeville and burlesque theater which it had occasionally rubbed up against in the previous decades. The ruthless pursuit of revenue spurred numerous promoters and wrestlers to further embrace the theatrical possibilities. Some degree of physical control was still a necessity just to survive the rigor of performing the in-ring side of wrestling, but as the decades progressed one didn't need to be an Olympic-level competitor to become a top drawing card. *Characters* now became just as essential to earning success from wrestling as bodily control. The ability to connect with crowds desirous of physical brutality and excitement could allow a sub-par athlete to ascend to the level of prize performer and reap the financial benefits. Wrestlers such as Lewis and Thesz were essentially indistinguishable aside from physical and ethnic differences. They tapped into the zeitgeist of their different eras by providing audiences with boxing-style "contests" of technique and endurance and the reassurance that talent and dedication was enough to rise above one's fellow men. The emergence of characters specifically tailored to elicit audience frenzy marked the possibility of wrestling's move out of the shadows into a new age of entertainment, and essentially engraved it into the popular consciousness.

*****

Television was the perfect platform for professional wrestling and effectively rendered its previous lineage as a real sport contested by strapping farmhands obsolete. Every wrestler who was to succeed at the box office following the move to TV needed to be in possession of some

intangibles that translated not just to the live crowd but through the cameras as well. The most astute wrestlers became pop culture icons of their time (in a regional sense at least) off the strength of their arresting visual style and willingness to tailor their actions to meet the parameters of this new medium. The likes of Gorgeous George and "Classy" Freddie Blassie fully milked the performative potentials of television, both within the confines of wrestling and along different avenues such as guest spots on talk shows, thus crystallizing once and for all the wrestling persona as an entity tailor-made for mass consumption. The popularity of wrestling benefited greatly from televised exposure, and the infrastructure of the business strengthened considerably from 1948 onwards. Wrestling had always enjoyed a regionally specific following, with working-class urban centers especially being drawn to the matches. The arrival of television enabled regional promoters based around the country to tape a series of matches at a local studio or arena and broadcast them within the catchment area of regional television. It revived the business in the post-War years and enabled astute promoters to benefit greatly. Writing on Chicago-based Fred Kohler, one of the first promoters to grasp the potential of television, Tim Hornbaker states: "Kohler took his business from an annual revenue of $18,000 around the end of World War II to more than $100,000 per annum during the nineteen-fifties. With the success of his Saturday night television program on the DuMont Network, he arguably became the most powerful man in wrestling" (Hornbaker 77).

Capitalizing on the increasing showmanship and distinctive visual flair of wrestling, local promotions gradually grew, with the increased exposure of their product drawing increasingly larger crowds in bigger venues. George, somewhat naturally, became a huge star on the West Coast. Exemplifying the flashiness of Hollywood, his carefully-constructed effeminate pretty-

boy gimmick ensured that fans routinely flocked to the arenas (and television sets) to see him get his comeuppance in the ring. Blassie, likewise, would become a major force at the box office in the nineteen sixties and bridge the gap between wrestling and more mainstream entertainment through his willingness to verbally blast local celebrities at wrestling tapings. Across the nation, wrestling promotions were adapting to the new medium, emphasizing wrestlers' personalities and backgrounds (hometowns especially) in order to connect with as much of their local audience as possible. Such was the importance of television that numerous promotions thrived at a regional level, with wrestlers typically moving back and forth between wrestling companies at the prospect of increased earnings. Wrestlers, following in the Gorgeous George tradition, had the opportunity to become stars beyond the context of wrestling's choreographed arena combat by extending their presence into the sphere of the home viewer.

There was a *need* for stars, figures who could tap into the social zeitgeist not just of the local arena fans, but also of the wider social context of the American public. American wrestling, despite its localism throughout much of the twentieth century, was unequivocally grounded in a larger narrative of "Americanness." Wrestlers across different wrestling promotions were situated within larger national and global narratives through the existence of "United States" and "World" championships—titles that were effective marketing tools for promotions as they bestowed heightened notions of prestige upon the characters in the eyes of the public. The early era of Muldoon, Gotch, and Lewis had seen wrestlers demarcated essentially along lines of ethnicity and European heritage with the only other variables of distinction being hometowns and slight differences in physicality. The TV era heralded a pronounced shift in the visible differentiation between wrestlers. Although the archetypal wrestler still dressed in black trunks

and boots, there were an increasing number who offset their characters with elaborate additions to the typical wrestling appearance. With television presenting a visual connectivity between the viewer and the socio-cultural complexities that composed American life, wrestling—in its search for the emotive nerve center of its combined audience—tapped into both the mythology of America's cultural history and the starkness of present realities.

By the nineteen-fifties wrestling had undergone significant development. A staple of weekly television across America, the business could afford to look back on a rich history that was steeped in distinctly white American cultural values. Although the business remained strictly white however, it became the site of increasing cultural diversity. Non-white wrestlers had been rare figures since the earliest days of organized wrestling, which was not exempt from the racist attitudes that permeated the nation-at-large. By the nineteen-forties, however, black and Mexican wrestlers were appearing more frequently on wrestling cards across the country before making the inevitable jump to television in the fifties. Television heralded a move for wrestling away from its early darkness into a new realm of viewership and by extension non-white wrestlers would progress into a popular consciousness that was increasingly populated by athletes and entertainers of color. American wrestling, once inexorably white, would now become a site for a negotiation of many racial identities—an intriguing complicated process that continues into the present day.

*****

The history of wrestling in the United States, from its gestation in the Midwestern farmlands up to the current emphasis on high-octane spectacle bordering on the cinematic, has been the stomping ground of a multi-ethnic, multicultural array of figures. Whereas boxing

evolved into (and out of) strict segregation along racial boundaries, wrestling developed in a different manner, which nonetheless contains much insight into the development of race relations in the US. The creed of combative legitimacy which boxing has always carried close to its heart saw it embodying the struggle for independence and manifest destiny so close to the American narrative. Baseball, another major turn-of-the-century sport that practiced segregation, celebrated the inherent togetherness of the same narrative—the notion of solid teamwork and gritty endurance testifying to the strength of the nation's (numerical) plurality and unity. The racial divisions that were rigidly enforced within both sports into the twentieth century spoke of the social climate of the times with an undeniable immediacy. Black boxers and baseball players were segregated at the turn of the twentieth century due to their perceived racial inferiority to their white contemporaries. The gradual integration of sport into the thirties saw the rise to sporting mega-stardom (or immortality in the cases of Muhammad Ali and Jackie Robinson) of numerous non-white American sportsmen, a development that is indicative of sport's ability to channel wider change within American society. For all its origins in real sport and the racially-sensitive cauldron of the mid-nineteenth century, wrestling's diversion into the hinterlands of sport, performance, and entertainment have led to it presenting a skewed vision of America's racial composition.

Wrestling has seen a plethora of racial characterizations throughout its history. The move to television and the rise of regional territories saw the numbers of ethnic characters rise exponentially, with the racial politics of the past century being filtered through the performance medium. The presence of wrestlers and other performers from ethnic minorities today speaks volumes about American multiraciality and its attitudes towards foreign nationals. In keeping

with the increasingly enlightened social precepts of the US, the contemporary wrestling business presents ample room for performers to succeed regardless of race. The overarching doctrine of bringing home a profit at the end of the day ensures that promoters will hire anyone, provided they have the requirements of basic performative competency and some vague shred of marketability. The present-day success of the African-American-Hawaiian Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, first in wrestling then later as a mainstream media star, proves beyond question that within wrestling, status as a top attraction can be obtained by racially-marked performers. However, beneath this, myriad questions relating to the true "viability" of ethnic performers and the significance of the characters they portray remain unanswered. In considering the true role of minority performers within wrestling, a barrage of contradictions emerges when America's racial heritage comes into contact with the popularity of The Wrestler.

Racialized wrestling characters have uneasily negotiated a boundary between blatant caricature, socially-relevant critique, embarrassing mockery, and financial success, yet their position within the wider context of wrestling as both performance and business remains ambiguous. In the twenty-first century, with President Barack Obama's rhetoric of change at the forefront of US national identity (regardless of unrelenting criticism to the contrary), wrestling, and popular entertainment in general for that matter, is a testament to progress and inclusiveness, the success rate of which is open to much debate. With race relations a consistent public issue, the parade of racial characters throughout wrestling ties into these wider concerns. Mainstream entertainment has long been "progressive" in its attitudes towards non-white performers and productions, with a vast array of entertainment figures (and the movers and shakers behind them) drawing both praise and criticism from audiences. However, the line between fiction and the

reality from which wrestling derives remains a difficult surface on which to articulate representations of race. Throughout its history, running concurrently with popular entertainment in America, wrestling has engaged in the same process of channeling real political and social events through its fictitious lens. Never as directly conscious of the political repercussions of this as other avenues (the likes of *The Cosby Show* and *In Living Color* enter here alongside many others), pro wrestling has long engaged in a decidedly cumbersome relationship with "the Other," often one in which that "otherness" has been consciously emphasized for the goal of fiscal gain.

Long a target for criticism on the grounds of racial exploitation, which the business as a whole seems unwilling or incapable of rectifying despite its supposed enshrinement in the minds of millions of American viewers, wrestling finds itself mired at the start of a new decade of the twenty-first century in a bind between a forward-looking vision of a more tolerant United States, and a permanent fixation with its own heritage, which reflects social values regarding race long considered archaic by the public. The aim of this thesis is to interrogate wrestling's complex relations of racial representation in the single-minded pursuit of capital, be it economic or cultural. By moving deeper beneath the layers of a performance and business that remains in many ways obscured behind a curtain of old-time mystique, the hope is that analyzing wrestling's attitudes towards race can posit both a critical reflection upon its cultural (in)sensitivities and the contemplation of future possibilities for multiculturalism within the industry. Wrestling stands at a crossroads between white hegemony and the promise of allowing debates centering on ethnicity, nationality, and the body, which for much of wrestling's existence has meant an above-average physicality of whiteness. Now settled in its status as a popular

public entertainment form, it nonetheless is a field of popular culture on which the crucial factor of representation has been constituted as a performance convention through decades of stereotyping and political-entertainment maneuverings on the part of the business's creative minds.

Wrestling now finds itself at the forefront of a rhetorically-progressive political society, in which media success comes with the necessity of recognizing the crucial social developments that have taken place within American society, and by extension, the nation's very identity. Other public entertainment media have embraced this, and yet wrestling, for all its efforts to do so, still finds itself enamored with its own heritage formed in a different time with different social edicts regarding minority representation. This heritage is so identified with the ideological power of decades of American history that it enjoys a seductive power over modern wrestling, ensuring that much of the modern product is devoted to the "glorious" past to some degree, however miniscule. The implications are that wrestling today is transfixed by its own creative lifeblood, mesmerized in many ways by its own power to form a surrogate world where ideological constructs present a vision of American life—one channeled through colorful bodies engaging in an almost-hypnotic spectacle of movement and dialogue. This power of persuasion and rapture extends to the masses who watch it on a weekly, or nightly, basis—the consumers who absorb wrestling's worldviews even as they juxtapose it with other forms of entertainment that are far more advanced in terms of social commentary. Wrestling's characters tap into this dynamic of socio-cultural interactivity, giving their fans entertainment they can both relate to and enjoy as spectacle. The problem is that the cogs grinding within this machine of fantasy are forged in a complex archaic fashion that bears investigation and criticism.

*****

The history of race representation in pro wrestling developed concurrently with the business itself. With this in mind, this thesis begins at the dawn of professional wrestling in the United States. Chapter 1 is dedicated to analyzing wrestling from around 1870, when it was a rudimentary yet popular sporting practice, up to 1948, when wrestling first appeared on television. The focus will be on the establishment of the white wrestler as a figure representative of larger socio-cultural trends that were relevant to the lives of the American viewing public. The connection between cultural backgrounds and the creation of wrestlers is a question of semiotics and invites an investigation into the layered symbolism of the wrestler. Here, the work of Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* (1957) remains a relevant touchstone for semiotically analyzing the wrestler as a symbol connoting deeper cultural beliefs. A central figure is Viro Small, the first recorded African-American wrestler. The popularity of early twentieth century African-American figures Jack Johnson and Josephine Baker will also be mentioned, specifically with regards to the ways in which their racial identities were performed in public.

Chapter 2 is an analysis of wrestling from 1948 to 1983, which I will refer to as the Television Age. The impact of television on the popularity, public profile, and performative development of wrestling will provide the foundation for a focus on the cultural significance that the new medium bestowed upon non-white wrestlers. The chapter will look at the creation of characters specifically to appeal to a television audience, and how this process led to the increased racialization of non-white wrestlers. The blurring of the lines between wrestlers and their personas plays a crucial role in the performance of wrestling and holds implications for the possibility of wrestlers transcending the racism mentality of everyday life by performing their

characters. The success and tribulations of televised wrestling stars such as Bobo Brazil and Art Thomas are important reference points contextualized within the racial tension that provided a backdrop to wrestling during this period.

Chapter 3 will begin in 1983 with the expansion of the World Wrestling Federation into the first national wrestling promotion. As such, a running theme throughout this chapter is how the national wrestling promotions specialized in presenting microcosms of American life in which the pointed issue of race would be condensed into wrestling storylines. The decline in distinct regional wrestling promotions in the face of powerful nationalization and the profound consequences this had on wrestling's attitudes towards racial performers is another dominant point of investigation. The work of Jean Baudrillard, specifically his theory of the hyperreal, translates tellingly to the colorful fantasy world created by advancing TV production technologies, a world which frequently emphasized the unnaturally muscular physiques and outlandish personas of the WWF's wrestlers at the expense of social realism. The chapter concludes by addressing the challenges wrestling must face in catering to a multicultural American audience in the twenty-first century.

The chronological framework of the above chapters is reflective of wrestling's onward evolution. Wrestling is a consistent presence across a century and a half, during which the issue of racial identity within American society has remained a subject of paramount importance. By moving from era to era, the purpose of the thesis is to chart the difficult, meandering journey racial representation has followed in wrestling—addressing its recurrence even as the business and the wider cultural fabric of the nation changes and develops. With wrestling such a unique industry, the temptation is to view the question of race solely within the context of the closed

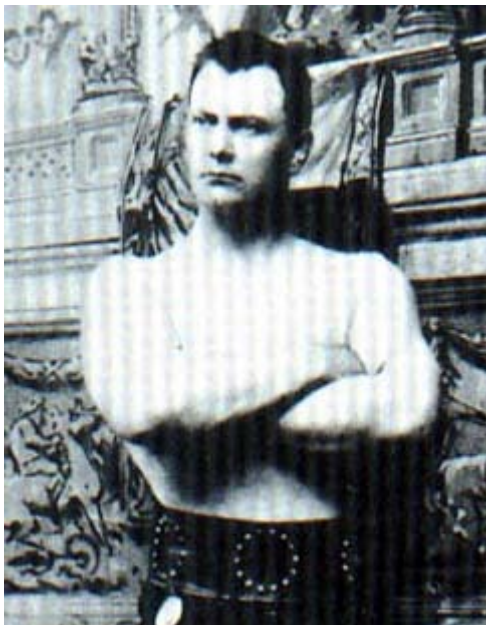
business. This neglects the key determining tenet of wrestling, however—its reliance upon dominant cultural narratives to sustain its creative nature. By placing the performance within these wider cultural frameworks, the true power of its characters is thrown into a sharper light, and the manner in which they act as beacons of (frequently conflicted) social idealism interrogated. The hope is that by approaching the business across different eras wrestling's enduring ability to act as a forum for deeper racial attitudes will be thoroughly examined, and the importance of its need to reflect America's evolving multiculturalism established as a crucial issue.

Chapter I. Wrestling Forms its Others.

Wrestling was a popular practice in the eighteen-eighties. Since its emergence in the wake of the Civil War, the sport's practitioners had traveled the back-roads of a reconstructed America, bringing sport and spectacle to towns and cities scattered across the nation. Although obscured by its status as a roving carnival activity, wrestling had an honest appeal to its audience. Throughout the eighteen-seventies, -eighties, and –nineties it was increasingly infused with the ideals of resilience and physical enterprise that were key parts of the American myth. The sport developed into a showcase of American masculinity predicated around the brutal clash of males united by their formidable toughness. From the start it was predominantly white—the great wrestlers taking part in these exhibitions of strength and skill represented the undeniable whiteness of America. Many of these men hailed from the Anglo-European heartlands of the country—farm-honed manliness was a requisite of white masculinity and spurred many young men rose from the unassuming pastoralism of the Midwest to become wrestlers. The sport flourished across the Midwest and into the Northeast, regions that in the wake of the Civil War were gradually experiencing the arrival of freed African-Americans. A non-white presence in American society was a hugely uncomfortable prospect to the majority, resulting in prominent minorities such as African-Americans being viciously stigmatized and confined to the perimeters of American life. Wrestling's growing popularity occurred as Minstrel troupes toured the country, parodying the perceived inferiorities of the black population with a humor that belied sinister undertones. The non-white "Other" was mired indisputably at the foot of the social hierarchy, rigorously marginalized by the white populace.

American wrestling began around 1870, when the pioneering William Muldoon introduced Greco-Roman elements to the existing American style of wrestling that was being

William Muldoon

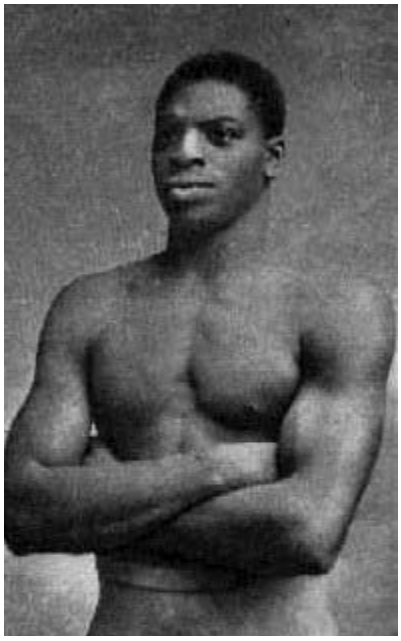


practiced across the country. Introducing concepts such as touring, by 1880 Muldoon was the most popular performer in a burgeoning sport. He became a nationally popular figure, gravitating to Broadway cameos (as "Charles the Wrestler" in *As You Like It* (Marshall, 40)) on the back of his successes in wrestling. Crucially, he established wrestling's potential for conveying deeper emotions and values early on, as he represented America against a variety of European challengers throughout the eighteen-eighties. The range of powerful sentiments conveyed by wrestling soon progressed beyond nationalism. Following Muldoon's example, the ranks of American wrestlers plying their trade in the eighteen-eighties conformed to a distinct template. Strapping white males, they were rooted in the nation's transition away from the conflict of the Civil War towards the attainment of a cohesive social identity. Widespread racism—directed towards African-Americans especially—indicated that such an identity had little tolerance for the increasing diversity of American life. In this environment, Muldoon's popularity solidified wrestling's public image as a white pursuit that privileged a mental acumen and discipline, both considered prominent attributes of white society. With such strong social ideals at work, the ranks of wrestlers travelling from town to town reflected little of the nation's growing multiculturalism. Instead, wrestling was another avenue of entertainment fixated on a white American identity, and any non-white prospects hopeful of entering its gritty world were forced to negotiate the sport's formidable cultural referents of American whiteness.

The Black Pioneer

The first recorded non-white wrestler was Viro Small. Originally from South Carolina, Small was an African-American who participated in wrestling as well as boxing contests in the Northeastern States. Small's status as a pioneer of non-white wrestling is largely consigned to history and he remains a forgotten figure, but his legacy (however brief) marks him as a vital figure in wrestling history. The number of non-white wrestlers operating during this period is unknown, but Small holds a special place as the first noted black *professional* wrestler, implying some degree of dedication to wrestling's vague code of sporting ethics, the willingness to compete for financial benefit, and the talent to travel beyond the confines of the fairground or carnival tent. Born into slavery, Small moved northward like many others after the Civil War and eventually drifted into competitive wrestling around 1870. A veritable signifier of black migration during this period, Small became an attraction amidst the surrounds of the New England carnival where his mentor, wrestler Mike Horrigan, lured customers to step into the wrestling ring for a cash prize. Under Horrigan's mentorship, Small developed into a wrestler proficient enough to win the Vermont collar-and-elbow championship (Beekman 29). Further progress eluded him however, and he soon migrated again, this time to the urban heart of the Northeast.

Viro Small



Small, ended his career in the big city—moving to New York after a successful run as both a boxer and a wrestler in Vermont. His move to New York reflected the trend of Southern blacks relocating in the hope of pursuing better times in the bustling city. Arriving in the

underbelly of the metropolis's dingy boxing establishments, Small soon underwent a process of skewed "rebranding" that would be continued down through wrestling's latter years: in keeping with the common practice regarding many black boxers of the era, he was given a racialized moniker ("Black Sam") to differentiate himself on fight bills. Upon being assigned such a nickname, Small's agency was effectively reduced along with his humanity. Now racialized completely as Black Sam, Small became something akin to a living stereotype. His humanity was certain in the immediate organic sense but removed in the figurative—his agency was symbolically absent every time he competed under his alias and relied upon white promoters to place him in fights. In sporting terms, the everyman-creed afforded to white wrestlers was denied Small: he fought as a universalized pejorative of blackness—the Other as sporting icon. Small would eventually fade into obscurity but not before the presence of African-Americans in boxing began increasing in the eighteen-eighties, heralding a new rise in the cultural lexicon of the black sportsperson.

For a man who predated an ongoing fascination with non-white wrestlers, Small himself remains an enigmatic figure. The keys to identifying his relevance to wrestling can be found in his past, and most pointedly in the institution that patterned his life and career. Small's slave heritage is an unavoidable facet of his iconicity, and his subsequent near-vanishing from wrestling history is a testament to not only the overwhelming whiteness that defined wrestling during his career, but the ongoing racism that erased the memory of countless black athletes. Before his move to the North, his existence was rooted in the most inhumane conditions. To endure the rough-and-tumble of wrestling in the eighteen-eighties, wrestlers had to be physically tough, but Small emerged from an environment in which toughness went beyond one's ability to excel at physical tasks. The psychological effects that life on a plantation had on Small were

never documented, but his origins in the oppressive environment of slavery cannot be separated from his better-recorded career as a free black man engaging in sporting activity. He came from slavery, and defined himself around his physical talents in a white sport. Plantations themselves were not unfamiliar with the apparent jovialities of sporting competition: slaves were cajoled into participating in brutal parodies of boxing and wrestling contests that were akin to dog fights (Mellon 248). The degrading prospect of being forced to fight for the entertainment, gambling prizes, and bragging rights of white patrons twisted the natural purity of sport into something far darker. Already stripped of independence and personal history, the black man would be further reduced into a mindless fighting object.

Ironically, for Small, pursuing a wrestling and boxing career in the North saw him move from one environment of hostility into another—that of the urban saloon where he mingled with the destitute populace of New York's underbelly. Based out of the Bastille on the Bowery, Small wrestled and boxed against both black and white opponents whilst working on the side as the establishment's bouncer. Charles Morrow Wilson, in his 1959 book *The Magnificent Scufflers*, writes:

> "Viro was the right man of any hour. He was warm natured, courteous, and sympathetic toward the live and let live customers, yet he was also strong of body and will power. Though Viro stalwartly declined to get rough with any customer with minor transgressions such as running out of money, any patron who was disposed to start fights or bully or use objectionable language was as good as in the gutter the moment he opened up. Viro was also a man of extremely rapid motions and almost uncanny talents for removing pistols or knives and replacing drawn weapons with fractured arms or wrists or tranquilizing uppercuts, but always, of course, in a courteous manner."

Precious little evidence remains of Small's wrestling career. He is believed to have competed from around 1870 up to 1885, when his last recorded match (a two-hour draw) took place in New York City (cyberboxingzone.com). A brief excerpt from the October 16, 1883 *New York Times* reports on a wrestling victory over George Hicks, in which the "herculean proportions" and "superior strength of the black man" are noted. Another incident that points to the barbarity of the boxing and wrestling circuits involved a rivalry with boxer Billy McCallum, who allegedly shot Small in the neck following a falling out in September 1882. Small seemingly made a full recovery, as his next documented match took place in December of that year (cyberbocingzone.com). Clearly, Small's experience of urban life was tinged with violence and danger, casting into light the oppressive life that flourished in the eighteen-eighties American metropolis. And, as the *Times* report attests, the relationship between the prototypical wrestler and the black man was one in which physical difference could be accentuated.

Semiotically, Small remains an intriguing figure, his obscurity pointing to the plight of black athletes who were subject to the staunch racism of the late nineteenth century. Read deeper, his participation in Bowery contests against white opponents evokes the ongoing struggles against prejudice and poverty faced by African-Americans during this period. In an era in which the leading wrestler, William Muldoon, exemplified a decidedly white masculine virtue, the presence of a non-white wrestler, however marginal, points to the feint possibility of ethnic minorities asserting themselves within a white practice. By the eighteen-eighties, wrestling was developing similarities to minstrelsy. The spectacle and its wrestlers increasingly came to resemble the staged masochism of the minstrels, with wrestling matches taking place before thronging crowds in theaters and saloons. Beyond the setting, the layers of the Minstrel performance had a kinship with wrestling. Wrestlers were entertainers navigating currents of

racial identity, just like the minstrels. The likes of Muldoon and Small occupied an odd space in popular culture, in the same way the minstrel troupes had for decades previously. There was a lurid quality to both—their purpose as entertainment masked darker ideals beneath the surface dictating the presentation of both genres. As Eric Lott describes, Minstrelsy's blatantly-demeaning parody fulfilled a psychological function in allowing white performers and audiences to engage with their concealed fascination/fear of the black population: "the black mask offered a way to play with collective fears of a degraded and threatening—and male—Other while at the same time maintaining some symbolic control over them" (25). Wrestling was just as lurid a spectacle, taking place in dingy location and relaying the ideal of the strong man of mind and body to its public. The psychological resonance of wrestling during this time was not as directly charged as minstrelsy, but the grim notions of violent white maleness behind its façade of sport attracted customers to witness the grueling contests. In this environment, Small was a contrary presence. His race marked him out almost as a novelty to wrestling fans, in many ways just as much a pastiche as minstrel blackface.

Small's legitimate success at collar-and-elbow in Vermont points to his capacity to transcend and transgress accepted racial protocol by virtue of his aptitude for wrestling. Despite being consigned to virtual anonymity alongside other black athletes, Small paints a decisive picture of the tribulations faced by the non-white wrestler during the eighteen-eighties, as well as the possibility of finding a space within what was fast becoming a white institution. As the prototypical minority wrestler, Small's black masculinity would ultimately become something of an archetype for the fashioning of black wrestlers in the coming decades. He was never successful enough, in either boxing or wrestling, to warrant recognition on a larger scale but the struggle of black athletes would be brought to public knowledge over the next two decades.

The ascension of African-American boxer Jack Johnson[1] to the rank of World Champion in 1908 marked a watershed in the perception of black bodies in the popular consciousness, and confirmed the significance of his many forgotten predecessors including Small. Despised throughout the white world, Johnson represented in the public eye the realization of an inconceivable truth—that of the mental and physical equality between black and white. The *idea* of Johnson, let alone his actual presence, set the stage for the arrival of black performers and characters in wrestling concurrent with the emergence of African-Americans in cinema. If Small was a marginal presence, Johnson's legacy is one of challenge—for all his progressiveness as a public figure, he existed within a context of dominant nation-defining doctrines of racial standing and categorization. He was always the "Black Boxer," and all his achievements occurred from this position—whether as virulent threat to whiteness or as champion of the oppressed. His possibility of moving beyond a raciological frame (as Gilroy ponders) towards a pan-human recognition of achievement and skill was nullified by the intense racial eruptions in response to his fights: Johnson could not exist merely as another boxer—everything he did in and out of the ring was measured by the racial insensitivity of the times. Caught between the paradigms of black athlete and black public figure, Johnson's importance with regards to challenging the very existence of "race" can be regarded as a foundational block in any move to reconfigure or indeed eliminate raciological thought processes. Problematic as he was, his influence as a figure that both challenged and invigorated racism filtered down beyond the realm of sport. Although he had no direct connection to wrestling, his presence in the public imagination can be linked to the indelible shaping of minority characters in wrestling. His shaping as an Other, in spite of his achievements, would soon find a place in the weird limbo of fiction and truth in which wrestling

[1] Johnson has been a widely analyzed and documented figure both in writing and film, a notable example being *Unforgivable Blackness: the rise and fall of Jack Johnson* (Ken Burns dir. 2004) .

continues to operate. Johnson's essential realism, both as a man and the larger-than-life athlete he is remembered as, was tempered with an *un*realism—the paranoia of newspaper after newspaper article condemning the terrible rise of intolerable blackness. Johnson emerged from a similar place as Viro Small and, in many ways, Small predates Johnson in his struggles to assert himself in his profession. Had Small managed to escape the bonds of racism and challenge Muldoon's status as the unparalleled leader in American wrestling it's possible that he would be as widely-renowned as Johnson is today.

Just as Johnson has remained an icon of triumph in the face of adversity, Small too has a powerful, symbolic presence. A lone figure surrounded by adversity, Small defined himself through the physical acts of boxing and wrestling. Robbed of personality by the passage time, he was for all intents and purposes a black body—an alternative to the archetypal wrestler as a white man. Frozen in time, Small is a convergence point of many powerful ideas (surviving slavery; pursuing freedom; the importance of non-white subjectivity) that would all be emphasized through the act of wrestling. Linked to Barthes' view of wrestling as a performance akin to a morality play, Small and Johnson welcome examination along similar terms, but they are by no means the same. If the wrestler, according to Barthes, stands for a continued affirmation of the omnipresent division between good and evil, order and chaos, that is ascribed visually both in body and action, then Small is a compelling figure, especially when his slave past comes into context. Barthes writes: "what is thus displayed for the public is the great spectacle of Suffering, Defeat, and Justice. Wrestling presents man's suffering with all the amplification of tragic masks." Suffering and defeat were certainly present in Small's life, but justice proved to be an intangible quality that ignored the reality of his life. Indeed, the "tragic

mask" was practical with Small, whose agency and humanity was obscured behind the alias of Black Sam.

The timelessness of the wrestler, his ongoing deployment as a barometer of ethics whilst allowing the eternal imbalance of justice and injustice to be contested in wrestling form, is magnified when an example such as Small is brought into the equation. Small is a timeless figure, not for his success in the face of racism a la Johnson, but for his existence in the first place. By merely being a part of wrestling, Small was the first to indicate that the wrester could be a locus of not just hegemonic ideas but counter-hegemonic ones as well. He wasn't supposed to succeed outside the confines of the fairground or the saloon, and he didn't —it wasn't his place to transgress upon the American narrative of Muldoon and his contemporaries. But Small unwittingly pointed to the multiple meanings that could be attached to wrestlers decades before Barthes. Because wrestling inscribes its appeal upon the muscular bodies of men and women, *every* body can be related to the deeper themes that speak of its audience and the culture in which it takes place. On the fairgrounds of Vermont, Small was the mysterious wrestler, blessed with a skill and racial appearance that set him apart from his challengers. He represented both the unheralded drive to move far from the horrors of enslavement into the freedom of the North. Small's transition to "Black Sam" in the crime-riddled Bowery saw him represent the process by which identity and subjectivity could be subverted beneath a "gimmick." As a physical specimen, Small represented the supreme attainment for a black body. Having struggled out of obscurity, Small's musculature had been forged in the fire of racism and hardship. His very presence in a demanding field could be seen as a testament to overcoming the constant adversity inflicted upon the black community.

Although boxing and wrestling have inherent differences, not the least of which is that boxers are not fictional creations, they too have mythological qualities in the semiotic sense. Viro Small, stuck as "Black Sam," was a wrestling curio deprived of subjectivity. Johnson, more extremely, was always the embodiment of evil, primitive chaos set to break free from the rightful chains of containment. Every white opponent he faced was a "Great White Hope" destined to defend the honor of Whites everywhere. In this sense, there is a transcendence almost of humanity, as the identity of wrestler and boxer become instead a battle of the paradigms—"whiteness" against "blackness." The wrestling performance is grounded in the body, as object, as medium, as a constant feature of existence. The connotations and immaterial factors of the wrestling spectacle are channeled and given relevance through the combination of appearance and movement. The black body, as exemplified by Small, housed numerous deeper connotations that were embedded in the realities of the audience and amplified by the exaggeration of the performance. The myth (to borrow Barthes outline) of seeing the black body in an early wrestling match was one of grim heritage being juxtaposed with present realities that still carried traces of white superiority. Small and Johnson were alike in that they were never just black athletes—they were black bodies, black signifiers, black hate objects, black beacons transmitting visual-cultural messages of difference, determination, and coming to terms with difficult placement within an inexhaustible frame of negative depictions. The mystique that would prove so crucial in fashioning the subsequent waves of colorful wrestling characters was rooted in the potential for the image of a man and all his connotations to tap deep into the heart of America's socio-cultural substance. Johnson got there first, but the mystique that defined Small's life and career contain the seeds for the true emergence of the racialized wrestling characters into the present.

Barthes writes on wrestling from the perspective of one who has thoroughly suspended his disbelief. In possession of the semiotic faculties that enable the viewer to deconstruct the object(s) of their perceptions for their deeper, wider, concealed, and defaced cultural symbolism, Barthes could draw comparisons between the figure of the wrestler and the power of myth in the ancient and modern sense. But the visceral emotionality felt by the interested observer is a factor Barthes can only observe with fascination. The symbolic gravitas of the wrestler and his function as a surface for negotiating explicit social matters is strikingly apparent to Barthes, but it is a process that he himself is exempt from by virtue of his position as master analyst. To actually feel an emotional connection with wrestling at its most raw entailed (and still does entail) being fully drawn into the emotional whirlwind created by the performers—one in which the exaggerated movements and vulgar skewed references to the innumerable circumstances of everyday life are intensified through a structure that is capable of twisting communal realities into something that gains additional emotive power despite no longer being exactly real. It is here that the figure of Johnson, the "real" boxer, collides with that of Small, the black wrestler caught partaking in a sport under an alias—and where Barthes' fascination with the barely-concealed formalities of fake wrestling comes into contact with the absurdities and violent actualities of early twentieth century racism.

Mind and Body

Following Small's 1885 retirement (his date of death has never been recorded), wrestling saw a sharp decline in the already miniscule numbers of non-white wrestlers. The emergence of recognizable non-white stars in pro wrestling did not occur for the better part of five decades, with the nineteen-forties seeing a marked revival in the numbers of non-white wrestlers. The absence of prominent non-white wrestlers from the eighteen-eighties to the nineteen-forties is

confusing, but the answer may lay with other sports. Many Universities at the turn of the nineteenth century were desegregated, reflecting not so much a rise in societal ambition of the first generation of "free" African-Americans, but a making up for lost time—a movement into bastions of whiteness that was becoming a gradual possibility beyond menial labor. Between 1885 and 1920, an increasing number of black colleges such as Grambling State (1901) and Xavier (1915) were founded. The prominence of Booker T. Washington and The Tuskegee Institute was instrumental in foregrounding the need for advancement of the African-American community from an educational foundation. The emergence of black thinkers like Washington and W.E.B Dubois drew attention to the importance of nurturing academic prowess. A physically-dangerous practice such as wrestling was an entirely different concept to organized education, and was light-years behind in terms of offering a platform for equality. Wrestling, along with boxing, called for bodily prowess instead of the intellectualism that was such an integral facet of the rise in black education. Although it lacked the cultural capital afforded a university-educated African-American, wrestling still presented the minute possibility of attaining some semblance of contested equality, but it meant immersing one's self in a world of shady monetary dealings and physical harm. The use of the body for asserting one's equality was a difficult proposition—it negated the mind and invited observations of genetic difference. Wrestling represented a meeting of mind and body. The best wrestlers were praised for their technical mastery of the sport, but a high pain threshold along with a certain roughness (eye-gouging and headbutting occurred often) balanced out any chance of wrestling becoming too intellectual a sport. This union privileged white hegemony and made it easier for a man like Viro Small to be branched off as a novelty—the stereotypical brute in a white man's sport. Ralph Ellison channeled such horrific negotiations of black intellectualism and racist dehumanization

in *The Invisible Man* (1952), with his educated protagonist drawn into the degrading racist brawl of the "battle royal" and later confronted head on by the racism endemic within the white educational institution.

Sport, more than almost any other avenue of American life during at the turn of the century, represented both hope for minority advancement and the certainty that the existing racial order would be upheld. Wreathed in a certain simple purity, the pursuit of sport was seemingly intended to represent the "state of things." Of course, this was aided significantly through the segregation of many black sportspeople and a hegemonic situating of professional sports as almost exclusively white. With the threat of the Other marginalized, sport could be cherished as a showcase for the best of the best, where the power of cultural myths—directly referencing a rich history of white cultural achievement—could be channeled through individuals who both exemplified larger-than-life ideals of physical prowess and could be entrusted with representing the "true" character of the nation. Sport would become an area in which the social imbalance could be addressed and possibly even righted. As the twentieth century progressed, the iconicity of the non-white athlete was captured, in the semantic sense, by photograph and film—the black boxer being surrounded by numerous white bodies; the all-black baseball team demonstrating skills comparable to their white counterparts in the controlled isolation of the Negro Leagues. The downside was that new media such as film also provided an ideological weapon that strengthened the racial divide.

When the first wrestling match was filmed in 1920, it clarified beyond doubt that wrestling fell within the confines of white sport. Yet even the technology worked to amplify the virtuousness of the white athlete whilst Othering the non-white even further. Paul Gilroy posits a mass-mediated society freed of the burdens of "raciology"—the complex series of discourses

that dictate the existence of race as a social category. Gilroy speaks caustically of the assignment of sporting success to the genetically-privileged black athlete, thereby negating the possibility of intellectual equality. He writes of "the ideal of physical prowess, to which blacks were given a special title in exchange for their dissociation from the mind" (273). This statement points to the uphill battle black athletes faced during the early decades of the twentieth century. Even pursuing agency through sport carried with it the burden of playing into existing pitfalls of the Other as physically gifted at the expense of an intellectual presence.

The Exotic Touch

As the impact of new media was reinforcing racial boundaries throughout the nineteen-tens and -twenties, wrestling continued to develop, as its new theatricality changed the last vestiges of legitimate sport into something more closely resembling a contrived entertainment. The emergence of showmanship in wrestling mirrored the upswing in America's thriving entertainment culture, and following the changes introduced by the Gold Dust Trio, the business gradually found itself exuding a performative vibrancy. The powerhouses of cinema, radio, and theatrical performance were convenient mediums with which to confirm the racial hierarchy, and as a result the twenties and thirties were conflicted periods of racial marginalization. These thriving media showed little restraint when it came to racial representations. The dark fascination with difference that swirled within the nineteenth century Minstrel was reinvigorated as the new media invested a great power in depictions of the Other. Many of these fortified what Richard Dyer describes as "white virtue"—the purity of whiteness contrasted with the threat of darkness. In this environment, ethnic minorities could be portrayed not only as different, but foreign curiosities. The exoticism inherent within the term "Other"—the Orientalizing potential of the term, to invoke Edward Said—implies a cultural terror manifested not only in the immediate fear

of genetic black difference, but also in the suppressed histories and complete cultural difference connected to the Non-White. This exotic, mysterious otherness would go on to be a crucial element in the rise of black wrestlers in the forties, and as such the mass-mediation of race forms a crucial bridge between two eras of wrestling. This was the non-violent mystery of the barely (dis)covered, possessed of a certain power that was resistant to complete taming via technology and civilization. This subtle allure was most famously embodied within the form of dancer Josephine Baker.

If Viro Small had embodied force, Baker represented persuasiveness. Debuted in 1925, her notorious burlesque "banana dance"—featuring Baker as hyper-sexualized, barely-clothed native seductress—exposed the entrenched fascinations with Otherness that permeated deep into the heart of white society. In a strictly performative sense, Baker's exotic dancer status and jungle character implied a degree of control over her as both performer and character. Writhing on stage for the pleasure of her white male audience, she was implicitly objectified. Yet, a power of persuasion existed within her dancing—a "forbidden" quality which enabled her evocation of the danger and excitement of the generic Africanness to awaken some kind of interest in the obscurity of the uncivilized. Through her dancing, Baker catered to this ingrained fear-fixation upon blackness. She called upon all the stereotypes of folk mysticism and savagery through her broad range of signifiers—banana skirt, bare breasts, tribal rhythms—yet despite objectification, Baker was able to exercise a power of her own: the presence of the mysterious outsider enticing civilized white audience members to give themselves up at least within the context of the performance, to engage with unconscionable primitive urges, albeit framed within the racy surrounds of burlesque theaters and dance establishments.

Paralleling wrestling's flair for the dramatic, the key to Baker's appeal was an inherent physicality that transcended effortlessly into the visually iconic. Whereas Small and Johnson were associated with the assertion of their humanity and equality through fisticuffs, Baker relied upon the body in a different way—as an instrument of seduction. She was entirely exoticized in the public eye as a performer and her shows, based around the control of her body, sharply characterized the non-white as being steeped in an environment of sexual urge that even displacement to the metropolitan West could not dim. Othered through race and characterization, Baker was able—by performing movements that were considered socially improper within polite twenties society—to channel the intoxicating and unnerving aura of Africanism through her movements which, though alien to society-at-large, were intimately symbolic of a freedom that was not present in New York and Paris[2] (unless in the domain of nightclubs where Baker starred). In a Baker performance, the body served multiple functions. In the first order, it was a badge of social stratification—her race immediately apparent as non-white and therefore befitting the sexual themes of her dancing. Secondly, it was an object of physical/sexual suggestiveness, appearing to the audience as noticeably foreign in appearance yet unavoidably erotic. Thirdly, Baker's physical movements were a conduit for the deeper connotations of the dance—the sexual sway combined with the occasional explosion of movement creating a disorientating whirl of motion charged with both the allure and energy that could only be connected to something untouched by the sober glare of industry and the city. Objectified as a captive of sorts to the male gaze (Mulvey), Baker was able to assert her own dominance through deploying bodily motions on stage. Whereas Johnson was performing only an abbreviated race struggle in his boxing contests, Baker engaged in elaborate commentaries on the fantastical

[2] Baker's fame within the United States was minimal, despite early successes in Harlem. Her reputation as a star performer was fully sealed upon emigrating to Paris where the *danse banane* became hugely popular.

qualities of the Negro that, for all their connection to her status as a second-class citizen in the United States, spoke of a transcendent quality attainable through the disguise of performance. A crucial factor in Baker's appeal, especially for attracting a fervent fan base, was her pronounced femininity. The male brute stereotype (one easily applied to black boxers during these early decades) was one of simple unsophistication reduced to outbursts of uncontrolled aggression and natural inferiority. Baker represented something more complex. The female African figure had long been coveted as an object of fascination, often in the most crudely scientific ways, thereby ensuring the objectification occurred strictly on grounds of uncivilized female sexuality.

By choosing to make the banana-dancing native her signature character, Baker actively sought the captivating aura that her overtly-racialized routine allowed her. Accentuating her racial characteristics to the point of parody, she fully embodied the stereotype of the untamed jungle girl whilst exploiting it to achieve stardom. Baker's choice of reveling in her racially-stereotyped sexuality is an important one—the marginalized performer adopting her difference as a stylistic trademark, predating the racializing of wrestlers from ethnic minorities by some decades. The obscurity at the heart of her persona and stage presence was a tantalizing one that flourished in the environs of the club scene, where the norm was open to be challenged by adventurous performers. Like Small and Johnson, Baker hinted at the dangers of the Other, fears of which were prominent in the American mindset throughout her career. But whereas the men demonstrated the capacity for black triumph through strength, endurance, and skill—thereby fanning the flames of race hatred, Baker's rise to fame was distinctly pop cultural. Baker embodied a *persona* of perfect non-white beauty—one that was able to float easily from the Harlem Renaissance to the Paris club scene. The capacity for the character she portrayed—the triumph of the exaggerated composite of Africanness, sexual promiscuity, and mystery—to

foster such a consistently strong reaction from a white audience was a testament to both the potency of the "Africanized" figure and the role of the character in navigating the currents of emotional response crucial to the best performance and for manipulating both character and setting in the most effective ways.

Like Johnson, Baker was caught somewhere between stereotype and race role model. Both invited targeting for the truths they exposed about white society (Johnson its paranoid hypocrisies, Baker its unspoken obsession with the Other as sexual muse) and both were saddled with derogatory public images by a resistant white audience. The progression Baker represented was akin to a reclamation of the pejoratives associated with performed savagery. Anne Anlin Cheng asserts that for all her apparent breaking of race taboos and public profile, Baker was largely complicit in her own stereotyping and in enforcing those same stereotypes. Baker existed within a sphere of stereotype—her challenge was never a direct reclamation but rather performing to the point that her effected savagery became almost a pastiche of Africanness. Easily criticized as a perpetuation of demeaning images of African-American women, there is nonetheless more to Baker's legacy than can be dismissed as an easy play into meeting the depraved tastes of her time. The sheer impact of her character upon Parisian audiences speaks to the capacity for the exotic to shock, whilst also serving as a vehicle for possible self-emancipation.

The Other was the center piece of productions in which the archetype of the black male brute combined with the beguiling sexual mystique of the tropics. The cultural impact of *King Kong* (1933) with its undertones of Other-as-primitive-horror, spoke volumes about the fears associated with the hypersexualized black male. *Kong* was a layered exercise in paranoia—the destructive Other; the uncontrollable urge of the animal; the dangerous allure of the untamed.

The primitive stop-motion cinematography that defined *Kong* only added to the darkness (on multiple levels) of this grim tale of brightness and techno-endeavor clashing with unconquerable primacy. The most pivotal scenes of the film—Kong as the embodiment of raw animalistic power escaping from his bonds; his running amok before horrified New Yorkers paralyzed by the reality of the dark outside unleashed within their modernist metropolis; the final triumph of technology (and whiteness) over the primitive in the climatic Empire State Building scene—served to crystallize the deep-seated fear of the outside and, by extension, its "denizens." Viro Small and Jack Johnson predated the film, and certainly weren't as fantastical as the movie's title character but they were subject to the same portrayals of black brutishness that underscored the movie. The brute force exemplified by Kong and the backwards evil of the Skull Islanders would recur through the years—displayed in the black wrestler's capacity for destructive force.

Their multiple readings as both anti-racist successes and signifiers of the power of "race" within white minds, were condensed down into simple stereotype, albeit a performed one that echoed the true dynamics of race in American society. The public rise of Johnson and Baker, and their ability to blur the lines between real person and racialized icon, ensured that the Other was consistently in the public imagination, but no longer strictly as the brunt of passive oppression. Although the color division remained an unquestioned normality, Johnson's victories and Baker's arresting visual displays challenged conceptions (at least figuratively) of African-Americans as powerless inferiors. Was race a fact of birth or an assigned role to be played and mandated by the tastes of the public? Did the power lie with objectifier or objectified? Although the debate would increase along with the visibility of non-white entertainers, the seeds are evident in the first proper wave of black professional wrestlers, who followed Baker into the public eye in the late twenties. With wrestling still at this point a spectacle of characterless white

pros squaring off, the presentation of the few non-white performers occurred along strictly racial lines. Whereas boxing in the post-Johnson years saw an increase in the prominence of black fighters, culminating in the emergence of Joe Louis, wrestling was still mired between its roots in real sport and its awkward rebirth as performance fiction. The visibility of minority wrestlers was minimal into the nineteen thirties, despite wrestling's consistent presence throughout the United States. Archetypes had been established in which white wrestlers were the focal points of every major wrestling group, engaging largely unchallenged in white-on-white contests as other ethnic groups were cast to the periphery of wrestling obscurity where they could occupy limited space in the spectator's imagination. That changed in the near future however, as America found itself drawn to a new technological front both abroad in the Second World War and domestically with the arrival of television into the home. As the thirties drew to a close, the new non-white wrestlers emerged. They retained the stark iconicity of Viro Small, but also combined referents from Jack Johnson and Josephine Baker. The example of these three performers showed that there was room for layered representations of race within popular culture, personas that flirted with the old negatives. Despite the suspect content of Baker's routine, the public spotlight had shown the non-white body as a site of great potential. The new non-white wrestlers tapped into the ambiguity of Baker's savage. Wrestling had become established as a popular yet barbaric pursuit by channeling grim narratives of American social struggle in the dim light of a darkened arena. Soon it would embrace the light of technological modernity, as well as the nature of American multiculturalism.

Chapter II. Sound and Vision.

The nineteen-thirties marked the true emergence of the ethnic wrestler. Since the retirement/disappearance of Viro Small, the wrestling business had undergone vast changes, tightening into a well-operated performance that embraced the potential of fantasy and character where before it had relied upon the harsh realism of its participants. The return of the ethnic wrestler occurred in a new cultural environment in which wrestling was moving from its vaudevillian carnival roots towards something vaguely cinematic in scope. Wrestling in the thirties was a massive advancement on what had been practiced since the eighteen-seventies. It continued the tradition of placing two muscular exemplars of maleness in the ring in front of an audience, but wrestling was now far more spectacular than it had been before, with new maneuvers and faster pacing heightening the excitement of matches. The cumulative success of Frank Gotch and "Strangler" Lewis from the turn of the century up to the thirties had perpetuated a move away from grueling legitimacy towards well-managed performance. This new environment privileged wrestlers who were marketable beyond just being skilled at Greco-Roman: Gotch knew that he was an attraction fans would pay to see in 1911, but his matches would still turn into dull exercises in grappling technique. It took Lewis to finally usher in the new era of predetermined wrestling around 1920, reformatting the whole concept with speed and action that not only kept spectators' attention but absorbed them into the spectacle created by the matches.

With new parameters added to the performance, the business was able to remain popular through the grim years of the Depression, continuing, as did other popular entertainment, in the face of the stultifying pressures of life during intense hardship. By 1935, the business was firmly divided into regional territories based around cities such as St. Louis and Chicago, each with its

own promoter and localized touring regime. Having dispensed with the dour, hours-long matches, wrestling had become an exciting visual spectacle and was able to endure through the depression into the Second World War. Throughout the thirties, the wrestler's quintessence remained undeniably white and flaunted an extroverted masculinity. They weren't normal men in that they cultivated an aura of superiority and physical exceptionalism; every move made in the ring carried with it connotations of power, control, self-discipline, self-assurance. The body, so crucial to the spectacle of wrestling, took on a more elaborate meaning as the business ensconced itself within the pop culture lexicon of thirties and forties America. The traditional pro wrestler—dating back to the carnival days continued into the Depression and Wartime era by Strangler Lewis, Lou Thesz and legions of others—was a "real" sportsman who symbolized a level of physical toughness, self-discipline, technique that the everyday American could only aspire to. The wrestler was an elite figure, certainly open to notions of timeless transcendence à la Barthes, and this elitism was radiated to larger crowds as wrestling settled in larger city arenas. Toughness, quite vividly translated in wrestling terms as the ability of the individual to dislocate joints and break bones if necessary, was a quality forged out of decades of American social development tinged with the mythology of nationhood. Dedication to maintaining an intense physical robustness was defining trait of the wrestler, a man apart but connected nevertheless to important notions of bodily appearance as essential qualifiers of American manhood. The skill of the wrestler was presented to the audience as the very real capacity for controlled violence tempered by an attentiveness (or lack of) to "sportsmanship" and arbitration of a referee. Such displays were hegemonic communicators for the virtues of personal strength and self-belief—this innate channeling of strength and morals broadcast an important message to the audience.

The potential for committing violence was okay, provided it was put to good use in a lawful setting.

The wrestler epitomized the hegemonies of virtue, power, masculine perfection, and striving for right. Barthes, watching the handsome wrestling hero tackle the unattractive villain, astutely detailed what were, to his trained gaze, semiotic conventions reoccurring endlessly within wrestling's play. The classic wrestling "babyface" was the hegemonic realization of the flawless synthesis of morality and physicality to which a male fan base certainly could aspire. Although the "fakeness" was there to see, the personas were such effective representatives of dominant hegemonies that suspension of disbelief was able to overcome this to such a degree that the performance conveyed these messages with stark clarity, setting the hegemonic template of wrestling for decades to come. The new era of wrestling hero was embodied by Thesz—tall, well-muscled, classically-featured, and an incredibly adept performer[1]—who stood for the pinnacle of manhood in the national mindset of the time. Offsetting the heroic beauty of Thesz and his contemporaries, the classic wrestling villain was the complete antithesis of the entertainment industry's hegemony on beauty and skill. In a match, the typical villain would forgo displays of wrestling talent, instead favoring a repertoire of gestures and maneuvers designed to magnify their unscrupulous, often animalistic characters. The vogue of the period favored villains who looked villainous in a classic Hollywood manner. Exuding malevolence through threatening expressions and postures, the classic wrestling "heel" combined vaudeville antagonist with a feint monstrousness reminiscent of Lon Cheney. The likes of The French Angel and The Swedish Angel parlayed their physical ugliness, which violated the hegemonic

[1] Thesz was famously resentful towards the increase in colorful characters that occurred in the forties and fifties. A skilled amateur, he maintained his favorable impression of technical purity and grittiness across his transition to professional wrestler, and was known to legitimately hurt flashy, money-hungry co-performers he regarded as having little connection to the Greco-Roman tradition.

ideal set by the babyfaces, into fame as villains and were appearing regularly on shows by the early forties. The exotic was back in.

The New Others

With visual diversity finally being factored into wrestling, it was perhaps inevitable that non-white wrestlers would make a comeback to the business. One of the most prominent of these was Jim Mitchell, nicknamed the "Black Panther." Although footage of Mitchell is rare, his muscular appearance and persona indicate the aforementioned fusion of body and popular image—his ring moniker conjuring up images of the Othered mystery that Josephine Baker had turned into a calling card back in 1925. Debuting in the late thirties, Mitchell was something of a crucial bridge between the obscured history of wrestling and its emergence as widely-recognized popular entertainment. Segregation was tentatively enforced during this period, and Mitchell had to hone his craft in matches with other marginalized, nameless ethnic minorities. Crucially, he made a breakthrough so that by the nineteen forties he was a regular star in several Californian promotions, positioned as hero in opposition to white villains such as Freddie Blassie. The African mystique of his nickname combined with Mitchell's muscularity in an interesting way. The thirties and forties had seen a slow increase in the prominence of exaggerated muscularity of the bodybuilding kind. The new ingredients for wrestling success combined storytelling talent and athleticism with a distinct look which served to exaggerate the hegemonic imperative. The emergence of non-white bodies that met these criteria presented intriguing

Jim Mitchell

alternatives, even challenges to this bio-hegemony. Mitchell was popular for performing the Other, but he possessed the genetic tools that set the wrestler apart from society and invested them with heightened power in the eyes of the audience. He would fade to obscurity eventually, but as one of the first of a new breed of "superhuman" wrestlers he would be followed by some of the most definitive figures in wrestling.

Following Mitchell, an increasing number of African-Americans emerged as stars in the forties. Debuting in 1943, Art Thomas would become one of the most successful non-white wrestlers over the next three decades, earning titles (a vital indicator of a wrestler's marketability) in territories as widespread as Texas, Indianapolis, and Toronto. Debuting in 1943, Thomas parlayed a career in the United States Navy into bodybuilding and later wrestling, where his physical appearance became his defining trait. By the forties, wrestling's love of the physical ensured that wrestlers lacking in technique could still succeed if they met the bodily criteria, and Thomas benefited from this. Thomas was supremely muscled, even by the increasingly Adonis-like standards of the forties. In so emphatically embodying and exceeding the visual stereotype of the wrestler, Thomas was able to circumnavigate virulent racism and become a star. One of his ring monikers was "Hercules," pointing to the mythic properties of the wrestler that he so successfully embodied. After wrestling made the jump to television, Thomas became an established figure on the various local programs. His subscription to the important muscular-masculine credentials of the wrestler archetype ensured that his racial identity was subsumed within the wider signifiers of the wrestler, not tacked on as a means of highlighting implied inferiority as the kind

Art Thomas

experience by Viro Small in the eighteen-eighties. Thomas' naval background was an important aspect of his character and went a long way towards his appeal. It implied discipline, loyalty, bravery, fortitude, and strong overtones of American patriotism—powerful notions that elevated "Sailor" Art above racism once he stepped in the ring. Stylistically, he overpowered his adversaries, with matches based around his formidable strength and muscularity. In victory, the connotations of bravery etc. were magnified and validated to the audience. His exoticism was not the work of accoutrements such as an outlandish name or colorful costume, but rather the alternative of the stereotypical wrestler he embodied. Whiteness aside, Thomas ticked all the boxes—power, presence, a physique that could only be attained through countless hours in the gym—that made the classic wrestler. In many ways he was an improvement upon the archetype: far more muscular than his peers such as Thesz, he was perhaps the closest wrestling got to having a real "Hercules." Thomas' only deficiency as a wrestler was his awkwardness in the ring, but his sheer power of presence overcame any limitations to make him a star in the business.

The hegemonic configuration of the wrestler—alongside the boxer, strongman, bodybuilder, and other that privileged male physiology beyond the norm—was one in which whiteness was taken to be a given. As the twentieth century lurched onwards, however, the incorporation of Mitchell and Thomas hinted at the possibilities of non-white wrestlers receiving better representation. Again, the influence of other sports like boxing and athletics points to a threshold of increased public tolerance that was nonetheless complicated by the ongoing presence of segregation throughout society. Minority wrestlers of the thirties and forties emerged into an environment that had progressed from the virulent hatred Jack Johnson was subjected to towards a greater appreciation for the likes of World Champion boxer Joe Louis and sprinter

Jesse Owens, the defining figure of the 1936 Olympic Games. The wrestler played into exactly the same dilemma that faced other black athletes, that of using one's physical skills to combat utterly demoralizing social inequality. Mitchell and Thomas arrived at a time in American history when racial differences were being thrown in sharp relief by a variety of factors. By 1940, the creativity of African-American writers, artists and musicians ran concurrently with the rise of the non-white athlete within powerful discourses of negotiating and asserting heritage and equality. At this intersection, the non-white wrestler, shrouded in the mystique of a business that perpetuated fiction as reality, proffers a powerful clarity to challenge perceptions of race.

The non-white wrestler played upon familiar notions of active physical display as a path to wider acceptance. The combination of social stereotype with the wrestler's power to rise above bigotry and twist the emotions of the crowd was a very potent thing. Louis and Owens were prominent as honest sporting figures overcoming the odds in spectacular fashion, but the capabilities of the non-white wrestler went beyond just representation. The black and Mexican-American wrestlers of the thirties and forties could afford to flirt with racial representation and toy with the ideological weight of racism as they controlled the emotions of a mass audience. The prominence of the body meant that wrestlers were immediate symbols of racial confluence—the strong man in trunks tackling issues of race head on. The wrestler was a surface upon which the currents of racism and resistance met, and its symbolic power contrived to increase as the thirties progressed into the forties. The steady rise of non-white American wrestlers into the forties hinted at the potential that the combination of bodily focus and racial popularity had for developing cultural relations within American popular media. Indeed the battle for recognition had to be waged in the realm of the camera and film, as both Louis and Owens are testament to. The negotiation of racial identity was one that was inherently public

whilst hinting at the history and complexity that lay beyond the mechanical fixation on the Other. Soon enough, a public forum emerged that presented the minority wrestler with more visibility than ever before.

The transition from the very real to the supposed (and accepted) "real" of pro wrestling as a ground for racial representation began to be developed with the consolidation of wrestling territories around large urban multiracial areas. The across-the-board sensory thrust of black popular entertainment at this time (be it sport, dance, or the unmatched musical vibrancy of jazz) was embedded in the reception of the human body as a conduit for deeper emotional-political resonances. Multifaceted in their symbolism, significance to the black community at large, and their use of bodily movements, black wrestlers came to represent the necessity of a visual stage—with the quotient of performativity a crucial ingredient—for reconciling the past with the possible future. This was a cultural battleground of the body and, vitally, the mind, with iron-clad perceptions open for the first time to remolding. The Harlem Renaissance with its neo-urban blizzard of color, energy and unbridled assault on the public image of the African-American, celebrated the performer in numerous forms and pointed the way forward to the performance and display of blackness through movement of body and sound-waves, or the sheer arresting attack of the visualized idea of celebrating difference alongside similarity. Louis, Owens, Duke Ellington, and many Renaissance writers toyed with racial conceptions and legacies that implicated the foundation of a modern industrial society firmly in the suppression of its African children. Wrestling, with all its timeless connotations of right and wrong and the essential focus on the climatic outcome, was a stage touched by all these explosive cultural negotiations, even if it remained primarily a white business. It was the ideal setting for this hybrid of body and idealism to flourish, even if the ranks of non-white wrestlers in the interwar years were only

slowly growing. At the end of the nineteen forties, the obscurity and struggle that had dogged ethnic wrestlers was thrown into a new light, one which added new dimensions to the wrestler, the performance, and its cultural appeal.

Black and white in black and white

The effect of television upon pro wrestling changed the business, and by extension the performance, definitively. Television had been broadcast to available homes in the United States since 1928, when the first mechanical television broadcasting system was installed in Chicago. The popularity of television sets was limited, however, and the spread of the technology into the home did not increase until after the Second World War, with the percentage of American homes with television rocketing from 9.0% in 1950 to 85.9% in 1959 (tvhistory.tv). With the introduction of this new apparatus, the opportunities for greater nationalization and social cohesion (along with a new means of hegemonic dispersal) were vastly increased in homes across the land via the moving image. Reflecting the dominance of white America over all areas of the public sphere, including the entertainment industry, television's introduction immediately raised politics of representation that would only increase over time. Just as cinema had been viewed and used as an instrument of white hegemony, television presented the same opportunities/drawbacks. Wrestling was a complex hegemonic entity, and the arrival of televised exposure exerted a profound influence upon its hegemonic nature. Where the film industry had been incredibly overzealous with its marginalization of non-whites, television promised new horizons in terms of non-white faces gaining recognition in the public eye. Television, as a communal medium, could be viewed not just in the sanctity of the nuclear family, but in public places as well, notably bars and other establishments of the type. Hence, the images on the screen could be interpreted by everyone who witnessed them, and decoded for a variety of

readings. As Stuart Hall outlines, the agency of the receiver in decoding the messages encoded within mass-mediated broadcasts is, and was, not necessarily a straightforward process, regardless of the institutional power behind the encoding process:

> "The codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical. The degrees of symmetry—that is, the degrees of "understanding" and "misunderstanding" in the communicative exchange—depend on the degrees of symmetry/asymmetry (relations of equivalence) established between the positions of "personifications," encoder-producer and decoder-receiver. What are called "distortions" or "misunderstandings" arise precisely from the *lack of equivalence* between the two sides in the communicative exchange. Once again, this defines the relative autonomy of the entry and exit of the message in its discursive moments" (510).

This meant that long-marginalized populations such as African-Americans and Asian-Americans could exercise their critical faculties when viewing televised programming. The presence on TV of black sports stars was a significant instance of the burgeoning medium representing overlooked minorities, especially with prestige the technological novelty of television bestowed upon those on the screen.

The stylistic changes necessitated in wrestling as a result of television occurred on multiple levels. At the most basic, the televised wrestler had to slowly adapt to the presence of a camera (and by extension a home audience) at his matches. Although cameras travelled to record shows at the larger sporting arenas, wrestling promotions eager to take advantage of the new avenues TV offered booked time in studios where a rudimentary equivalent of the live wrestling arena space could be recreated with a fraction of the fans. This condensing of one of the most important ingredients to the performance, the live ambience created by the essential presence of

indirect participant observers, necessitated that wrestlers emphasize even minimal body movements and facial expressions in order to convey to the televised audience what would have been more easily recognized by the live arena viewer. The true stars of televised wrestling, led by Gorgeous George, built their stardom off of the photogenic appeal that was granted the televised body. By appearing on the small screen, the wrestler was blessed with a heightened aura from being at the forefront of technology. As an object on the screen, the successful televised wrestler could revel in the spotlight, his physical prowess and appearance magnified by virtue of being broadcast to hundreds of homes around the area. Television personalities became magnets for social attention, larger-than-life figures that crossed over into the minds of a united American public from the space of a televised domain outside the immediacy of the home or theater. Wrestlers fully embraced this enhanced profile, and the introduction of the interview segment and commentators to convey the personae and characters of the wrestlers in more depth further developed the conception of what a wrestler was and what he could represent.

In this new environment, the wrestler became an enhanced fictional construct. Live, as Barthes illustrates, he (or occasionally she) had the capacity to conjure up allusions to timeless struggle and the righting of wrongs within the performative context of two men grappling in a faux gladiatorial sense. The arrival of television only elevated this quotient of fantasticism before the eyes of a double-audience—the present and the semi-present viewer in front of their TV set. With this new emphasis, the wrestler's presence was increasingly potent. The combination of personality and muscularity appeared to be of an exceptional resonance when held up on the screen as having abnormal properties of strength and resilience. Wrestlers now, by virtue of their presence at the vanguard of the developing medium, could be semiotically presented as superior beings. It was during the early televised years that the prototype of the wrestler was constituted

upon an axiom ranging from physical beauty or monstrous ugliness—tapping into the age-old dichotomy of virtuous hero and inhuman(e) figure of evil. The classic babyface, best exemplified by the herculean Bruno Sammartino and "Cowboy" Bob Ellis, was muscular and powerful, embodying the human optimum through displays of strength and toughness that so easily translated to hegemonics of the body. The villainous prototype on the other hand, successfully portrayed by the likes of Freddie Blassie and Danny McShain were less attractive physically, yet made up for this by embodying a ruthless arrogance that was the antithesis of the defining messages of wrestling—sport, discipline, and physical and mental triumph.

Wrestling became a staple of television in many local markets, exponentially broadening the public visibility of the "sport." By now firmly operating as an arranged performance, it was given new impetus to develop its exciting crowd-pulling appeal. The actual performance became more exaggerated for television, with movements and pacing emphasized so as to convey a newer aspect—that of the story within each wrestling match. Wrestling now demanded mini-narratives for each match that capitalized on the basic contest element and introduced semi-cinematic conventions such as the little man triumphing in a hard-fought bout or bitter rivalries being commenced and ultimately concluded within the space of the wrestling ring. Every match was a contained performance that could be arranged around a beginning-middle-end format and the drama could be stressed by the televised commentators and in-character interviews. This created an aura of high drama that extended beyond that of the straight-forward sporting contest. Now, wrestlers's motivations for wrestling each other were those of basic social interactions such as dislike, respect, hate, and so on. Fans embraced this—it had all the drama of other sports (wrestling was fanatically presented, and defended, as being real) but involved characters that were just as likely to appear on cinema screens as on the sports field.

The most pivotal part of wrestling's move to TV was the centrality of characters who conveyed the larger narratives and hegemonic meanings encoded within the shows. Wrestlers were paragon-like figures embodying physical discipline, vicious menace, corn-fed toughness, immigrants-made-good, and any other American cultural narratives that were likely to be appealing to a large audience. They were still mainly white, representing the lopsidedness of representation within the mass media, but this was no longer exclusive—as wrestling was a territorial business operating around larger cities, it saw a rise in the number of African-American fans. With sport being one of the few forums in which non-white Americans could exercise some sense of equality and superiority from basic human skill, wrestling, as a legitimate sport in the public's eyes, somewhat naturally attracted this same attention. The heightened theatricality of the sportsmen of wrestling meant that the business was a potential groundbreaker in dedicating some attention to ethnic minorities. Getting into the business, though, was a difficult proposition for non-white aspirers. Although never officially segregated in the tradition of early boxing and baseball, wrestling nonetheless reflected the social protocol of the forties and fifties. Non-whites were second class citizens, and by extension, black wrestlers especially were consigned to obscurity through participation in segregated bouts. Luther Lindsay, one of the great black wrestlers of the fifties and at one point the "US Colored Heavyweight Champion," dryly recalled how he was placed in matches with fellow African-American Shag Thomas: "Monday I wrestle Shag Thomas in Portland, Tuesday I wrestle Shag Thomas in San Francisco, Wednesday I wrestle Shag Thomas in Dallas, Thursday I wrestle Shag Thomas in Houston, Saturday I wrestle Shag Thomas in Memphis" (wrestlingperspective.com).

Almost right from his debut in 1951, Lindsay was a significant figure in terms of overcoming the racial hierarchy that had filtered into wrestling for decades. The "U.S. Colored"

championship was for all intents and purposes a gimmick that affirmed Lindsay's vast performative competency without promoters having to run the risk of placing him in featured positions against white opponents. Given that he wrestled frequently in Southern cities, the decision to match the popular Lindsay against the leading white stars carried implications for the supposed superiority of white over non-white. Lindsay's legacy lies in subverting such racist notions. His cross-demographic appeal forced promoters to move him up to higher profile matches. Alongside contemporaries like Art Thomas and Bobo Brazil, he overstepped the unconscious color line of fifties America through his wrestling ability. Thomas and Brazil were impressive-looking performers but were somewhat lacking in performative dexterity. This was Lindsay's forte. Technical skill was a requisite for consideration as a promotion's champion, and Lindsay was able to progress from segregated bouts to main events opposite the preeminent star of the fifties, and the embodiment of white wrestling prowess, Lou Thesz. Thesz, a great defender of wrestling's heritage, summed up Lindsay's lasting influence:

> "the best black wrestler ever. Luther had a fantastic body and limitless energy to compliment his skill. Like many other industries, wrestling was not open to African-American wrestlers during his career, so it was an amazing accomplishment for Luther to even learn his craft. His place in history is not because he was black; it is in spite of the fact he was black" (wrestlingheritage.co.uk).

Such positive characterizations ran contrary to the dominant social mentality of the time. Despite decades of insidious representation in the media, black wrestlers were rarely booked as villains. Although never specified, the propensity of over-excited fans for rioting at wrestling shows and attacking heels may have dissuaded promoters from booking black wrestlers as villains for fears of enticing irate racist fans to violence at the sight of a villainous black. Another possible reason

is the small, yet consistent presence of black fans at wrestling shows, especially in large cities such as Washington D.C., and the desire to maintain this constant source of ticket sales through booking appealing black faces.

Bobo Brazil

The first true non-white star of the television age was Bobo Brazil. Sometimes acknowledged posthumously as a Jackie Robinson-like figure, Brazil (real name Houston Harris) stands as one of the most pivotal figures in the development of non-white gimmicks in wrestling, and as one of a few isolated African-American wrestlers who established themselves in the business during a period of intense racism. The iconicity of Brazil establishes a paradox which has dogged non-white wrestlers, in particular African-Americans, ever since. Like Joe Louis a product of the migration northwards in the first half of the twentieth century, Harris grew up in Benton Harbor, Michigan, and it was in the upper-Midwest, a haven of sorts for migratory African-American families drawn towards the state's motor plants, that he would achieve his greatest fame as a pro wrestler. Thanks to the popularity of wrestling on television, Brazil became a definitive, recognizable black star. Oddly, considering the virulent hatred to which the African-American community was subject during this period, Brazil spent his entire career as a babyface character popular across racial boundaries. Debuting in 1951, he was able to establish himself first in the Detroit territory before expanding nationally, wrestling in the Northeast, the Central States, and other regions as a ticket-selling star and a major attraction wherever he appeared.

Although his repertoire of moves in the ring began and ended with his trademark "Coco Butt" headbutt, Brazil possessed a charisma that placed him among the elite of his era,

conveying a likeable modesty in TV interviews whilst reflecting on the essential challenges of being a professional wrestler. Brazil's eloquence on the microphone was contrasted by his rough grasp of wrestling basics. Never particularly agile or flashy and blessed with a physique that lacked the muscular definition of many other top stars, he lumbered about the ring in an ungainly fashion with a slight boxing shuffle in his step, grabbing vigorously at his co-performers for most of a contest. His true skill as a performer was in his "selling"—the vital quality which enables a wrestler to convey his emotional responses to being attacked in the ring to the crowd and thus form almost an emotional bond as they suspend their disbelief. Brazil was so proficient at this aspect that he could suck the already-enraptured audience even further into his matches—Freddie Blassie reflected on a D.C. match in which Brazil's feigning of being choked unconscious nearly provoked violent scenes from the largely black audience (Blassie). Indeed, besides the novelty of being one of the few black wrestlers on television starting in the fifties, Brazil's lasting legacy has been his success in circumnavigating the currents of racism that permeated America in the mid-twentieth century. Fans of all ethnicities embraced the charismatic Brazil due to his masterful knack of focusing on universal human qualities of compassion. In an era when his skin color prevented Houston Harris as an American citizen from service in some segregated institutions, Bobo Brazil the superstar wrestler was able to make great strides towards equality, within the wrestling business at least. This was accomplished whilst bearing a name that invited the age-old problematic of orientalism and exoticism.

Wrestlers had performed under catchy names over the decades. Harris's sobriquet was one with distinctly racial overtones, etymologically conjuring up such derogatory tropes as the "Sambo." Even his signature move, the headbutt, created a wrestling trope that would continue explicitly into the seventies—that of black wrestlers having exceptionally hard skulls. Although

the "coco butt" became one of the most recognized wrestling maneuvers of the era, the connotations of hard head equaling diminished intellect were quite apparent in spite of Brazil's interviews evidencing an obvious intelligence. Although Harris was adroit at avoiding any other performance hallmarks that would imply or invite thoughts of racial inferiority, his reputation as a break-out black star had been formed out of a character that had a foot in past traditions of questionable portrayal. In spite of this, Harris has to be recognized for the considerable exposure his success, and that of contemporaries such as Lindsay and the super-muscular Thomas, gave to non-white performers in the business. Brazil was never presented as being racially inferior, as if his on-screen character existed in a sphere isolated from the racism outside. In fact, his presentation as being on a par with and ahead of his white opponents was crucial in establishing the possibilities for non-white wrestlers as successful drawing cards. Beyond the novelty of seeing a select few black wrestlers in a white business, the success of Brazil had very little to do with the negatives a deeper reading of his character reveal, and a lot to do with his marketability as a skilled performer. Appearing on TV with other larger-than-life bodies, Brazil was also blessed with that sheen of technological-physiological superiority. He was one of the select elite separated from the paying public by way of skill, resolve and bodily prowess—a media-created demigod in many ways, albeit one with an obvious difference in skin tone. For all its white-hegemonic potential, the apparatus was, in its primitive years, incapable of truly presenting a wrestler as anything other than how they appeared to the naked eye, and on the small-screen even more than the arenas, Brazil was a black superman.

Roots

From 1948 up to the early eighties, a variety of ethnic wrestlers were appearing on television across the country. Mexican-Americans such as Pepper Gomez, Alberto Torres, Rito

Romero, and later Puerto-Rican Pedro Morales were stars in various territories, usually as fan favorites, and many of them were given title belts (key parts of the performance and essential to a wrestler's marketability) in territories with high Hispanic populations. Wrestling had traditionally been popular in Mexico as *lucha libre*, which had many similarities with the American performance as well as a more localized cultural feel that accentuated entirely different social narratives relating to Mexico's history and nationhood. The fervent love of sports among Spanish-speaking American communities also favored wrestling's move further into the public spotlight. Another trope which has persisted to the modern day was the Native American wrestler. Typically portrayed by wrestlers with genuine connections to tribal communities, the prototypical Native wrestler would come to the ring in ceremonial headdress (tomahawks and peace pipes were optional) with moccasin-style wrestling boots to accentuate their connection to their roots. Fluent English was also optional. The classic innovators of this gimmick, which paid close attention to a wrestler's specific tribal roots, included Wahoo McDaniel, Chief Jay Strongbow, Billy Red Cloud, and Bobby Bold Eagle. In fact, it was rare for a Native American character to be played by a wrestler without some indigenous roots. Performative tropes patented by these wrestlers included the performance of "war dances"—normally a visual cue that the wrestler was about to launch a comeback after sustaining a beating in a match—and the "tomahawk chop," a finishing maneuver adopted almost universally by wrestlers doing the Indian gimmick. The Native character had enjoyed a rich history in American cinema and television up to that point, immortalized as both protagonist and antagonist in many pioneering films, and was a recognizable figure in American popular culture beyond the realm of visual entertainment. Not unlike African-Americans, wrestlers of Native heritage were typically presented as heroes, often with an air of tribal nobility about them. McDaniel especially

possessed a charisma and talent that ensured fans paid to see him regardless of his gimmick. The most successful Native American practitioners configured their real heritage into their characters so that a sense of cultural legitimacy was apparent. Despite the feathers and moccasin boots, McDaniel and Strongbow forged a bond with fans because they conveyed a sense of proud realism in their movements and expressions.

The Native American stereotype persisted throughout the television boom, becoming a staple in many territories. Another popular trope that emerged during this period went on to become an enduring fixture in wrestling, dredging up in the process lingering signifiers of hatred and post-War paranoia. The Second World War had seen a domineering use of mass-media for pro-American propaganda. The nation was placed firmly at the heart of national sentiment as its fascist enemies were targeted as foreign evils to be resisted and combated. The very real psychological trauma of America's involvement in the War resonated within the country, especially once the true toll of the conflict became apparent during the rebuilding process. Like boxing, wrestling demonstrated the capacity to channel the national psyche during a time of turmoil: wrestlers' performances tap into reliable tropes of heroism and villainy that gained a heightened emotional currency in the uncertainty of economic impoverishment and war. Wrestling promoters, ever keen to locate potential revenue, took note of the anti-Japan thought process and began introducing a number of Orientalized villains to their shows. The main dilemma faced by promoters was the practicality of bringing these guaranteed ticket-sellers to life given the impossibility of importing legitimate Japanese wrestlers. The solution was to employ American citizens who physiologically resembled Japanese in order to accurately convey some shred of realism. The result was a parade of faux-invaders played by Hawaiians and American Samoans including Mr. Moto, Mr. Fuji, Professor Toru Tanaka, Tojo Yamamoto, and

Tosh Togo. In the ring, these men channeled the *evil* inherent in the image of the Japanese despot. Rarely managing fluent English and either squinting villainously or grinning with devious malice, the likes of Fuji and Moto were created out of movements and gestures that firmly relied upon pre-existing stereotypes of Japanese as a distinctively non-white threat. Hallmarks included "martial arts" maneuvers, throwing "salt" into an opponent's eyes, and a penchant for "Pearl Harboring" opponents when the referee wasn't looking. By channeling the residual fears of invasion left over from the War, promoters defined an archetype that revolved around an Orientalism that was exclusively negative. More tellingly, once actual Japanese wrestlers began arriving in the States to perform in the fifties and sixties, they too were frequently treated with the same Westernized attitude. A Japanese wrestler would typically find himself billed by last name only, often with the faintly-disparaging "Mr." prefix tacked on. Mastery of English was overlooked, replaced with either a bland stoicism (for babyfaces) or sheer contempt for American fans (heels). These archetypes assumed a sense of permanency as wrestling became entrenched on local television. The nefarious Japanese especially would recur in promotions across the country into the eighties, signifying that post-War sentiment still lingered in the minds of wrestling fans. They were all fantastical variations on race, exaggerated to fit the brash world of wrestling, and carried a distinctive air of parody. But the early-nineteen eighties saw this frivolity become serious. The traditional stereotypes, hallmarks of local wrestling programming were dragged onto a new frontier of expansion as the business went national.

Tremors

The nationalization of pro wrestling began in 1982, when Vince McMahon Jr. purchased his father's World Wide Wrestling Federation. Dropping the "Wide," by 1984 McMahon was

promoting shows in territories outside of his late father's Northeastern base. Following this violation of the unspoken agreement to respect promotional boundaries (Assael and Mooneyham), McMahon set about building a new vision of wrestling that maximized new media opportunities like cable television and (in a move that would have a profound impact on how wrestling was received) pay-per-view. McMahon's risk-taking and technological ambitions drove him to systematically assimilate or destroy his competitors. Signing his rival's top stars such as Hulk Hogan to lucrative deals, he soon had a virtual monopoly over American wrestling. McMahon's vision for wrestling was futuristic—a separation from the traditional regionalism of his father's Northeastern promotion. His characters would be larger-than-life, colorful to the point of stretching the boundaries of plausibility. But McMahon's ambition was rooted in tradition. His roster was stocked with characters who smacked of territorial archetypes—Native Americans, Japanese villains, Russian antagonists, and barely-civilized Pacific Islanders—yet he steadfastly pursued a sheen to his televised programming that validated the visual power of his wrestlers. In spite of how dated and regionalized many of the character-types were, the WWF's production values painstakingly created a televisual realm in which they appeared to be brand new. Aiming at a family demographic, McMahon dispensed with any vestiges of territorial darkness as he dragged the old stereotypes into his eighties fantasy world. The bright lights and cascading synthesizer music signaled that the likes of Mr. Fuji, Kamala the Ugandan Headhunter, and The Islanders were at the forefront of a new wrestling era—one in which wrestlers would increasingly be faced with a changing national culture.

Chapter III. Made Men.

The success of the World Wrestling Federation in expanding into the public spotlight created seismic repercussions across every facet of professional wrestling. The company's evolution from regional promotion to national brand revitalized the industry as a profitable enterprise, steering it away from the confines of the dimly-lit arena to the brightly-colored aesthetic dazzle of cutting-edge television production that had never before been attempted by a wrestling company. With the WWF, wrestling transformed into a nationalized spectacle, one that harnessed new inventions such as pay-per-view and cable television to launch its wrestlers into the popular consciousness like never before. This new technological age signaled an elevation of sorts with regards to the cultural symbolism of the wrestler, and it is squarely on the back of this semiotic reconfiguration that Vince McMahon Jr.'s legacy as an innovator is rested. McMahon's rise from the status of "wrestling promoter" to "entertainment mogul" bore significant changes in the public reception of pro wrestling as a business and a performance.

Starting in 1984, the traditional image of the white male, masculine champion of the people was elaborated into something much more. As the WWF consolidated its hold over the American wrestling landscape in the mid-eighties, the innate appeal of wrestling characters—along with the performance in which they engaged—came to reflect the business' growing commercialism whilst at the same time remaining connected to notions of a rich performative tradition of wrestling. Such advancements saw non-white wrestling characters achieve national recognition like never before. With the WWF beamed into homes nationwide, wrestlers who previously would have been limited to regional wrestling companies could now travel the country and perform regularly in front of massive crowds in arenas such as Madison Square

Garden and the Rosemont Horizon. This was a vast move away from the previous decades of regional wrestling, and one that contained huge implications for the representation of multiculturalism within wrestling.

To examine the new racial horizons of wrestling during its most successful period, it is necessary to combine several approaches to the business and its characters. The decline of wrestling's regional promotions in the face of the WWF's 1984 national expansion had a profound impact on wrestling as a forum for American racial and cultural diversity. With the territories and their regionalized approach to racial diversity defeated, the WWF ushered in a new era of mass-mediation. This helped perpetuate the wrestling business's transformation into a hyperreal practice (as theorized by Jean Baudrillard) in which wrestlers became "simulacra" of the social and racial ideals of the nineteen eighties. As this was taking place, small, local "independent" promotions of the nineteen nineties promised an alternative to the hyperreal WWF by focusing again on gritty countercultural representations of race that reinvigorated the medium's capacity for accurate racial portrayal. By 1986, the renamed-World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) has achieved a practical monopoly over American wrestling.

The Death of Regionalism

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the wrestling business had, since the nineteen forties, been divided geographically into different promotions. Colloquially known as "territories," these promotions thrived around large cities, using their presence on regional television to promote upcoming events at large local arenas. Prominent examples included the World Wide Wrestling Federation in the Northeast, Big Time Wrestling in Detroit, and Mid-SouthWrestling in Oklahoma and Louisiana. The different territories catered to the specific social demographics that comprised their audiences, resulting in a rich differentiation in style and presentation from

region to region. During what I shall refer to as the "territorial era," which ran from approximately 1930 to 1987, the small geographical areas of many promotions meant that promoters had to rely upon local-grown stars to comprise the bulk of their rosters. Such an atmosphere ensured that non-white wrestlers could gain regular exposure in different territories, as well as sharpen their skills to pursue top-billing in different regions. The nineteen-seventies and early nineteen-eighties was a golden period for the visibility of non-white wrestler. In the South especially, Georgia, Alabama, the Carolinas, and Florida had hugely successful local promotions which acted as proving ground of sorts for a generation of African-American stars like Ernie Ladd and The Junkyard Dog. Thus, regionalism was crucial with regards to wrestling becoming more multicultural than before. As the pay was often underwhelming, wrestlers would move between territories in pursuit of consistent rewards, leaving spots in various promotions to be filled by skilled local wrestlers. The downsides of regional wrestling were numerous: only well-traveled, established wrestlers made much money, and the performing conditions were frequently primitive. Additionally, the competition for spots was fierce, with wrestlers needing to "get over" (gain popularity) with the local die-hard fans to ensure continued bookings on shows. In Southern promotions like Mid-South and Georgia, non-white wrestlers were given opportunities to headline large shows and some, such as The Junkyard Dog, became established headliners at the regional level.

Regional promotions were focused mostly on catering to their localized audiences. A by-product of this environment saw many non-white wrestlers portraying characters that reflected a certain clumsy regional aesthetic. African-American Koko B. Ware, for instance, spent some of his formative years in the Memphis territory as the masked Stagger Lee, a reference to the murderous African-American character of Deep Southern folk tradition. Memphis was also the

home territory of Kamala, a primitive "Ugandan" savage played by Jim Harris, a black wrestler from Mississippi. Other regulars in the Southern territories included "Bad Bad" Leroy Brown (a name derived from the folk song of the same name) and Iceman Parsons, a character seemingly derived from the Blaxploitation film genre. Despite the success many of many of these characters achieved, the men playing them were often stifled by the cartoonish stereotyping. The fact that a character as blatantly typecast as Kamala was appearing across the South in the early nineteen-eighties spoke volumes for the lingering racism that existed in the region. The Junkyard Dog had better luck at avoiding stereotyping, but this was mostly due to his unique, and sought after, skill at drawing massive crowds into his matches.

Kamala

Another notable performer was Ernie Ladd. Debuting in the sixties, Ladd had progressed by the mid-seventies to be one of the biggest stars of the territorial era, appearing in main events everywhere from Atlanta to New York City. Ladd was always a villain, a role that accentuated his eloquent verbal delivery and the refined menace of his in-ring movements. Perhaps his most crucial contribution to the development of non-white characters was his refusal to be typecast by racial stereotyping. His nickname of "Big Cat" aside, there was nothing about Ladd's character that suggested he had any similarity to the likes of Kamala. His background certainly shaped the nuances of his persona—Ladd was a graduate of Grambling State University, and prior to entering wrestling had been a hugely successful player in the American and National Football Leagues. His wrestling stardom was achieved through his mastery of every aspect of the wrestling performance. The hatred he enticed from crowds, which could often spill over into violence in the seventies, could be attributed to his very absence of racial cliché. Ladd always

came across as highly-intelligent, imposing, outspoken presence on television, triumphing not though brute force but intellect and ruthlessness instead. Regarded today as one of the most important non-white wrestlers in the history of the business, Ladd had the potential to obliterate many of the old stereotypes of inferiority and Otherness. On screen, he was unquestionably the equal of his white opponents both mentally and physically, and his negotiation of Otherness was so emphatic and multifaceted that Ladd almost succeeded in de-venomizing much of the stigma of caricature that had been attached to non-white wrestlers down through the years. Whereas The Junkyard Dog's popularity centered upon his unorthodox charm—he played a humble, if slightly eccentric, working class African-American from the South—Ladd was a caustic persona, displaying the ability to castigate white audiences and opponents without ever overstepping the boundaries into reverse racism. His success was a testament to the migratory nature of the territorial system—moving cross-country from promotion to promotion, he headlined shows in front of diverse audiences in areas with contrasting histories of racial relations. Ladd never allowed the integrity of his persona to be compromised during his career, and the integrity of his performances indicated that wrestlers of color could attain success in their profession without sacrificing their dignity to wrestling's taste for the obscure.

Ernie Ladd

The existence of the territories ensured that the wrestling business was open to cultural plurality, even if this often manifested in the form of poorly thought out gimmicks. It provided non-white wrestlers an opportunity to travel and perfect their craft by tailoring their performances to different audiences with different regional attitudes. Plying one's trade before

small crowds in places such as Blytheville, Arkansas or Hamburg, Pennsylvania may not have been the most lucrative experience, but it exposed wrestling to different audiences and challenged it to experiment with characters to draw in fans. The results weren't always state-of-the-art in terms of racial sensitivity—Kamala was designed to play on the inherent Southern fear of the black Other—but non-white wrestlers were encouraged to experiment with their characters and calibrate them to appeal to varying audiences. The seventies was a vintage decade for non-white wrestlers. The territories prided themselves on presenting realistic characters, and ethnic performers were generally no exception. For instance Tony Atlas and Rocky Johnson—billed as the "Black Superman" and "Soulman" respectively—may have had racialized monikers, but they were always presented as embodying a powerful masculinity that made them seem impervious to a damaging ideology like racism. The territorial era privileged The Wrestler as an archetype of muscularity that extended almost equally across racial boundaries. The decline of this regional model would see the believable musclemen placed under threat by a promoter who fashioned his wrestlers into the polar opposite of the realistic regional grapplers.

Following his national expansion in 1984, Vince McMahon Jr. established his dominance over the creative direction not just of his own burgeoning empire, but that of his nearest competitors as well. Struggling to counter McMahon's encroachment upon their territories, not to mention his aggressive pursuit of their top stars, the vast majority of regional promotions were dealt crushing body blows. Grasping the potential of cross-promoting with burgeoning mass-media outlets like MTV, by the end of 1984 the WWF was the leading wrestling promotion in the United States. McMahon's risk-taking philosophy of dragging what he perceived to be wrestling's archaic presentation into the eighties paid dividends at the box office. On July 23, 1984, the WWF promoted *The Brawl to End it All*. Broadcast on MTV, the event drew a 9.0.

Nielsen rating for televised viewership and established the WWF as an unstoppable media juggernaut. Continuing this momentum, the inaugural *WrestleMania* event on March 31 1985 was viewed on closed-circuit television by an audience in excess of one million viewers (Shields 148). Regional promotions didn't stand a chance, and were swiftly crushed as McMahon began promoting across the country. The regional ethos, with wrestlers travelling back and forth to different areas and different promotions, was damaged by McMahon's unified touring product. His multiracial cast of wrestlers brought the same rapturously-received show to new arenas on a weekly basis, eradicating the need for regional variety. Everything about McMahon's WWF ran contrary to the territorial atmosphere. The smaller arenas with primitive lighting set-ups and tatty rings were subsumed within the WWF's blitz of primary colors. The regional flavor that seeped into every local promotion was also wiped away by the ready-made nationalism of the WWF. It was region-non-specific—all of the wrestlers on McMahon's shows were designed to appeal to the *American* nuclear family. It was reminiscent of a distinctly ruthless nineteen-eighties Capitalism, with McMahon perceived as a highly-stylized, immaculately-suited nemesis of the blue collar territories. Perhaps ironically, McMahon's white collar business mentality would inspire the last regionalized bastion of resistance to emerge. Ted Turner, his main rival for the remainder of the century, was in many ways an extreme counterpoint to McMahon's New England oligarch. Turner's abrasive Southernness was the public force behind the success of WTBS, his regional entertainment powerhouse, but his vision was also one of national expansion, driven by the same desire to get into as many households as possible that punctuated every business decision McMahon made. Georgia and the Carolinas were the last regions to resist the WWF, conjuring up images of a figurative rivalry between Northern capital and Southern parochialism. But Turner subscribed to the same Capitalist ethic as McMahon. Despite

having made his reputation by carousing, yachting, etc. in Northern elite circles, Turner still possessed a "maverick" drive that compelled him to return to his Southern roots and apply his Ivy League-education to dominating its media landscape. Whereas McMahon's MTV-era fluorescent enterprise bore the remnants of his father's New Yorker urban edge before transitioning into a distinctively 80s power-capital entity, Turner's foray into wrestling had a notably Southern flavor, with technologically advanced block graphics and synthesizer music superimposed over "rasslers" brawling in primitive Georgia TV studios. McMahon's vision initially hit a speed-block when faced with the regionalized "rasslin'" tastes of Georgia viewers (Assael and Mooneyham). Turner, the product of that same ethos of home and community (if not economic modesty), embraced it in his foray into the wrestling business.

Snapping up the failing family-owned Jim Crockett Promotions, an archetypal Southern promotion, in 1987, Turner set about combating McMahon's WWF on his own field.[1] This resulted in heavy defeats in the ratings, as Turner struggled to establish the newly-renamed World Championship Wrestling as a viable alternative to the nationalized WWF. The die-hard viewers wanted a product that continued the rich heritage of Southeastern wrestling promotions: long, intense, matches; climatic near-falls; and wrestlers who were able to combine showmanship in interviews with expert storytelling in a match setting. McMahon veered away from this and reaped the benefits like no promoter before him. Image was the priority—an inimitable visual hook that depended upon the presence of male bodies that weren't merely the product of dedicated hours in the gym, but also scientifically enhanced through obsessive care and steroid usage. The bodies had to hold the viewer within the barrage of color, light, and disorientating sound, whilst representing a definitively American-centric conception of bigger-

[1] Eager to establish his new venture as a money-maker, upon purchasing JCP Turner infamously telephoned McMahon to announce that he was in the "rasslin'' business. McMahon responded that his company was "in the entertainment business" (Assael and Mooneyham).

as-better. The inhabitants of McMahon's American microcosm were veritably futuristic in their idealizing of the male physique and aesthetic appeal to an American audience routinely accustomed to new advances in televisual production standards. This was the death in many ways of the old wrestler as stoic rough-edged pro. The new model was a combination of Narcissus and Heracles—pointedly embodying a bodily potential for power that ran concurrently with a physical beauty that was the stuff of fantasy or ridicule for its obsessive creation.

Turner was behind in this regard. Though the late eighties WCW stars were on a par cosmetically with the WWF (and purists claimed WCW's roster was far deeper in terms of talent), but the promotion was still regional in the sense that production values were modest in spite of Turner's involvement because the product was distinctly rooted in the socio-geography of the Southeastern US. WCW gradually evolved to mimic the enveloping sensory smash of the WWF, but its bread and butter lay in its history—which was fervently broadcast to the audience in everything from lighting to ring set-up to the plainness of many wrestlers's attire. This resulted in characters that bore direct connotations to the culture of their audience. The WCW babyfaces, such as Dusty Rhodes and Tommy Rich, were typically portrayed as hard-working men blessed with Southern charm, modesty, and attachment to the fans, whose support was often referenced in storylines as being inspirational to the success of these wrestlers. Opposing these young bucks and good ole boys were flamboyant money-flaunting representatives of Southern elitism and Northern-style Capitalism, surly rural thugs, and anti-American foreigners striking directly at the honest blue-collar heart of the nation. These were time-honored characters within the tradition of Southern wrestling, and in many ways were so ingrained in the lives of wrestling fans that removing or editing them would have been tantamount to a pop cultural affront. This dose of realism was crucial, even as Turner imagined beyond his traditional stomping ground.

Referents to the local still abounded in WCW, much to Turner's chagrin. The TBS label was, for all its capital, still a Southern one, and its star performers were much closer to the ideals of their audience than the super-bodies of the WWF. These referents ensured ample room for the old archetypes to continue on, albeit in a very stylistically eighties form. Ric Flair embodied Turner's excessive Southern affluence with his ostentatious outfits and constant interview references to indulging in the finest things in life, riling up lower-middle class crowds throughout the region like few characters had done before. Elsewhere, Ricky Steamboat, Terry Funk, and The Road Warriors (the WCW wrestlers closest to the WWF body template) conjured up bygone memories of good and bad clashing in the "rasslin'" tradition. The crucial attention paid by WCW to advancing production materials (and the example of the WWF) prevented the company from losing touch with their Connecticut rivals, but the promotion's DNA was still explicitly tinged with old Southern wrestling. Within this colorful, somewhat faded tapestry, wrestlers of non-white ethnicity still occupied featured spots, and many embodied not only the advances in the mass media and arts made by minority performers, but also wrestling's move towards greater acceptance after the awkward previous decades.

The challenge WCW faced was to reconcile its regional roots with the aim of challenging the WWF. As WCW adapted to the Capitalist ethics of Turner, it also found itself impossibly linked to the rich local heritage of territorial wrestling. McMahon had become a wrestling magnate by dispensing with regional affiliation, but WCW's history was profoundly linked to regionalism. As the nineteen-nineties approached, the issue of race struck a damaging blow to the company in which conflicting Southern mentalities—progressive nineties Americanism and staunch lingering racism—threw wrestling's racial sensitivities into doubt. The company existed in a South that had long been demarcated as politically and socially different

from the Northern States. Since the Civil War, the development of "New Southern" idealism had seen the region re-evaluate and reformat itself to reflect both a powerful Reconstructionist Americanism and its own regional identity. The difficulty of breaking with a past balanced against the North had recurred throughout the twentieth century, with the Civil Rights movement calling into question the conflict between a traditionalist South and its progressive side.

Turner, despite identifying himself as a "socialist at heart and a fiscal conservative" (Auletta, 88), was evidence of a complex shift in the Southern mentality that combined the enduring Southern ethics of local enterprise and community (evident in Turner's decision to root his empire in Atlanta) with an appreciation of the flexible powers of Capital to extend beyond a regional Southern mentality. Dating from Reconstruction, the area's traditional Southern Democratic foundation—which emphasized segregation among other "principles"—had been severely damaged over the course of the twentieth-century. Events such as the New Deal and Civil Rights had had profound effects that contributed greatly to the reformatting of the South away from its staunch localism (Scher 74, 163). With the inauguration of Bill Clinton as President in 1993, the South had attained an image of progressivism that more than ever marked a move away from (a quite literal, in many cases) flag-waving regionalism. From 1987 onwards, WCW was evidence of the drive away from localism to a national Southernness. Success could not be obtained by catering primarily to crowds in Georgia and the Carolinas: the keys for prosperity lay beyond the geographical (and psychological) boundaries of the South. Cable and pay-per-view enabled Turner to at least compete with McMahon by 1990, but the evolution of the company Turner championed was not necessarily an easy one. The New Southern ethic that powered him to the upper echelons of American Capital was tainted by elements of traditionalism that stigmatized the South as a whole. WCW still bore the hallmarks of

regionalism and racism—progress needed to be made in order to achieve the sheen of New Southern economic prosperity.

WCW had a number of non-white wrestlers during the early nineties. Although the racial lines of Southern society remained defined (at least mentally) into the nineties, the emergence of a new wave of multiracial wrestlers offered some much needed equality and social conscience to wrestling, without the bombast and heavy-handedness that had traditionally dogged presentations of minority wrestlers. Foremost among WCW's retinue of ethnic stars was Ron Simmons, a Georgia native who was selected in 1992 as the first African-American heavyweight champion of a major wrestling promotion. The significance of Simmons's selection is key to charting the importance of racial equality transfigured through the concept of *the wrestler*. An outstanding football player at college level, Simmons had been a success away from wrestling before he began training. He represented the ideal of sporting superheroism through his accomplishments and transitioned easily into the demanding environment of wrestling, where prowess in other sports has traditionally stood one in good stead when the writers are looking for new faces. After a stint in the masked tag team Doom, alongside fellow African-American wrestler Butch Reed, Simmons became a star in his own right. The blurring between Simmons the All-American athlete and Simmons the character was veil thin. In the ring, his performance of footballesque movements implied his real success in the desegregated environment of college football, traditionally a breeding ground for black sports stars. Simmons may not have been a public black intellectual of the type so thoroughly debated by Henry Louis Gates and Cornel West ("The New Cultural Politics of Difference" (1990)), but he stood out on national television as a successful product of an increasingly tolerant atmosphere. Embraced by fans for his tough man aura and natural athleticism (despite a grasp of wrestling essentials that rarely passed beyond the average),

Simmons very much fit the image of the successful nineties African-American male—talented, eloquent, dignified, and willing to exert his presence within the context of his matches. Not a simulacrum to the extent of the WWFs favorites, there was realism in Simmons's portrayal of a slightly exaggerated version of himself. His physical strength was ostensibly legitimate; the physique the product of a life of dedication and focus. Refreshingly, WCW refrained from over-egging Simmon's racial status in a classically ham-fisted wrestling fashion. Although not the box office smash the company desired, his reign was booked to ensure that the central dignity and manliness of his character was never compromised during his spell as champion.

The choice of Simmons as company figurehead was made by WCW's Executive Vice-President, Bill Watts. Watts had been the creative force behind the regional success of Mid-South Wrestling in the seventies, and later the Universal Wrestling Federation (UWF) in 1986-1987. Despite promoting shows in the racially disharmonious states such as Louisiana, Watts had championed the ascent of black wrestlers, most notably The Junkyard Dog and Ernie Ladd, and was instrumental in allowing them to shine without any demeaning characterizations. If anything Watts was a step away from the endemic racist mindset that had permeated the South for over a century, but not still attached to the South. Writing in 1997, Richard K. Scher states:

> "Southerners worry about their region. There is pride among Southerners about the beauty and virtue of traditional Southern ways, but anxiety as well. There is, after all, the danger that what is best about the South, and Southerners, might disappear as it, and they, become more like the rest of the country" (336).

During the mid-eighties, Watts had strongly espoused anti-WWF sentiments on the UWF's television programs, testifying instead to the powerful tradition of regional promotions such as his own. He was steeped in a Southern traditionalism that advocated a distinct masculine

toughness. This extended to the wrestling he produced, with Watts's preferred wrestling style a mix of traditional holds with wild brawling. The appointment of Watts in 1992 to assume control of WCW's creative direction was an interesting one, with Watts's faith in time-honored tradition (even down to cosmetic details such as under-lit arenas) seemingly contradicting the sheen that was evident in WCW's appearance on television. Because of this, Watts, paradoxically, produced programming for WCW that both challenged racial stereotypes whilst returning to wrestling conventions that were two decades old, and somewhat out of place given the evolution of physical skill required to captivate an audience exposed to a high-energy breed of performers. Watts' 1991-1992 reign as WCW booker was controversial also for reasons which contradicted his open-mindedness regarding his African-American employees (both on-screen and off). In 1992, Watts was implicated in a racist scandal when an interview with the *Pro Wrestling Torch* magazine seemingly revealed that the apparently-trailblazing Watts was steeped in nationalist-racist sympathies:

> "If you own a business and you put the money in it, why shouldn't you be able to discriminate? It's your business. If free enterprise is going to make or break it, you should be able to discriminate, it's your business. It should be that by God, if you're going to open your doors in America, you can discriminate. Why the fuck not? That's why I went into business, so I could discriminate. I mean really, I want to be able to sell to who I want to and be able to serve who I want to. It's my business. It's my investment. So they (the government) come in and say `No.' I can't tell a fag to get the fuck out. I should have the right to not associate with a fag if I want to. I should have the right to not hire a fag if I don't want to. I mean, why should I have to hire a fucking fag, if I don't like fags? Fags discriminate against us, don't they? Sure they do. Do blacks discriminate

> against whites? Who's killed more blacks than anyone? The fucking blacks. But they want to blame that bullshit `Roots' that came on the air. That `Roots' was such bullshit. All you have to do if you want slaves is hand beads to the chiefs and they gave you the slaves.' What is the best thing that has ever happened to the black race? That they were brought to this country. No matter how they got here, they were brought here. You know why? Because they intermarried and got educated. They're the ones running the black race. You go down to the black countries and they're all broke. Idi Amin killed more blacks than we ever killed. You see what I mean? That's how stupid we are. But we get caught up in all this bullshit rhetoric. And so it's ridiculous what's happening to our country. Lester Maddox was right. If I don't want to sell fried chicken to blacks, I shouldn't have to. It's my restaurant. Hell, at least I respect him for his stand. That doesn't make me anti-Black" (*Pro Wrestling Torch* 1991).

Watts was summarily fired as WCW found itself faced with the task of defending its image as a forward-thinking company in a forward-thinking young decade of entertainment. In Watts wake, the company fully adopted a progressive equalitarian stance that belied its roots in the segregationist legacy of Southern business which Watts' comments, as garbled as they were, had succeeded in sullying the company with. If anything, the presence of such a mentality within wrestling was evidence enough to suggest that the business was stuck at a crossroads between an outdated past and a future that needed to move away from the more damaging aspects of a regionalist heritage.

Hyperrace

McMahon specialized in characters that possessed a notably "hyperreal" edge, demanding wrestlers that possessed the looks and personas to match his investment in higher

production values. Investigated in great detail by sociologist Jean Baudrillard, hyperreality is one of the most extreme vantage points of postmodernism—where the world under Capitalism is comprised of myriad simulations so that "reality" itself is for all intents and purposes the fabrication of detailed simulations in the place of anything of substance. Things are essentially "more real than real" (Baudrillard). The concept operates on a principle of deception—bombarding the everyday citizen with simulacra intended to provoke an emotional connection. As such, this presentation of a shallow reality has much in common with wrestling. Wrestling personas are heightened caricatures of real people—moving, interacting, and emoting akin to regular people and convincing the observer (when the performance is at its most realistic) to forge an intense connection with them. Ultimately, though, they are fictional constructs—for all their apparent authenticity they are nothing of the sort. The hyperreality of wrestling is at its most powerful when these various simulations come together in a cohesive whole. Writing in 1985, Baudrillard unintentionally captured the WWF's new format:

> "It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes" (454).

The false world in which the wrestlers exist is the most hyperrealistic aspect of wrestling—a world that is ostensibly that of the viewer but is an enhanced construct designed to lull fans into an entertainment space where the reality of the everyday merges into the "reality." The complexity of this is increased by wrestling's penchant for drawing directly on pop culture, politics, and social issues to legitimize its fantasy. Within this hyperreal wrestling space,

boundaries are pushed: improbably muscled bodies are rendered the norm; everyday fears such as war, unemployment, racism, and homophobia are portrayed in an exaggerated, elaborate fashion. It is a powerful process, and one that Vince McMahon grasped early in his expansion. The importance of creating an accurate version of American life that alluded to the everyday troubles of its audience but condensed them down into showy bombastic struggles between wrestlers was key to tapping into a national market. Between 1984 and 1992, Hulk Hogan, The Ultimate Warrior, "Macho Man" Randy Savage, and legions of others hinted at an America that was beyond the norm even as it appealed to the everyday experiences of fans. They represented a universal American cultural depiction that did away with concepts of regional identity. Hogan et al were ideals in human form.

The physical "Godliness" of the WWF's performers alluded to a new concept for the art form—that of the body acting as separator of the elite beyond the norm and the rest (the audience, the rest of civilization) who would forever be in awe of the spectacular power McMahon obsessively imbued in his shows. This superhuman appeal, however, was an undeniably manufactured one. Wrestlers have traditionally been within human reach—one can train from an early age in sports, improve cardiovascular conditioning to at least be on a par physically, if not skillfully, with a wrestler. The likelihood of such equality was still made extremely unlikely due to the shrouded nature of wrestling's trade secrets, not least how to actually get into the business. Still, the sense of normalcy was always present with the likes of Bruno Sammartino and Bobo Brazil. Hogan and his ilk declared that this normalcy was a fading, almost obsolete quality. McMahon always strove to emphasize the humanity of his characters through collaborating with such ventures as the Make-a-Wish Foundation, but they existed at an intersection where the human nature of his hyper-muscled employees took on a cadence of a

living action figure, where their obvious humanity was obscured by the fantastic surrounds of McMahon's meticulous production. The steroid culture of the WWF was a determining factor in its parody of nature. Wrestlers abused steroids to such an extent that the muscularity that had defined the traditional archetype of the wrestler since the early days of the business was completely restructured. Now the wrestler had to be muscled to the point of ridiculousness. This risky obsession with body altering chemicals spoke deeply of the company's desire to entrench itself in the popular consciousness—any wrestler who failed to meet the criteria was phased down. Steroids have provided the basis for a recurring criticism of wrestling, with numerous wrestlers accused of (logically upon appearances) and exposed in the media as abusers of anabolic steroids. The repercussions of this for wrestler's long-term physical and emotional health, along with the apparent lack of employee benefits afforded to WWE employees especially, returned to the public forum following the 2007 suicide-homicide of WWE wrestler Chris Benoit and his wife and son. Revealed as a dedicated and illegal steroid user in the wake of his death, Benoit elicited a media frenzy that served to underline McMahon's ambiguous attitude towards the habits of his employees and necessitated the company's enforcement of a strict drug-testing policy.

The WWF fully dedicated itself to painstakingly cultivating a PG-rated model of a modern America where "justice"—that essential concept of modern wrestling narratives—could be upheld to the nth degree by men whose weapons were located firmly in their unreal physiques. Baudrillard, for all his bombast and penchant for extreme social commentary, was a keen observer of America's global (re)presentation. The power necessitated by the nation's global presence, especially in the early nineteen nineties, saw all cultural outlets configured as part of a "web" designed to perpetuate the conscious control of the dominant order through the

construction of a media-oriented pseudo-world where concepts such as “doubt” and “fear” were defused within a moderated reality where any resistive impulses or thoughts could be easily countered. The ramifications of this, according to Baudrillard, have resulted in a media that grossly elaborates the definitive precepts of American national identity that had been staples of the country’s transmitted cultural code for decades. The most insidious manifestation of Baudrillard’s hyperreality was its programmed clarity that made it undoubtable and untouchable. Its fakeness was apparent—the famous use of Disneyland as a construction of the American desire for communal happiness confirms in his thinking how the hyperreal is an intoxicant easily consumed (and constantly moderated by its dominant creators.

In this environment, McMahon’s parade of gaudy, costumed musclemen could perform a cartoon-colored America where right and might were interconnected and displayed always through pantomimed forcefulness. His characters were so tailored to his vision that that the “realness” of the men behind them was easily forgotten once the mist of illusion descended. Indeed, when the WWF was beset by a nationally-publicized steroid scandal in 1991, the most damaging revelation wasn’t the illegality of the wrestler’s drug vices, but the exposure of the human side, and frailty, to their alter egos. Bodies, again, were vital to perpetuating deeper meanings. In the hyperreality of the WWF, the ultra-muscled, tanned, whiteness of the leading performers carried reassuring connotations of the natural endurance of the American order. Within the WWF’s glossy fantasy land, the hyper-masculine could be easily codified as morally upstanding—and compared to WCW—predominantly white. The Disney effect demanded characters to accentuate its colorful chaos, but the presence of a real America informing the WWF microcosm demanded that racial representation to keep everything ticking over. Koko B. Ware, Special Delivery Jones, and The Junkyard Dog—able at last to market his character to a

national audience—made transitions from the dying regional promotions in the eighties, with their appealing characters and exaggerated race adding an intended vibrancy to the lower ranks of the burgeoning WWF pantheon. Its eighties apex, however, gradually waned at the start of the nineties thanks to the steroid fiasco and repetitive booking of the same faces in the headline spots. The result was a move towards even more cartoonish creations that smacked of desperation. Having previously demonstrated a knack for drawing on pop culture sources for ideas, McMahon's writers stumbled severely, especially with non-white characters.

Seemingly in an outdated nod to Alex Haley's *Roots* adaptation, Tony Atlas, previously a lynchpin of equality as "Mr. USA," was reintroduced as Saba Simba, a Zulu character bedecked in a lion's mane and a tribal outfit. Staggeringly shortsighted, Simba was a clear indication that WWF's racial politics were showing some evidence of McMahon's staunch conservatism. The return of Kamala, now playing the comedic role of witless primitive being civilized in the skewed modernity of the WWF utopia was equally disastrous. The introduction of "voodoo master" Papa Shango, who at least had the potential to be culturally provocative through his similarities to folkloric demigod Baron Samedi and subtle implication of the complexities of a belief system which had some grounding in the Caribbean and Creole neighborhoods of large cities like Miami and New Orleans, was negated by his lower-card placement and transparently shoddy "magical powers." This triumvirate underscored the backwards logic of the WWF at a time when black athletes in other sports such as Michael Jordan and Charles Barkley were proving to be hugely popular role models for minority communities, as well as helping to combat demeaning stereotypes. More alarmingly, such one-dimensional personae seemed to indicate that the physical virtue borne by its top stars was only available to white wrestlers.

WCW was also prone to half-developed failures that sat at odds with their previously decent track record of minority characters. The likes of Yoshi Kwan (a "Chinese" Fu Manchu-type blatantly played by a white wrestler) was a fitting complement to the degrading WWF stereotypes such as El Matador and Tatanka. Clearly, the "more real than real" (to paraphrase Baudrillard) creative ethos of the WWF especially evoked deeper "logics" of an inherent cultural imbalance within American society. The difficulties of performers of other ethnicities to assert agency over the characters assigned to them was hampered both within the context of the WWF's gaily-colored microcosm of America, and behind the scenes of the national promotions themselves. Characters were created and assigned to tap into the largest possible market, but the capabilities of the WWF and WCW to do this were hampered by an obsessive protection of unspoken social norms. This meant that even when certain characters explicitly related to the wider cultural mobility of young non-white Americans (into the higher-end of the job market, for instance) they were caught within a frame of signification that served to negate the recognition of their positive cultural momentum. Young African-American wrestlers such as 2 Cold Scorpio and Bobby Walker had the potential to appeal to the same motions of upward advancement that were encoded within the media presence of black figures from *The Cosby Show* and *In Living Color*, the aforementioned cross-over success of the NBA's African-American superstars, and the continued tradition of hugely successful black recording artists. With its strongest following based in and around its home city of Atlanta, WCW drew significant numbers of middle-class African-American fans to its television tapings, but storylines and characters failed to reflect this increasing cross-demographic following. Scorpio, whose visual appeal borrowed much from the early nineties pop-hip hop purveyed by the likes of MC Hammer, gained instant popularity with fans due to his impeccable displays of agility, but the bookers (first Watts then Eric Bischoff)

neglected to capitalize on his potential to figure as a prominent character. Despite some early success, Scorpio's career eventually stalled in the company.

When the WWF explicitly dealt with racial storylines, it found itself falling into distasteful potholes. 1997's three-way feud between the white Disciples of Apocalypse "biker" gang, the Puerto Rican Los Boricuas, and the African-American Nation of Domination was a somewhat daring attempt at tapping into the urban disharmony of inner-city violence, albeit one undeniably affected by the conservative politics of McMahon and his creative cohorts. The familiar trope of ethnic gangs doing battle echoed real cultural paranoia, which the WWF catalyzed by having Latino gang members wage a scripted war against white bikers (who were the designated babyfaces) and black militants. Playing a prominent role in the feud was Simmons, who had joined the WWF in 1996 to be rechristened "Faarooq." After this "modern-day gladiator" creation failed to garner audience interest, Faarooq/Simmons was redirected as a black-clad militant figure, invoking both (at least sartorially) the Black Panther Party and the Nation of Islam's Louis Farrakhan, then a notorious figure in the mainstream media. Farrakhan was an aggressively nuanced figure in nineties politics, whose mass-mediation made him the ideal subject for wrestling interpretation. As Robert Singh claims: "in both assisting in the initial creation of the Farrakhan phenomenon as a national force, and in subsequently reviving and sustaining its political momentum, the U.S. media has incontrovertibly played its part in contributing to the minister's national political ascent" (212). Whilst both these organizations espoused strong socio-political commentary, their perceived reliance upon inflammatory rhetoric and discomforting public presence ensured that, in the black-and-white moral compass of the 1997 WWF, any character bearing a similarity to them could be easily portrayed as a straightforward villain.

Simmons's performance of his new identity certainly veered toward the openly threatening. Always an imposing physical presence, he now embellished thuggish, belligerent movements in the ring with the deliberate appropriation of the Black Power Salute and an oratorical interview style modeled on the direct diction of Malcolm X and Farrakhan. As leader and mouthpiece of the Nation, Faarooq's rhetoric was a watered-down version of the Panthers and the NOI (with the explicit politicism of those two groups removed): he talked constantly of waging war on their rivals and maintaining group solidarity based around "power." The acknowledged leader of the group, Faarooq served as an onscreen mentor to his fellow members, who in the storyline had been swayed by his rhetoric and espousal of power. Although the Nation typically engaged in gang-style beat downs during matches, the eloquence of Simmons and the quasi-political nature of the group—which deviated from the classic template of wrestlers banding together for motives of greed or revenge—ensured that the NOD were more nuanced in terms of their connections to the outside world than the typical wrestling heels. Uncommon for many wrestling characters up to that point, Faarooq's real name, and choice of rename, was included in the storylines. Referencing the public furore that had surrounded Cassius Clay's famous denouncement of his anglicized "slave name," Faarooq was clearly positioned as an African-American secure in a position of radicalism. The blackness of the group was portrayed in an unnerving way (all the members fit the negative stereotype of imposing black brute) but Simmons's centrality as the verbose commander (and mentor to the groups disillusioned young members) prevented it from falling totally into a demeaning representation.

Though never avowedly dedicated to racial politics, the Nation embodied the underlying fears associated with black-on-white violence. Marching to a tribal rhythmic entrance track, the NOD dressed in gear that combined Fruit of Islam uniformity with Afro trimmings. In the ring,

the group performed the role of thuggish Others, concentrating their matches around punches and impact, rarely using moves that required finesse. Two of the members, Kama Mustapha and Ahmed Johnson, were given Islamicized ring names to compliment Faarooq and make their connections (at least pop cultural) to the real Nation of Islam abundantly clear. Although definitively heels, the NOD was at least an attempt to portray well-spoken, intelligent African-American characters. Ultimately, the negative racial connotations, tying into a corpus of analysis regarding the public image of Farrakhan's NOI proved too one-sided to be counted as a positive progression. The assertion by noted African-American intellectual Cornel West that a "black bourgeoisie" was blossoming in the United States contained vast implications for the balancing of economic and educational achievement across racial boundaries which were evident in many forms of the mass media as well as politics and the upper echelons of America's economy. This emergence was largely ignored on screen by the major promotions. Ahmed Johnson, prior to joining the Nation of Domination, had been positioned in WWF main events as a dominant physical force. However, the massively-muscled Johnson was the embodiment of black athletic perfection that Paul Gilroy criticizes as being a concession long made to blacks in the public eye—the allowance of success in one social arena based on a genetic privilege at the expense of a perceived intellectual deficiency. He was a classic WWF wrestler: huge and direct in his actions during matches whilst his interviews, so crucial to establishing an emotive hook that an audience can grasp, were gruff and minimal.

Ahmed was the threatening "Bad Black Man" described by Bryant Keith Alexander as a side of the African-American male persona expected by white America of all black men, almost as a form of social convention. Johnson fulfilled this, and there was always the sense that so long as his anger was directed at his opponents it wouldn't be unleashed in a socially-destructive

manner elsewhere.[2] Alexander contrasts the "Bad Black Man" with the "Good Black Man" a counterpoint that is the socially acceptable barometer of conduct that African-Americans are expected to maintain at the threat of a diminished social presence. This dichotomy between "Good" and "Bad"—and the necessity of having to perform one or the other under different circumstances in order to enact some kind of negotiation of self in the public eye—is one that Alexander sees as taking place in the lives of many black American men who have been placed into a social realm where their identity, even as a independent subjects, is predicated upon racial performance. Within American society, the rise of a black class that could move through a white business world with increased ease implied the increased agency of black Americans (male and female) to essentially free themselves from the burden of such a dichotomized expected performance. Wrestling's centralizing of the mock emotional outburst prevented a true break with stereotypes ground in this good/bad binary. The good side of the equation had been on show for years—Bobo Brazil, Art Thomas, The Junkyard Dog, and Koko B. Ware all met the parameters of the passive, smiling, polite African-American male. The bad side was the violence that had been constantly ingrained in the public mind of the semi-civilized brutal black male conditioned to reflect his violence upon a defenseless white society. The nineties promised a reconciliation of both of these images and an end to a racial performance mandated by the need to circumnavigate concrete expectations of how the minority subject should act.

The large companies, as always eyeing the widest market possible, shied away from the difficulties of presenting a racial character that didn't fit along this axiom. The very real anger and desire for recognition that permeated the non-white American community, especially in the

[2] Johnson's progress within the company was hampered by his attitude backstage. In many accounts, the character differences between Ahmed and Tony Norris, the man behind the persona, were barely noticeable. Renowned for carelessness when handling his co-workers during matches, he became increasingly uncooperative with regards to his character's direction and eventually left the company when the situation became untenable.

wake of the 1992 Los Angeles race riots, rarely registered on the WWF or WCW's cultural radars. A character standing for positive multiculturalism free of demeaning stereotypes and representing the difficult but necessary integration of America's disparate ethnic communities was lacking for much of the nineties. For one to even exist in the business, huge changes in wrestling's creative philosophy would have to occur. But the crucial placement of fictional characters that compressed and simplified social shifts were still vital to the production of wrestling. The face-heel binary was easily enforced by drafting characters that were obviously one or the other. A progressive character by its very nature would threaten such an axiom, or worse, potentially see its capacity for social commentary tainted by being part of such a blatantly performed medium. The WWF and WCW were heavy-handed with racial matters, but faced with the opportunity of updating their trade to reflect the world that fueled them—as wrestling had always done—would possibly damage their precious semi-fictitious realms. If the WWF and WCW dealt in the "hypperreal," then their simulated realities worked better when they eliminated anything that could potentially shatter the illusion. Smaller, non-national wrestling companies, on the contrary, had no qualms about entering such crucial territory—a testament to the more liberal approach many promotions adopted in the face of the WWF/WCW wrestling oligopolies.

Wrestling's Representations from the Dark Side

The explosion of the WWF did not completely mark the demise of regional wrestling. In the mid nineties, many "independent" promotions still staged shows across the country, typically before miniscule crowds in smaller, communal venues such as high school gyms and Elk Lodges. The creative ethos of many of these promotions was vastly different, in some cases oppositional, to the major companies. Although many "Indys" employed WWF or WCW cast-

offs to spike ticket sales, other groups dedicated themselves to providing an alternative product that dispensed with the measured cleanliness of the WWF and embraced a raw energy designed to stir the emotions of a core base of devoted local fan(atics). At the forefront of these was Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW). From its base in South Philadelphia, ECW ran regular shows at a local bingo parlor,[3] gaining a cult-like following from its abrasive mixture of high-energy wrestling performed by skilled practitioners largely unknown to mainstream fans and an edgier topical focus that included spousal abuse, alcoholism, cultism (in a sense that vaguely alluded to the infamous Branch Davidian movement), and urban inner-city violence. The context for much of ECW's success was the toughness of daily life in economically impoverished South Philadelphia. The likes of Tommy Dreamer and The Sandman were homegrown anti-stars from the area with whom the young adult male demographic that comprised much of Extreme's fan base could relate to and empathize with. ECW fans were typically and vocally[4] aware of the contrived nature of the spectacle and thus demonstrated both a greater appreciation for well-performed sequences and storylines that willingly tested the boundaries of wrestling convention. Paul Heyman, the creative force behind ECW, was a dedicated follower of pop culture and infused his storylines with an unpredictability that echoed many films that resonated with a similar age group as his customers (*Pulp Fiction*, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Natural Born Killers*) as well as anti-authoritarian subcultures like grunge, hardcore punk, and gangsta rap.

Heyman was astute in encouraging his wrestlers to engage fully with their personae. Within the mindset of wrestling, young wrestlers were able to become cult stars by injecting their performances with mannerisms and words that were true to their own personalities and thus more

[3] The "ECW Arena" as it was unofficially known, became something of a Globe Theater for independent wrestling, attracting many promotions and hundreds of wrestlers who stage shows at the venue to the present day.
[4] ECW storylines were increasingly self-referential—a slap in the face to the traditionalist powerhouses in Connecticut and Atlanta. Such a wrestling philosophy arguably made ECW the first wrestling promotion that could be considered at least partially postmodern.

vitally authentic to fans than pre-ordained characters. Wrestlers would deliver interviews and promos more often than not on the spur of the moment or from limited script guidelines produced in conjunction with Heyman, allowing them greater artistic freedom. The result was a show that provided the loyal fan following with a product that was akin to graffiti across the preserved marble surface of the WWF. A performative hallmark of ECW was the willingness to engage purposefully with controversial subject matter. The storylines felt real, often because they were tellingly reminiscent of real events in the media. Without the benefit of expensive editing and effects, ECW was able to easily cut straight to the heart of the pop cultural and social landscape that was home to its audience. It resonated with a legitimacy that implied that wrestling, as an art form, could faithfully bring to its audience programming that wasn't a complete distortion of American life. Most notorious in this regard was Jerome "New Jack" Young, a former bounty hunter who carved out (quite literally) a reputation in the group that overshadowed any semblance of "wrestling." Young was a defining example of the violent aspects of performance that ECW became renowned for. Along with the traditional aspects that were now foundational to every American pro wrestling match, many ECW wrestlers routinely included sections that emphasized brutal, street brawl-style violence. Wrestlers would implement barbed wire and everyday household objects (often brought to the shows by fans) to break down the divide between wrestler and audience as well as between real life and spectacle. Real bloodletting returned to prominence, establishing a visual signifier of grim authenticity to further mark out a unique identity for the promotion.

The black New Jack character was announced as being from Compton, California, the crucible of rap group the NWA and a perceived center of both black urban violence and the rise of an aggressive, almost sub-cultural, assertion of underprivileged African-American inner-city

identity. The rise of gangsta rap thrived around the NWA and comrades such as Snoop Doggy Dogg, alongside the emergence of films such as *Boyz In The Hood* and *New Jack City* that outlined the sprawling urban neighborhoods as potential flashpoints for an outward explosion of disenfranchised ethnic rage. It was this unnerving paranoia that Young tapped into with the creation of the New Jack persona. Channeling the brazen outspokenness that characterized the ghetto voices of the NWA and Dogg as well as the terror that had been attached to them by critics mindful of that same celebration of urban struggle, New Jack was the first non-white professional wrestling character to truly provide an insight into the rising discontent that had exploded into the national consciousness with the LA riots. Young fully targeted the fall-out of such controversies, patterning New Jack as the black nightmare figure emerging from a metaphorical cultural ghetto to wreak havoc in polite society. On the one hand an expert and timely commentary on pop cultural trends, New Jack was, on the other hand, an exemplar of subconscious racism that still lingered into the nineties: a racism he would exploit to great affect by striking directly at its core. Prior to arriving in ECW in 1995, Young developed the controversial aspects of his gimmick alongside tag team partner Mustapha Saed. The two gained notoriety for their 1994 appearances in Smoky Mountain Wrestling, a regional promotion that catered to a largely white audience in and around Knoxville, Tennessee. SMW's product was deliberately "retro"—reveling in displaced meanings as it presented shows that were designed both cosmetically and stylistically to awaken fond memories of Southern wrestling promotions of the nineteen seventies, which had traditionally dealt with reaffirming visions of outwardly Southern white masculinity.

Young and Saed set about deliberately "exposing" the hypocrisies of the audience, eliciting genuine hatred that bordered uncomfortably on the racist. "Black owned and black

operated," Jack explicitly targeted white racism in his interviews, making analogies to the slave trade and the team's distrust of white people in general. Evoking affirmative action, the nineties movement for equalizing the racial-social divide within American society, the Gangstas were despised to such an extent that a Ku Klux Klan rally was apparently staged to greet their arrival for one show. Their defining feud in SMW was with the Rock 'N' Roll Express, a white Southern tag team who effectively banished the Gangstas from the company after a series of black-on-white brawls. The Express were frantically cheered during these matches, as if the sight of two aging white cowboy boot-wearing Southern boys beating their black opponents rectified a vital social division. The complicity of Young in the direction of his character during this time is unclear, but his willingness to exploit the innermost prejudices of fans (and prevent SMW's bookers with the chance to exploit such hatred financially), showed that wrestling at the regional level was a fiery ground for addressing issues of racial politics that were provocatively situated in present realities. Eventually, the Gangstas left Knoxville for the urban melting pot of ECW, where they would catalyze a vibrant, violent synthesis of wrestling, pop culture, and unnerving social commentary that dragged the plight of African-Americans firmly into the wrestling mindset. In ECW, the Gangstas, decked out in camouflage, do-rags, and jack boots would enter the arena to the track "Natural Born Killaz"—keying the audience into an inevitable display of wrestling that was ostensibly patterned after gangland battles.[5] As the song kept playing ominously (breaking a convention that music was used strictly for wrestler's entrances and victory celebrations), Jack and Saed would move the match around the arena, incorporating various "weapons" at the expense of traditional wrestling moves. The faux/occasionally

[5] Young was notorious for occasionally striking and attacking fellow wrestlers during matches. Renowned for his uncompromising approach to business, he was at one point charged with grievous bodily harm after an in-ring spot involving an exacto knife resulted in his opponent suffering extensive bloodloss. With his career now on the decline, Young has persistently attempted to maintain his notoriety in wrestling circles, and cause confusion between his real persona and that of his character.

legitimate violence was openly connected to the supposed "hood" lifestyle of the team. Storylines featured run-ins with the police and the Gangstas's promos were punctuated with New Jack's uncensored rhetoric highlighting their apparent sociopathy and chauvinism, and intimidating exclamations from Mustapha that successfully perpetuated the image of the Gangstas as immoral hoodlums, antisocial to a severe degree.

The legacy of the Gangstas within wrestling is one of direct reference to the brutality, crime, and prospect of a young death that prevailed over urban Los Angeles's and was, by the mid-nineteen nineties, firmly positioned as a staple of contemporary pop culture. The Gangstas, as pro wrestlers, *were* pop cultural artifacts reflective of the times around them. ECW's insistence on drawing from real life in order to inflect their programming with a legitimacy that broke with the often over-processed nature of WWF and WCW productions, offered characters like New Jack a platform to blend their wrestling with the cultural zeitgeist of mid-nineties urban America, in the process drawing an uncomfortable distinction between the actions of a violent black male and the real gang violence escalating in the media. The safety zone wrestling presents to its fans was skewed by Jack, thanks to the volatility his character was imbued with. The Gangstas were able to bring their own histories (in Jack's case one of violence) to their roles, demonstrating anew wrestling's potential as an effective barometer of social concerns.

Racially loaded characters like New Jack, explicit creations that flourished in the calculated counter-culturalism of ECW, exposed the ineffectiveness of the major companies when it came to broaching the subject of race to their PG audiences. When viewed from this angle, the inherent negativity of the New Jack character made him a piece in a larger puzzle of urban and moral decay. The environment of South Philadelphia, so crucial to the flavor of ECW and the life experience of its fans, lent the promotion an ambience of hardship because the

wrestlers enacted different roles in a larger representation of contemporary America. New Jack conjured up the darker side of this idea, highlighting directly the enduring racial disharmony beneath the surface. For a wrestling character, he contained a distinct unspoken politicism that was far more direct than that informing the Nation of Domination. As an alternative to the mainstream promotions, ECW effectively countered many of the unspoken hegemonic messages relayed to the national wrestling audience. The Nation, despite their edginess, veered closer to the conception of Other-as-menace that had long permeated various wrestling characters on the national stage. The dominant narratives of the WWF were upturned and parodied to an extent by ECW, who operated in the cultural void outside the creative vision of the majors. New Jack can be read as a direct commentary on the state of the times *and* a challenge to the WWF and WCW to incorporate social aspects that before had been the antithesis of their immaculately-crafted neon landscapes.

Such was ECW's impact (over a reduced audience nonetheless) that the WWF and WCW both belatedly elected to upgrade their shows to meet the young adult male demographic the Philadelphia company had targeted so effectively. The WWF completely divorced itself from the child-friendly presentation that had been its stock in trade since the eighties. Having shed many of the stars who established his brand dominance, McMahon dived head first into a new direction for the company that maintained the larger-than-life presentation so central to his success whilst updating it to reflect a new age—the late nineties as dominated by risqué media and corporate greed. This new "Attitude Era[6]" proved to be an update on the hyperreality of the Hulkamania years. This WWF was now grounded in the masculine expressivity of its young male customer, giving artistic life to hated boss figures (McMahon amping himself up on TV as the amoral

[6] The WWF's re-branding in 1997 saw the group unveil a new company logo and replace its traditional red, white, and blue color scheme with a palette dominated by black and red. The slogan "Attitude" was heavily used in marketing to such an extent that the period has since become known colloquially as the "Attitude era."

billionaire mogul), drinking culture ("Stone Cold" Steve Austin; the APA with Ron Simmons in yet another role as good-natured Southern barroom brawler) and a focus on the exaggerated female physique that heralded the most chauvinistic objectification in wrestling history. This sea change catapaulted the WWF back into the popular consciousness, symbolically declaring an end to the razzmatazz of its golden years, and a firm attention to the world of its audience. The "heroic" play was declared dead as a new breed of characters created a world that now exaggerated the emotional urges of the average twenty-something male. The hyperreal touch remained, transforming the daily grind into an over-the-top play of excess that was still potent in its ability to encourage fans to draw correlations between their lived experiences and the characters that seemed to so effectively stand as an outlet for their repressed urges and masculine energies.

The wrestler-as-simulacrum assumes a more difficult nature once the PG trappings of a picture-perfect environment geared towards viewer pleasure is distorted by an appeal to more complex emotions. Hulk Hogan and his ilk were blatantly fictional constructs given enough realistic qualities to convince the audience to fully immerse themselves in the WWF vision. The leading stars of the Attitude Era were far more realistic, with their obvious fakeness balanced by a penchant for improvisation which created an aura of greater truthfulness. Adept at making their characters come alive by channeling their real personae in the absence (largely) of prescribed stereotypes, the likes of Austin, Triple H, and The Rock bridged a gap between performed role and actual persona. Triple H the wrestler was, as most diehard fans were aware, not radically different from Paul Levesque—the man behind the gimmick. Steve Austin especially crystallized the resentment many young adult male fans felt for the rigid hierarchy of the workplace—his one-man kick back against McMahon's storyline corporation elevated him to a level of

popularity previously touched only by Hulk Hogan. Fans could really empathize with such characters. But, crucially, hyperreality's function in promoting Capitalist control over the masses and the hegemonic message of deference for one's superiors was left untouched by such characters—regardless of how directly they appealed to the resentment and desire for emotive release of the fans. The essence of the WWF as a multi-million dollar company prevented its programming from truly separating itself from the fantastical nature of the spectacle which independent promotions working on a shoestring such as ECW were able to better accomplish. Its wrestlers's statuses as professional entertainers meant that their actions and dialogue, regardless of how "uncensored" they appeared to be, were still components of a larger whole inextricably wound with dominant-hegemonic meanings (Hall) and the transmitted personal views of arch-capitalist McMahon. They existed to draw in viewers and sell merchandise. Despite being far more angular than the eighties roster, the new stars were still unreal ciphers—simulacra in essence convincing fans to spend some time in a created world which now seemed more authentically aggressive and morally suspect, but was still a meticulously edited version so to speak, of real American life.

In this remodeled zone—one far more successful at linking the illusionary world with the actual than before—race became for the first time in modern wrestling a bona-fide point of controversy. Largely ignorant of the rumblings that had issued forth from the obscure likes of New Jack, McMahon opted for a parade of outlandish new non-white faces who fit his new, racier (and increasingly tasteless) business plan. The racial characters he unveiled were explicit caricatures, and became very popular on the strength of the wrestlers performing them. The Godfather (a Las Vegas pimp) and "Sexual Chocolate" Mark Henry caught on with fans, but theirs were characters almost exclusively designed in questionable taste that highlighted the

WWF's fervent quest for "edgier" material. Nonetheless, the comedic elements of both made them cult favorites with fans who, thanks to the Internet and wrestling newsletters, were aware of the contrived nature of wrestling and the calculated ridiculousness of many characters. The fact that both these comedy roles were blatant (and dated) racial parodies raised question marks regarding representation and positive, multi-dimensional ethnically-marked characters. On the surface, the African-American Godfather was damningly negative, perhaps almost racist in the wrestling tradition of assigning ethnic wrestlers pejorative cultural roles. The image of the pimp in popular culture was one of violent chauvinism of the worst kind, one often applied to ethnic groups in the poor inner-city, such as Puerto Ricans. Yet Charles Wright, the man behind The Godfather (and Papa Shango), invested his character with a smiling vibrancy and charm (his "Ho's", typically portrayed by local strippers, always seemed to be having a great time—even when Godfather would "pimp" them out to his opponents). To call The Godfather a positive reclamation of a painful stereotype is going a step too far, given the WWF writers's appetite for titillation and pushing the envelope (as far as a nationally broadcast television show could be pushed, that is), but the Attitude Era at least tried to lend some positivity to his character. "Sexual Chocolate" was a different story. Seemingly designed to punish Henry for some behind-the-scenes transgression[7], the character required Henry to engage in scripted acts of depravity that firmly underlined the stereotype of the African-American male as a sex-crazed deviant.

The questionable matter of taste within pro wrestling was broached repeatedly by such intentionally vulgar creations, and yet the self-referencing (Wright and Henry always seemed to enjoy playing their gimmicks) could be read on the other hand as a deconstruction of old

[7] Prior to wrestling, Henry was an Olympic weightlifter—another representative of black sporting talent being a marker of "social advancement." Signed to an unprecedented ten-year contract by the WWF, Henry developed a poor grasp of wrestling's basics, many speculate that his shortcomings attracted the ire of McMahon and his penchant for publicly humiliating his employees.

stereotypes, if one was willing to view the Attitude Era as a complete break with wrestling's outdated past. More often than not though, the actions of Henry in particular were sufficient to incite widespread disgust, thus validating the shock/trash ethos of the new WWF. In this regard, racial stereotypes were an excuse for perpetrating the puerile *American Pie*-style humor that the WWF's writers had become so invested in. This suspiciously backward-thinking racial content aside, the Attitude Era produced two notable non-white figures. The first, Jacqueline Moore, was an intriguing addition to the roster. The female body was objectified even more than the male during this period of wrestling history, with the idealized form favored by the WWF being one of almost pneumatic appearance. Seemingly designed, quite literally, around cosmetically-enhanced breasts, facial reconstruction, and an alarming minimum of body mass, the archetypal woman of the WWF was essentially a flesh object—intended to appeal unashamedly to the sexual urges of the male audience. The combination of bad acting and remodeled, clone-like "femininity" often came across as being akin to soft porn—the women encouraged to perform hypersexualized maneuvers in the ring even as they were depicted in the storyline context as independent, strong-minded, representatives of American womanhood—a warped parody of feminism for the late nineties.

Jacqueline entered this equation as the exotic flavor reacting against the parade of enhanced blondes. A skilled performer, Jacqueline had a far more compelling presence than many of her female peers. Embodying the trope of the aggressive, sexual, African-American wild woman she conjured up the same notions of jungle-girl Other that bell hooks attributes to the career of Tina Turner. For all her assertiveness, self-confidence, and skill, Moore was continually portrayed as one of the more directly confrontational WWF ladies, more than willing to engage in physical confrontation with male wrestlers. This stereotype of female black

aggression was worryingly used against her when she was booked to sustain a beating from male wrestler Jeff Jarrett. His accompanying rhetoric referring to the "dominant species" aside, the selection of Moore to be on the receiving end demonstrated a disconcerting attitude towards non-white females within the company. Indeed, Moore's non-conformity to the racial preference for female characters (tanned, white, preferably blonde) seemed to mark her as an acceptable recipient for such storyline treatment, as if her feminine credentials were insufficient in the eyes of the image-crazed WWF. hooks notes the pressures placed upon naturally striking black women to fit the template of white femininity established through decades of media hegemony. Moore certainly noticed them, conforming bodily if not racially to the standard physique of the WWF female, and yet in spite of this, she was somehow deemed to possess less feminine virtues, evidenced by her storyline treatment. As the only recurring black female in national wrestling during the late nineties, Jacqueline was the sole exemplar of a non-white woman within a wider array of performers who conformed to the white model as critiqued by hooks. Her very presence, and success, is perhaps testament to the necessity of having a female figure who at the very least presented an alternative to the prevailing whiteness of mainstream wrestling's female cast.

The biggest non-white star to emerge during the Attitude Era was Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson. Boasting an impressive pedigree in the business (his father and grandfather had both had their own experiences with racialized wrestling characters), The Rock proved to be a transcendent talent possessing self-assurance as a wrestler as well as a verbal eloquence that preceded an almost virtuosic capacity for manipulating the responses of a live or televised audience. The visual image of The Rock was another crucial aspect of his appeal. Possessing a certain racial ambiguity, at least upon first glance, Johnson had an enigmatic allure to his audience. Fans were unsure of his ethnicity (Jhally), which only heightened his mystique and

special aura. In reality of Hawaiian-American-Afro-Canadian extraction, The Rock had the potential to completely reconfigure the approaches made towards race within wrestling on account of his being almost *raceless*. Defying categorization, Johnson exposed the frailties that lay behind such processes of grouping. Race only entered the equation when he referred to his family's history in the business. Such was his appeal, it could be argued that The Rock character was the closest wrestling had come to reaching a truly postmodern stage. Racially ambiguous, The Rock existed purely as an icon within the hyperreal plane of pro wrestling—as a surface on which the real was entirely refashioned as something that radiated into the minds of viewers from language down to baser points such as "race" and maleness. Paul Gilroy identifies the increased mediation of the non-white body as a problematic indicative of both the potential for racialized bodies to transcend negative representation. This shows a crucial synthesis of, so to speak, of their public image whilst simultaneously reinforcing raciological parameters through their objectification in the public lens. Johnson's success was and is intriguing when analyzed from Gilroy's perspective. In many ways, The Rock is that hybrid of sheer non-white athleticism and idealized object-body that lends itself to the continuance of definitive racial alignment. However, the inherent ambiguity of his *hyper*-racialness demarcates the character and Johnson himself as a borderline post-racial body. The success of The Rock in a business (and hyperreal space) that has a long history of exaggerating every racial detail was a hugely significant one that pointed the way to a developed wrestling product that promised to dispense with cumbersome racial signification without sacrificing the crucial elements of masculinity and muscularity. In many ways, Johnson remains the leading testament to the potentials a committed industry has for looking beyond racialized parameters.

New Horizons?

Having recently (March 2011) reappeared on WWE TV, The Rock character (and Johnson himself, who embarked on a new career in the entertainment Promised Land of Hollywood) has maintained its lack of strong racial anchoring, effortlessly reinserting himself within the perpetual system of masculine verbal and performative tropes whilst still promising to move beyond them at the same time. Although Johnson has settled easily into a pattern of repetitive catchphrases and moves, his character's old momentum, sometimes so irresistible that the parameters of McMahon's "universe" proved incapable of containing it, has persisted into the present. Having torn down many of wrestling's racial assumptions from within, The Rock character remains an invigorating presence as he relishes his unprecedented cultural cross-over. However, his was an isolated case, pointing to Gilroy's concern that raciological discourses are still ensconced within society and popular culture.

McMahon remains undiminished in his fondness for racial characters that fit old stereotypes. Upon the demise of WCW in 2001, the WWF purchased the contracts of several ex-WCW wrestlers. Foremost among these was Robert "Booker T" Huffman. Booker T was a rare success in wrestling—an ethnic wrestler who managed to transcend the limitations of his character (originally as one half of the tag team Harlem Heat) to become a bona fide star. Again, mastery of the difficult medium of wrestling-as-performance, both in terms of physical movement, dynamic and subtle, and the verbal conveyance of a layered character were the vital elements of his success. Fans embraced the Booker T character beyond his initial limitations because he had the ability to forge the all-important connection with a large portion of his global audience. Central to Booker T's popularity was his acknowledgement of his adolescent years spent in poverty and crime in Houston, Texas and how his real success in the wrestling business enabled him to attain the comfortable lifestyle, free of strife, which he had long pursued. The

connotations of lower-class living and crime in a large Southern city as distinctly black certainly played into the formative basis of the Booker T persona, but as time progressed these elements became less prominent. Booker T's African-Americanness, along with his flashy performance trademarks such as break dancing moves, became his defining characteristics. Although racially coded, Booker's gimmick spoke of an increasing sensitivity to the racial composition of American society beyond class divisions. Always decked out in expensive suits when not wrestling, T was able to carry off the trope of wealthy successful pro wrestler without the ostentatiousness that would usually be associated with such a character. In many ways he resembled the model of the successful black American male—overcoming hardship to flourish on the back of his own talents in a predominantly white profession, and maintaining this success without lapsing into overtly passé stereotyping. However, despite his best efforts, the reliance upon those same stereotypes would recur at different times throughout his WWF/WWE career. In an effort to present him as a viable World Title contender, WWE opted to elicit sympathy from fans by having Booker's enemies, such as Ric Flair, indulge in coded racist dialogue, bringing up his criminal past and alluding to a racial subjectivity. Booker's eventual failure to win the title, in a way that was symbolically demeaning of his character's masculine credentials, underlined an inferiority in Booker's character. Having been so pointedly racialized in the run-up to the concluding match, the outcome reduced the public effectiveness of the Booker character—confirming the defective masculinity and morality he was ridiculed for before the match. Although he still remained popular with the fans, Huffman's career stalled in the aftermath, leaving him as a prominent and successful non-white figure, but one trapped on the fringes of the upper echelons of a North American industry that was still predominantly white.

As Booker was toiling on the fringes of the main event, other ethnic groups were being featured prominently on WWE television. The traditional connections between American pro wrestling and Mexican *lucha libre* have flourished into the present day. The late Eddie Guerrero and Rey Mysterio, two Mexican-Americans who first came to national prominence in WCW, achieved superstardom in WWE thanks to their colorful characters and aptitude for combining hallmarks of the Mexican performative tradition (which has strikingly gymnastic-balletic overtones) with the directness of the American pro style. Mysterio, whose image resembles that of the classic masked Mexican *luchador*, is massively popular with the children-family demographic that the company has returned to following the eventual petering-out of the Attitude Era. Guerrero also was a valuable and highly-skilled cast member who transitioned belatedly to main events. Significantly, both tapped into the thriving popularity of WWE in Southwestern cities such as San Diego and El Paso that had huge Hispanic fan bases—their use of Spanish in interviews along with their incorporation of Mexican elements into an American production complemented both Mysterio's and Guerrero's wider appeal by injecting a much-needed element of multiculturalism into WWE's programming. However, the shadow of stereotyping again fell over both performers, threateningly diluting their cultural appeal in the face of WWE's industry-shaping hegemonic precepts.

With the demise of the Attitude Era's reality TV-esque mining of everyday life to give its characters more bite, the company returned to a PG format around 2005, embracing characters that were diluted when compared to the vigorous appeal of their late nineties counterparts (or selves, in some cases). Guerrero and Mysterio, for all their skill and marketability, occasionally had to endure tired images of sombreros, Mariachi bands, and other insulting material. While harmless when used in a Machiavellian way by their storyline enemies, such visual tropes speak

volumes about the attitude of WWE towards its Mexican-American fan base. Guerrero especially was discontent with the requests made of his character. Despite being a self-identifying American, his "Latino Heat" persona spoke in a comical Mexican accent. Prior to this his Los Guerreros tag team with nephew Chavo Guerrero had seen the two filming vignettes in which they championed their motto of "lying, cheating, and stealing"—which worryingly served as an intrinsic attribute for the entire Mexican-American community. Performative additions to Guerrero's repertoire included him bending the rules in a mischievous way to distract his opponents alongside his low rider-driving entrances. Similar to Booker T, though, Guerrero was able to negate any immediate negatives through sheer force of talent, but the wider social implications remained.

In this new PG environment, "time-honored" tropes reemerged swathed in faintly desperate WWE jargon regarding its status as a leading force in global entertainment. Since the commercial zenith of the Attitude Era, the company has stalled somewhat as it finds itself adrift in the field that it helped spearhead. Left to its own devices and fatally ignorant in many ways of how its renewed simulation of American life is one that neglects the deeper societal resonances of its characters, WWE continues to focus on archetypes that whilst affording wrestlers the opportunity to profit financially off their talents, leaves much to be desired socially. The flipside to this is that WWE (and wrestling in general) is now so open to public scrutiny—thanks to the deluge of behind-the-scenes journals, Internet "shoot" interviews, and wrestling's own self-referentiality, characters can be dismissed precisely as the composites of pop cultural and social reference points that they have been all along. The likes of Umaga (a primitive Samoan savage), Cryme Tyme (a black hip hop-loving tag team more reminiscent of mass-produced radio-friendly hip hop culture than the aggressive darkness that was channeled by New Jack in the nineties),

and the public relations disaster of Muhammad Hassan[8] are all cut from the classic socio-politically inspired cloth of classic wrestling albeit updated to meet the entertainment requirements of a modern globalized audience. Such characters are just that—simulacra operating within an exposed performance space that is now lacking in hyperreal powers of distraction due to the transparent creative impulses of those behind it. This doesn't diminish the cultural weight of racialized characters, especially in light of the progressivism, tolerance, and equality that pervade modern American political rhetoric.

The fictional characters may be open to the leisurely consumption of fans across racial boundaries—and those behind them may be well-paid employees (especially in WWE, which as part of its image as a public company endorses racial tolerance and recognizes events such as Black History Month)—but the inescapable connectivity of every non-white persona to larger models of racial placement within American society lingers beneath the surface, disguised as tradition and heritage. The fondness for ethnic demarcation within wrestling—along with all forms of popular entertainment—is likely, even destined, to persist due to the recurrence of tropes and character-types and the settled nature of WWE, which is firmly situated as the socio-cultural barometer of American wrestling. The potential, and necessity, for characters that challenge this and appeal more effectively to the dominant narratives of change remains untapped. Now back on national television, The Rock remains a beacon for the capability of wrestling to look beyond the limits of racial alignment and realize the progressiveness and benefits, both creatively and economically, of taking such steps. For wrestling to stay positioned

[8]Debuting in 2004, Hassan, played by Mark Copani, was an Arab-American heel character who professed his Americanness in promos, along with a willingness to overcome negative representations of Arab peoples in the wake of 9/11. When this potentially progressive gimmick was met with a muted response, WWE switched to a full-on villainous portrayal that culminated in Hassan's masked Jihadist-like followers attempting to "garrote" a wrestler on national television. Following a media uproar, the Hassan character was removed from television.

as a “leader” in an entertainment business which is more culturally attuned than ever before, such moves are becoming increasingly vital.

Conclusion. Tradition and Reconfiguration.

In 2011, American pro wrestling features more non-white performers than ever before. The WWE, the most dominant company in the business, employs wrestlers from a variety of ethnicities and nationalities, representing, arguably for the first time, a truly multicultural aspect to American wrestling. On the independent circuit, numerous non-white wrestlers are active, frequently making names for themselves outside of racial demarcation or stereotypical gimmicks. As a whole, the business maintains its popularity across multiple demographics, echoing the mass appeal of professional sports such as basketball that have traditionally enjoyed a cross-racial appeal. In the public sphere, wrestling is increasingly coming into contact with other forms of entertainment such as music and film, enhancing its status as a successful medium with a secure public presence. Still a weekly fixture on national television, large arenas and small local venues, pro wrestling remains an institution specializing in providing its fans with a captivating entertainment experience.

With new ground covered through advances on the Internet, wrestling thrives outside live experience. Although shows large and small still attract dedicated crowds, the wrestling business has also embraced new media, proving that its conventions can translate beyond the immediacy of a live show or televised viewing experience. An actively critical fan culture flourishes online and in various newsletters such as the *Pro Wrestling Observer*, where dedicated fans devotedly and sometimes obsessively analyze and debate wrestlers and matches. Pro wrestling's cultural presence has easily crossed over, resulting in the rise of fandoms that go beyond being merely casual viewers. The business's popularity corresponds with an audience that has become fully accustomed to wrestling's contrived nature. Wrestling is now a medium that can be comprehensively critiqued by its audience. Its inner-workings have become exposed, lending

fans the opportunity to appreciate the wrestlers and their work from a vantage point beyond that of the casual observer. To be a skilled wrestler in this landscape involves not only encouraging the average spectator to suspend his disbelief, but also to convince the new breed of "smart" fan that they are dedicated to doing so.

With wrestling more open to public scrutiny than ever before, the cultural relevance of its characters has become a point of contention. On the one hand, wrestlers' gimmicks are now more than ever harmless alter egos used by professional athletes in the interest of showmanship and profit. Whenever criticism is leveled at WWE for its perceived flaws as a company—usually in reference to controversial programming content or its treatment of its performers—the resulting PR backlash typically makes reference to the company's primary goal of "putting smiles on people's faces." Independent promotions, meanwhile, are taking more liberties with the unspoken rule of presenting characters as realistically as possible. Gimmicks in many local promotions such as CHIKARA and Pro Wrestling Guerilla are deliberately far-fetched, pushing the boundaries of wrestling as a supposedly-real thing, along with the ability of fans to suspend their disbelief. In short, wrestling is so open that the integrity of characters that was traditionally a strong factor at the box office has been diluted. The separation between wrestler and gimmick in the public eye means that, increasingly, once the cameras are rolling the persona essentially stands as its own entity. The repercussions of this are that characters are now ultra-stylized roles to be filled. Whereas old names such as Bobo Brazil and The Sheik were believable as actual people, the likes of The Rock and more current non-white characters such as R-Truth, Kofi Kingston, and Yoshi Tatsu stand out as carefully developed facades.

In this environment, the ethnicity of different wrestlers becomes another factor on a list that includes marketability, photogenic appeal, and well-defined muscularity. The modern

wrestler exists as a collection of signs that combine to appeal semiotically to the customer. The massed visibility of wrestlers across a variety of media outside of wrestling has served to compound their status as marketing tools. By amassing wrestlers of different ethnicities and appearances, wrestling companies are able to broaden their appeal in multiple markets and demographics, as the popularity of Rey Mysterio and other Mexican faces in WWE such as Alberto Del Rio and Sin Cara testify. On the one hand, the elevation of the wrestler to the role of figurehead speaks volumes for wrestling acting as a vehicle of Americanization and globalization. To the world outside the US, wrestlers from the WWE and smaller groups like Total Non-stop Action and Ring of Honor represent the uniting of a global community through wrestling. The presence of American wrestlers abroad, and foreign wrestlers in American companies, solidifies the wrestler as a global figure—one that speaks of a prosperous cultural synthesis taking place within US wrestling.

On the domestic front, it's possible to read the undisclosed fabrication of wrestlers as indication that multiculturalism is at home in wrestling. Characters are created in the modern companies and assigned to wrestlers regardless of race. Likewise, the dynamic of a wrestler using his gimmick almost as a work tool to complement his performance in the ring is on the rise. The old process of a wrestler accentuating the racial overtones of their character through distinct gestures and movements has in given way to an almost raceless medium where racial demarcation is achieved much less through in-ring performance. On the independent circuit especially, the fidelity applied to the performance of complex moves means that skilled wrestlers, such as Bryan Danielson and Samoa Joe, are differentiated less by heritage than by talent. Wrestling echoes boxing again in that athletes can shine based on skill regardless of ethnicity. Likewise, the enormous popularity of the Ultimate Fighting Championship—a hybrid

fighting discipline that celebrates multiculturalism at its very foundation through its incorporation of Brazilian *Jiu-Jitsu*—points to the rapturous possibilities that a body-centered form has for further championing racial (and cultural) equality before a national audience.

As wrestling has become firmly established, its inherent hypermasculinity and hyperfeminity have risen to become the focal points for a generalized visual identity. In WWE particularly, wrestlers conform to such highly-cultivated male and female body-types that race is inscribed across identically perfect physiques. The degree of dedication put into achieving and maintaining this muscled, fat-free appearance is such that the notion of race being permanently linked to physical appearance falls into a gray area where questions of the body's absoluteness arise. Paul Gilroy, as mentioned previously, highlights the flexibility of the body as a definitive factor in reassessing the necessity of *race* in social thought. Using examples such as Dennis Rodman and Tupac Shakur, Gilroy posits that perhaps—in an era where the mass-mediated body is so modifiable via tattooing and airbrushing—the cemented thought patterns of "raciology" can be out-stepped by moving beyond age-old fascinations with the racial body. Although Gilroy is quick to point out the difficulties in attempting to do so—namely that tactile, identifiable, unchanging bodies are an accepted part of everyday life—his central argument of attempting to question the importance of race as a social precept has repercussions for popular entertainment, including current pro wrestling. Much of wrestling's heritage thrived on utterly recognizable racial bodies. The human form was racialized either through existing social stratification or through parody lethal in its lack of subtlety. Today, the non-white wrestler is less grounded in such distinctions, and racial characterization is a much more ambiguous thing.

The earliest non-white wrestlers, along with sporting and entertainment trailblazers like Jack Johnson and Josephine Baker, were undeniably subjected to prevailing fixations of race.

The men behind the personas were unanimously placed in situations where they had to accentuate their own racial "characteristics" in a wrestling setting. From Viro Small through to the televised stars such as Bobo Brazil and Wahoo McDaniel, all were employed to some extent to inhabit characters that parodied their real (or faked) ethnic heritage and play it up for the audience. This shackling to a racial archetype may have been a by-product of the cultural environment of their respective eras, but it was an enduring one—a process of truth being condensed into fictional form that still reflected a potent realism. The true non-white stars in a commercial sense were (and are) the wrestlers most able to subvert such objectification, stars who through sheer force of presence both live and on television imposed themselves upon the audience almost beyond racialism. They possessed a mastery of the subtleties of wrestling—the right words intoned in the right cadence, the right movements at the right time—that enabled them to cut across boundaries of race. The best, Brazil, McDaniel, and The Sheik, were identifiable as non-white performers but once the bell rang they could suspend their own ethnicity by engaging with their alter egos to stand out as something outside of racial politics. This was a by-product of the exciting space established by the move to television. On the screen, the wrestlers were isolated in many ways from the trials and tribulations of their viewers, acting as signifiers in the Barthesian sense. The action occurred again and again from match to match whilst the characters stayed the same.

Apart from the announcement to tune in next week, the wrestler on television almost existed in a zone untouched by the passage of time. There would always be heroes battling villains, and there would always be a craving for the decisive confrontation. The power of this fundamental feature was such that by tapping into that vital understanding of what an audience wanted from the matches, wrestlers could become supermen in the eyes of the viewer. Within the

context of televised wrestling, race was something to be condensed into performance and played out in the simple format of wrestling matches. However, the external reference points of racial inequality and public perceptions of different ethnic groups remained on the outskirts, filtering into the characters. The public affirmation of racial difference and the pursuit of equality and recognition that manifested itself in the Civil Rights Movement was prevented from gaining air time by promoters, creating the impression that wrestling remained a space closed from the experiences of its multi-racial audience. As such, ethnic characters, though racialized, could move fairly freely in terms of appealing to the widest demographic of fans. However, any direct connections to the complicated social issues of the fifties and sixties were carefully moderated by promoters, and in this all non-white wrestlers found themselves having at some point to face harsh realities of working within a medium that promoted a standardized white Middle America. Despite the transcendent appeal of many of their characters, the men behind them were constantly aware of their status as ethnic minorities—their profession paraded a defining American white masculine norm. Achieving a balance between their everyday lives spent travelling through America during its most socially volatile period with the dedicated acclaim of huge crowds was a tricky process, but one that had to be made as wrestling (and American society) continued its development.

Today, with its popularity sustained through the use of media outlets such as pay-per-view, wrestling maintains powerful nationalist undercurrents developed during the early TV era. American identity is a stronger factor in presentation than ever before, and the new wave of non-white characters that perform on national television are subject to not only this prevailing mentality but also the scrutiny of an audience that has become utterly aware of America's global reputation. The world inhabited by these hypermediated wrestlers still resembles a microcosm of

American life. Where once promoters had strictly been concerned with getting spectators into arenas to watch matches, now the dominant wrestling companies specialize in stylized visions of America in which their wrestlers represent simplistic aspects of the real society. Wrestling's ongoing public recognition of its status as entertainment has seen the pursuit of profit so pivotal to the business inspire a continued simulation of American life. The business has continued into the present, benefiting from the sheen of new technologies whilst still using conventions that hark back to less tolerant times. The problems arise when wrestling attempts to present itself as progressive and socially-conscious whilst drawing on evergreen tropes that invoke an uncomfortable nostalgia for less tolerant times.

For all its history minimizing the significance of the wider issues outside its sphere of entertainment-fantasy, wrestling has little choice but to recognize and absorb them into the fabric of its storylines. Within the entertainment industry, the paradigm of race has become increasingly fluid in the wake of developments within American society. It remains prominent in wrestling, but the defined archetypes of racialized characters are no longer so concrete, reflecting a growing consideration for the popularity of wrestling across wide demographics. Today, the impetus for wrestling to continue to redefine itself as an industry no longer dependent on stock stereotypes is a vital factor if the business is to avoid flirting with tradition to the point of irrelevance. The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), which combines real martial arts with the production sheen akin to WWE, has a multicultural group of fighters representing a progressive multiculturalism. Such innovations have allowed the UFC to rival WWE in the pay-per-view market, and indicate the priority wrestling needs to place on multicultural recognition. It's easy to dismiss wrestling for its sense of the ridiculous—and many local promotions are beginning to thrive on this—but the history of the business remains intertwined with deep,

changing issues of race representation. As a public form dedicated to presenting its fans with entertainment that reflects a realistic America, wrestling has to continue its progressions, adopting more character archetypes that aren't dependent on racial markers (The Rock being the classic example of this) that flow effortlessly within the context of wrestling. The opportunities for character development are being taken, but the tendency to fall back on dated characters still invites criticisms of wresting being out of touch with the realities of its diverse audience.

The possibilities for modern wrestling to rectify its own failings lie with the presentation of the wrestlers. The body reigns as something to be modified. Characters are inscribed upon physiques that are almost unnaturally perfect. Such is the prominence of the sculpted male and female body across racial lines that personas can float freely without being grounded by hackneyed role-playing. The twenty-first century superstar wrestler is the synthesis of character and masculinity/femininity captured in an idealized body. This combination no longer privileges race in the same way that early televised wrestling did. Although there are still obvious ethnic differences, wrestlers today are increasingly identical figures physically with slight personality differences. The onus on promoters and writers today is to fashion intriguing characters upon wrestlers who conform to an established body template. Occurring at a time when the business needs as many strong characters as possible to satisfy a huge audience, this new standardization presents a golden opportunity for wrestling companies to experiment with different personas. More than ever transparent creations, the formation of wrestling characters is a terrain on which underlying narratives of race and identity can be addressed.

Wrestling's success has always emanated from its ability to tap directly into the emotions of its audience, providing a culturally relevant theater that, with its uncompromising love of colorful characters, unashamedly proclaims its status as audience-friendly entertainment. This

constant mining of relevant social issues is destined to continue as the business pursues the largest possible audience. The task at hand for wrestling promotions across the country is to continue to develop characters that draw on the rich textures American society in order to celebrate the nation's multiculturalism. The wrestlers, as always, are crucial components in this process of representation. For wrestling to further establish itself as a business and performance dedicated to an accurate and timely presentation of a racially-progressive America, creative mould-breaking non-white characters are a must. Wrestling is entitled to celebrate its past as it gradually evolves in the American public eye. It has a rich history not only of providing entertainment to a mass public but in featuring performers that speak powerfully of the true character of the nation. And yet, to reflect so fondly on a heritage tinged with an unshakeable negativity of stereotyping is to ensure that wrestling remains out-of-step. America's cultural diversity is a constantly developing phenomenon, and wrestling has to take account of this if it wishes to further its creative possibilities and provide its audience with the most resonant portrayal of American society.

Works Cited.

"Hicks Thrown by Black Sam." *New York Times*, 16 Oct 1883. Print.

"Luther Lindsay." *wrestlingheritage.co.uk*. Wrestling Heritage. Web. May 8 2011.

"Viro Small." *cyberboxingzone.com*. Cyber Boxing Zone. Web. May 8 2011.

"Sporting Comment." *Auburn Citizen* (Auburn, IA,) 28 Feb 1907. Print.

Alexander, Bryant Keith. "Passing, Cultural Performance, and Individual Agency," *Cultural Studies/Critical Methodologies* 4.3 (2004) p.377-404. Print.

Assael Shaun; Mooneyham, Mike. *Sex, Lies, & Headlocks: the Real Story of Vince McMahon and the World Wrestling Federation*. New York: Crown, 2002. Print.

Auletta, Ken. *Media Man: Ted Turner's Improbable Empire*. New York: W.W. Norton & company, 2004. Print.

Barthes, Roland. 'The World of Wrestling." *Mythologies*. Seuil: Paris, 1957. Print.

Baudrillard, Jean. "The Precession of Simulacra." *Media and Cultural Studies: Key Works*. Eds. Meenakshi Gigi Durham, Douglas M. Kellner. Blackwell: Malden, 2001. Print.

Beekman, Scott. *Ringside: a History of Pro Wrestling in America*. Westport: Praeger, 2006. Print.

Blassie, Freddie, and Keith Elliot Greenberg. *Listen You Pencil Neck Geeks*. New York: World Wrestling Entertainment, 2003. Print.

Cheng, Anne Anlin. "Skin Deep: Josephine Baker and the Colonia Fetish," *Camera Obscura*, 23.69 (2009) pp.34-79. Print.

King Kong. Dir. Merian C. Cooper. RKO Radio Pictures. 1933. Film.

Ellison, Ralph. *The Invisible Man*. 1952. New York: Vintage, 1995. Print.

Gilroy, Paul. "The Crisis of 'Race' and Raciology." *The Cultural Studies Reader*. 3rd ed. Ed. Simon During. Abingdon: Routledge, 2007. Print.

Hall, Stuart. "Encoding/Decoding,' *The Cultural Studies Reader*. 3rd ed. Ed. Simon During. Abingdon: Routledge, 2007. Print.

Hornbaker, Tim. *National Wrestling Alliance: the Untold Story of the Monopoly that Strangled Pro Wrestling*. Toronto: ECW Press, 2007. Print.

Kirby, Michael. "On Acting and Not-Acting." *The Drama Review: TDR*. 16.1 (1972) pp.3-15. Print.

Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft*: *Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, Oxford: University Press, 1993. Print.

Marshall, Cynthia. *As You Like It*, (*Shakespeare in production*), Cambridge: University Press, 2004. Print.

Mellon, James. *Bullwhip Days*: *the Slaves Remember: an Oral History,* New York: Grove Press, 2002. Print.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16.3 (1975) pp. 6-18. Print.

Scher, Richard K., *Politics in the New South*: *Republicanism, Race, and Leadership in the Twentieth Century*. 2nd ed. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997. Print.

Singh, Robert. *The Farrakhan Phenomenon: Race, Reaction, and the Paranoid Style in American Politics*. Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1997. Print.

Wilson, Charles Morrow. *The Magnificent Scufflers: Revealing the Great Days when America Wrestled the World*. New York: Stephen Greene, 1959. Print.

Zerzan, John. "The Catastrophe of Postmodernism." *primitivism.com.* Web. May 8 2011.